“The Post-Christian Christian Church”

Ecclesiological Implications of Mattias Martinson’s Post-Christian Theology

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I would like to emphasize that the problem of the future of religion could also be translated into the smaller, but also very important problem, of the future of the Church.

— Gianni Vattimo
1. Introduction

Uppsala University has a long and proud history. Established in 1477, it was the first university in Sweden. Likewise, Uppsala’s Faculty of Theology is the oldest theological faculty in the country and has for centuries been a center for the learned study and teaching of Christian theology. Thus, when the professor of Systematic Theology at Uppsala University champions a post-Christian theology that attempts to transcend traditional Christian theology in important respects, one could expect this to be a matter of great interest, a cause for concern, or, at the very least, something noteworthy. One can only imagine what would happen if the same were to occur at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Yet, when Mattias Martinson launched his post-Christian theology in 2007, and again in 2010, few took notice. The project did not generate a heated debate in academia, nor did it generate a sustained discussion in public media or was condemned by church authorities. Perhaps the very fact that Martinson’s post-Christian theology stirred so few emotions is not only testimony to the degree to which non-confessional Swedish state universities have eliminated all ties to the Christian churches, but also the degree to which Swedish society in general has set aside the Christian faith and entered a post-Christian era.

Martinson’s post-Christian theology is an attempt to take seriously the cultural changes that have cumulated in what Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen calls the post-Word. According to Kärkkäinen, we live in a time of epochal changes, an era that is characterized by the transcendence of the old, but which has not settled into something new.¹ The proliferation of multiple post-terms testifies to the changes. Postmodern, postcolonial, poststructuralist, post-foundationalist, post-secular, post-material, post-Einsteinian, and post-Christian all describe our current situation as having gone beyond the old, without being able to name the new. Put differently, the various post-terms share the notion that our time is a time of profound and lasting change, without however agreeing what this change exactly consist of or what we are changing into. Each term identifies a specific set of beliefs and attitudes and postulates change in relation to central themes in that realm. Thus, postmodern signifies a change in relation to the modern, understood as a firm belief in reason, the possibility of objective knowledge, the conviction of the absolute freedom of the individual, and the elemental orderedness of existence that guarantees truth.² Similarly, postcolonial denotes a central change in the colonial attitude, the belief in the racial superiority of the white man, and the consequent reshaping of identities, including the humanization of the colonial Other.³ These two examples indicate that the post-World is a site of fundamental cultural change. The shifts occur at

the elemental level of beliefs and values, affecting the worldview and self-understanding of whole societies.

The post-condition also raises the question of shifts in the beliefs and values that are commonly termed religious. Both the post-secular and post-Christian discourses address this nexus of issues, even if their emphasis is different. Post-secular refers primarily to a change in relation to the processes of secularization that established religion as a specific and isolated societal realm. In contrast, post-Christian denotes changes in relation to one specific religious tradition. Both terms indicate, however, that the changes identified with the post-World have a direct impact also on our understanding of religion, in general, and Christianity, in particular. It is this complex of issues Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology engages.

In his research project on experimental theology, 2004-2010, Martinson addressed the current situation of academic theology in Sweden. In two of the resulting publications, Martinson argues that Christian theology is no longer able to adequately engage a post-Christian society, understood as a society that has largely discarded the Christian faith. As a response, Martinson suggests that theology needs to be freed from its Christian deep-structure, so that a post-Christian theology can emerge, that addresses society on its own terms. Whereas Martinson does not attempt to formulate a comprehensive theology, his analysis of the cultural situation and his delineation of the associated possibilities and difficulties of theology contain the kernel of a post-Christian theology. However, it is not only academic theology and the wider society which are affected by Martinson’s proposal. Post-Christian theology has also important implications for the understanding of the church. Martinson himself acknowledges some of these implications when he coins the phrase the “post-Christian Christian church,” in his discussion of the churches in today’s Sweden. Analyzing the ecclesiological implications of Martinson’s post-Christian theology, this essay aims to make a contribution to the understanding of the changing conditions for the Christian church in the post-World.

1.1 Previous Research

The research field that could be termed ‘the Christian church in the post-World’ is large and expanding. Best established of the post-terms is postmodern, and it is under the rubric of postmodern theology or postmodern ecclesiology that many of the post-proposals and treatments are grouped. Gerard Mannion exemplifies this trend in his chapter on “Postmodern Ecclesiologies” in The Routledge companion to the Christian church from 2008. Mannion collects under the label of ‘postmodern’ schools of theological thought such diverse movements as the secular theologies of

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4 Mattias Martinson, Postkristen teologi: experiment och tydningsförsök (Göteborg: Glänta production, 2007), 115. All translations throughout are my own.

Thomas Altizer and Harvey Cox in the 1960s, the non-realist theology of Don Cupitt, the deconstructive theology of Mark C. Taylor, the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck, the emerging church movement, the ‘resident aliens’ theology of Stanley Hauerwas, and John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement, but also evangelical responses to postmodernity, such as the communitarian ecclesiology of Stanley Grenz, feminist ecclesiological perspectives, and comparative ecclesiology along the lines of Roger Haight’s work. The postmodern label is thus used broadly and captures theological projects and opinions that are otherwise diametrically opposed to each other.

Employing the concept of recontextualization, Lieven Boeve has argued that the post-condition necessarily entails change for the Christian church. In *Interrupting tradition* (2003), Boeve maintains that the Christian tradition has always developed in relation to a particular context. The Judeo-Aramaic world in which Christianity arose differed markedly from the socio-cultural makeup of the Roman Empire, which in turn was distinct from medieval Europe or the Europe of modernity. Every shift in context requires the Christian tradition to change, to reformulate the faith in a new cultural-linguistic situation. The result of these changes is not ‘more’ tradition, but ‘different’ tradition. The current task of the church is accordingly to reformulate the Christian faith in the language of postmodernity, or put differently, to once again recontextualize the Christian tradition.

Ecclesiological attempts at recontextualization in the post-World, generally, and in postmodernity, specifically, have often taken the form of communion ecclesiology. Stanley J. Grenz argues in his chapter “Ecclesiology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (2003) that postmodern ecclesiologies generally portray the Christian church as a particular community marked by certain characteristics. Grenz himself suggests that the postmodern church is best understood as a community held together by a particular ‘constitutive narrative,’ realized in word and sacrament, which founds a special solidarity among believers. These bonds of fellowship, support, and nurture transform the church into an ‘alternative community,’ with a missionary mark.

The communion aspect is also strong in Gerard Mannion’s *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* (2007). Mannion settles on a model of the Christian church as a virtuous community based on conversation, dialogue, and charity. For Mannion, charity is the essential ecclesial virtue and conversation and dialogue are the practices that form charity. The charitable church is thus a

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6 Ibid., 132–147.
8 Ibid., 7–24.
10 Ibid., 257–264.
community of love, characterized by a plurality of dialogues within each church, between the churches, between the churches and other faiths, and between the churches and the world.\textsuperscript{12}

The focus on communion is also evident in the research projects that have addressed the post-Christian aspect of the post-World. Rodney Clapp takes this approach in \textit{A Peculiar People} (1996), which argues that the church has not only lost its influential role as the sponsor of Western civilization, but that the church’s sponsorship is no longer wanted.\textsuperscript{13} It is only by breaking with the Constantinian association of church and state, that the church can remain a viable option for people in the post-Christian society. Such a church needs to be a counter-culture, a community of friends, which challenges secular political power through its radical otherness.\textsuperscript{14}

Jan Eckerdal has engaged the post-Christian situation from a Swedish perspective in \textit{Church in Mission} (2017).\textsuperscript{15} Eckerdal argues that Sweden has entered an era in which Christianity no longer functions as the common frame of reference. The position of the previously dominant Church of Sweden has changed from one of political power to one of political marginality. This change results in new challenges for the church. To address this new situation the church needs to live its mission and engage society from its new position of weakness. However, the church’s changed position also entails new openings and possibilities.\textsuperscript{16}

It is not only the mainline churches that are affected by the post-Christian situation. In his study “The Self and the Collapsed Other: Towards Defining Free Church Identity and Mission in a Post-Christendom Age” from 2015, Philipp F. Bartholomä demonstrates that free churches in Germany have traditionallly identified themselves in opposition to the mainline churches, offering a credible alternative to a Christian society.\textsuperscript{17} However, the interplay of secularity and post-Christianity leaves free churches without their traditional fond and historical other, both of which necessitate changes to free church identities.\textsuperscript{18}

Research on the church in the post-World has thus variously demonstrated the need for the church to adapt to this new cultural situation. Boeve’s concept of recontextualization is a clear pronouncement, but also Mannion’s virtuous community or Clapp’s peculiar people are examples of how the church adapts to the post-World. Moreover, Eckerdal and Bartholomä point to the necessary changes for the church the post-Christian situation entails. This strand of research thus

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 115–176.
\textsuperscript{13} Rodney Clapp, \textit{A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society} (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Philipp F. Bartholomä, “The Self and the Collapsed Other: Towards Defining Free Church Identity and Mission in a Post-Christendom Age,” \textit{Baptistic Theologies} 7, no. 2 (2015): 53–73.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
points to the necessary adaptations the church has to make in response to the changes in the cultural norms and beliefs that characterize the post-World.

Not all research that relates to the post-Christian situation relates to ecclesiology however. Looking at recent publications that engage the post-Christian situation, it is helpful to distinguish three different meanings of the adjective ‘post-Christian,’ which can refer to either post-Christianity, post-Christendom, or post-Christianism. Stefan Paas examines the distinction between post-Christianity and post-Christendom in “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences.” Paas sees both post-Christianity and post-Christendom to be closely related to processes of secularization, characterized by differentiation, rationalization, privatization, pluralization, and an individual loss of faith. ‘Post-Christian’ differs however from ‘secular’ in that the former underlines the historical continuity with Christianity, and hence denotes a particular European or Western form of secularity. More specifically, the difference between post-Christianity and post-Christendom is one between a change in beliefs and attitudes, on the one hand, and shifts in the societal structures of religion, on the other hand. Post-Christianity describes a cultural situation characterized by an individual loss of the Christian faith, rooted in a deep-seated change in the beliefs, motivations, and practices of people. Post-Christianity can hence be understood as the result of de-Christianization or, what Roman Catholic theologians in the United States call, deconversion. Post-Christendom, in contrast, refers to the shifts in the position and structures of organized religion as a consequence of differentiation, rationalization, privatization, and pluralization.

However, as a description of societal and cultural developments of de-Christianization, the treatment of post-Christianity remains often superficial. Stephen Hunt’s “Negotiating equality in the Equality Act 2010 (United Kingdom): Church-state relations in a post-Christian society” is a case in point. Hunt discusses the engagement of Christian groups with the UK Equality Act, focusing on the churches engagement in debates about contemporary legislation and the negotiation of competing rights of sexual equality, religious freedom, and property. However, the article does not mention ‘post-Christianity’ anywhere besides the title. The same is true for Darwin Glassford and Lynn Barger-Elliott’s “Toward intergenerational ministry in a post-Christian era.” The authors analyze generational fragmentation in North America and argue for an increased need for ministry to bridge the intergenerational gap. Nevertheless, the analysis of current trends is done

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in relation to postmodernism. Post-Christianity is also here relegated to a title catchword.\textsuperscript{24} Equally, of the fifteen chapters in \textit{Justification in a post-Christian society}, only the chapter by James M. Childs, Jr., “Lutheran Theology and Dialogical Engagement in Post-Christian Society” contains an in-depth discussion of the post-Christian society, where Childs relates it most clearly to post-Christendom.\textsuperscript{25} These examples demonstrate a curious dearth in the literature on post-Christianity as a description of the current cultural situation of disbelief. While these authors find it meaningful to describe our current era as post-Christian, they do not fill the term with sufficient content to motivate its use. More in-depth treatments of post-Christianity are therefore needed, which especially investigate the specific effects post-Christianity has on religion and Christianity in particular.

Whereas post-Christianity refers to a situation of widespread disbelief, post-Christendom refers to a societal situation in which Christianity is no longer tightly allied with institutions of political power. In \textit{Post Christendom} (2012), Stuart Murray defines post-Christendom as the culture that emerges from the increasing separation of the institutional set up of contemporary society and the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{26} Murray understands post-Christendom to be the outcome of several transitions by which the Christian story moves from the center to the margin, Christians become a minority, the church finds itself in a situation of plurality and witness instead of privilege and control, and hence changes from maintaining itself as an institution to a missionary movement. Post-Christendom thus entails profound changes for the societal position of Christianity and the Christian church. However, Murray understands post-Christendom to be strictly distinct from the end of Christianity. The church can survive these changes, since Jesus continues to command interest even as church institutions crumble.\textsuperscript{27}

Today, post-Christendom is the best established of the three post-Christian terms. Also, Clapp, Eckerdal, and Bartholomä, surveyed above, understand the term ‘post-Christian’ to denote the cultural situation of post-Christendom. Taken together with Murray, these authors show how post-Christendom is generally understood positively to entail an opening for the churches. Some even see a return to some form of original or authentic church as it was in the pre-Constantinian era. Post-Christendom is thus distinct from the end of Christianity. Indeed, post-Christendom makes it possible for the Christian churches to engage society on new grounds. Missional perspectives are therefore most often incorporated into the post-Christendom literature, and Paas argues that the concept of post-Christendom appears most widespread within missiology.\textsuperscript{28}

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\item[24] Ibid.
\item[27] Ibid., 287–317.
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While post-Christendom offers important insights into the challenges and opportunities the Christian churches face as they lose their historical influence and control, the literature tends to sidestep the issue of loss of faith. Even where studies on missiology, ministry, or Christian education address these difficulties, post-Christendom tends to focus on the appropriate church responses, rather than seeing how a loss of faith feeds back into a changed understanding of theology and of the church.

Turning to the third post-Christian term, ‘post-Christianism’ is not an established concept. However, it has become commonplace to differentiate between other ‘-ity terms,’ such as postmodernity, as the description of our era and ‘-ism terms,’ such as postmodernism, as a particular theory in response to the same. Accordingly, it would be possible to distinguish between post-Christianity and ‘post-Christianism.’ The latter would then be the field of study in which particular theories are developed that aim to address the cultural situation of post-Christianity, a situation of widespread societal disbelief. It is in this third category of post-Christian writings Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology properly belongs.

To date, publications on post-Christianism remain marginal in the theological literature. One reason is the historical connection between theology and Christianity in the West. Still today, most published academic theology is Christian theology. Martinson himself argues that theology’s loyalty to the Christian faith hampers post-Christian theological reflection. Post-Christianism has accordingly not established a research literature in its own right.

It is perhaps due to the marginality of post-Christian theology, that there does not exist an extensive secondary literature on Martinson’s proposal. Lars Svensson has analyzed Martinson’s theological project in his Bachelor thesis “Secularization and the Return of God: Reflections on Three Books about Theological Change in a Post-Secular Perspective” from Uppsala University. Svensson studies Martinson in relation to two other Swedish theologians, Jayne Svenungsson and Ola Sigurdson, and is primarily interested in their respective portrayals of the developments of religion and theology in the post-secular society and the way in which these theologians have contributed to the development of post-secularity in Sweden. Svensson concludes that theology has contributed to the development of post-secularity and that Martinson’s post-Christian theology can be understood as a response to post-secularity that supports the return of religion and God in Swedish society. While such a reading is possible, it is doubtful whether Svensson gives enough weight to Martinson’s post-Christian proposal. While it is true that Martinson sees a continuity from the Christian to the post-Christian, there is also a decisive break with traditional

29 Gerard Mannion, “Postmodern Ecclesiologies,” 128.
30 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 32.
understandings of Christianity that points away from the return of Christianity and the Christian God.

This essay relates directly to the research literature on the church in the post-World, and, more specifically, to the church in post-Christianity. As noted, to date there are only sparse treatments of post-Christianism in the sense of a post-Christian theology that aims to take seriously the cultural shifts in beliefs and attitudes that resulted in widespread disbelief. In contrast to postmodern theologies and postmodern ecclesiologies, post-Christian theologies remain a marginal phenomenon. However, if one accepts post-Christianity as a valid description of our era, theology and ecclesiology need to focus more attention on these elemental changes. Moreover, scrutiny needs to go beyond the openings for the church presented in the literature on post-Christendom. Serious and engaged treatments of post-Christianity are needed that not only postulate the changes as something foreign and removed from the church and the Christian faith, but pay attention to how the situation of disbelief affects and interacts with our understanding of the Christian faith and the Christian church. Mattias Martinson has made one such proposal, which looks to formulate a theological project based on the cultural situation of post-Christianity. This essay attempts to add to this line of investigation by analyzing the implications of his post-Christian theology for the Christian church.

1.2 Aim and Problem Formulation

Despite the recent efforts in ecumenical dialogues on ecclesiology, to date there is no universal agreement on the theological understanding of the Christian church. Various Christian traditions describe the church as the mystical body of Christ, a holy or peculiar people, a mother, a pilgrim, the bride of Christ, a perfect society, a vine, a flock, a household. Not only the various ecclesiological traditions understand the church differently, but also within every tradition there exists a multitude of images and models for the church.32 For example, Avery Dulles has described five distinct models of the church employed in the Roman Catholic tradition.33 Roger Haight has demonstrated how the theological thinking about the church has developed ‘from below,’ in response to shifts and changes in the socio-economic and cultural situation and developments in the theological thinking of the day.34 Put differently, the church as an empirical reality has always been part of the wider society, and, as a theological reality, has been shaped by the understanding of traditional theological loci, such as christology, pneumatology, soteriology, eschatology, theological anthropology, and so forth. Since all Christian doctrines hang together, a change in the

33 Avery Dulles, Models of the church (Doubleday: New York, 2002).
understanding of any single doctrine has implications for all others. A change in christology or pneumatology thus effects also ecclesiology as the theological understanding of the church. It follows that any reformulation of Christian doctrine in terms of a post-Christian theology feeds back into a changed understanding of the Christian church, perhaps even to the degree that it becomes possible to speak of a “post-Christian Christian church.” The first aim of this essay is to contribute to the literature on the Christian church in the post-World through an investigation of how Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology affects a theological understanding of the church.

Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology is a tentative attempt to seriously engage the cultural shifts away from Christian belief to a situation of general disbelief from within theology itself. Martinson himself is explicit on the explorative and experimental nature of his theological project, which is already expressed in the subtitle of Post-Christian Theology, Experiment and Attempt at Construction. Thus, Martinson explicitly invites discussion of his proposal, calling his perspective a “starting point for further theoretical reflection.” Furthermore, Martinson recognizes that his perspective is shaped by his particular discipline of systematic theology. Martinson therefore finds that “other theological, philosophical, or cultural studies perspectives on the questions I here raise and address could surely complement the discussion and lead it into new and unexpected directions.” The second purpose of this essay is such a complementary discussion from the perspective of ecclesiology, with the purpose to further refine our understanding of the post-Christian theological project.

Since the inception of the university in Christian Europe, theology has not only been the purview of bishops and teachers of the church, but also of theologians working within the academy. The influence of this ‘academic’ theology on the church can easily be exemplified by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, Luther, or Friedrich Schleiermacher, and, more recently, by Nathan Söderblom and Antje Jackelén, to pick some examples with obvious relation to Swedish context. However, in Sweden, there has been an important shift in the understanding of the relationship between academic theology and the church. During the second half of the 20th century, the church lost increasingly in influence, while belief in science grew strong. When the practical philosopher Ingemar Hedenius argued in the 1950s that theology was fundamentally unscientific, irrational, and inconsistent, his arguments found fertile ground. In the 1970s, Swedish universities were restructured and theology turned into religious studies on the premise that teaching based on

36 Martinson, Postkristen teologi.
37 Mattias Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden: om ateism och teologi (Lund: Arcus, 2010), 12. All translations throughout are my own.
38 Ibid., 33.
specific churches’ faith traditions should no longer exist at the university level. The impact on theology was pervasive. Still in 2009, faculty at Uppsala University’s department of theology found it natural to emphasize that the theological faculty is mainly an arena for critical religious studies, which ideologically stands detached from the theological interests of different denominations and religious groups. While there remain different ways of interpreting what it means to be independent of specific religious interests, the general understanding is that non-confessional academic theology is completely separated from the churches. However, it is possible to question whether the link between academic theology, the churches, and, consequently, the understanding of the Christian church can be definitively severed. The third aim of this essay is thus to highlight the way in which seemingly non-confessional academic theology has implications for the understanding of the Christian church and the churches.

Sweden is often named together with the Czech Republic as one of the most de-Christianized societies in the world. The Word Values Survey repeatedly portrays the degree of Swedish secularity as an extreme outlier. It is this very specific cultural situation that is the context of Martinson’s reflections. However, even if one agrees with Petr Pabian that this does not mean that the Czech Republic, or Sweden, displays a model to be emulated, the developments in these particular societies can still be informative to a general discussion about the church in our times. This is not least so because, as Henk de Roest has argued, the margin is also a space for creativity and innovation. The fourth contribution this essay attempts to make is therefore to make the discussion about post-Christian theology in Sweden available to a broader, international audience.

These four aims translate into two distinct research questions:

1. How does Mattias Martinson contrive his post-Christian theology?
2. What are the ecclesiological implications of Martinson’s post-Christian theology?

1.3 Material

The primary material consists of Mattias Martinson’s *Postkristen teologi: experiment och tydningsförsök* (2007) and *Katedralen mitt i staden: om ateism och teologi* (2010). Both titles are part of Martinson’s

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41 Ulf Jonsson, Mattias Martinson, and Lina Sjöberg, introduction to *Kritiska tänkanden i religionsvetenskapen* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2009), 8.
46 Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden: om ateism och teologi* [*The Cathedral in the Center: On Atheism and Theology*] (Lund: Arcus, 2010),
research project “experimental theology,” which concluded in 2010.\textsuperscript{47} Part of the same research project is also \textit{Tro och tvivel}, which Martinson published together with Tomas Ekstrand in 2004.\textsuperscript{48} Martinson and Ekstrand intend here to contribute to the development of Protestant theology through a “reflection about the Christian faith from a perspective of doubt.”\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Faith and Doubt} aims at being further reading for undergraduate courses in systematic theology and has therefore a definite textbook character.\textsuperscript{50} As such, \textit{Faith and Doubt} presents a rather typical project in systematic theology. The authors start with a portrayal of foundational Christian doctrines to then add their own theological interpretations of the same. In contrast, the ambition with \textit{Post-Christian Theology} is to “take a step away from the genre that is called Christian doctrine or dogmatics, with the intention of determining the position of Christian theology in our time.”\textsuperscript{51} There is a clear shift between \textit{Faith and Doubt} and \textit{Post-Christian Theology} both in relation to form and content, and \textit{Faith and Doubt} does therefore not form part of the material for this study.

\textit{Post-Christian Theology} develops an argument for the need to fundamentally transform academic theology away from its loyalty to Christianity towards a more open and pluralistic reflection on existential questions. The 274 pages are divided into two parts, titled “Experimental Theology” and “Theological Experiments,” respectively. Part one deals with theology and its method. It is here the bulk of the argument is presented, including Martinson’s central claim that theology needs to be “thinned out” or “weakened” to function properly in today’s post-Christian society. Part two presents various applications of Martinson’s experimental theology, including a discussion on the existential dimensions of art, a treatment of the practice of theological labelling, and a theological analysis of the “company soul.” Martinson ends his exposition with an argument for critical thought as opposed to simple faith. Only critical thinking allows people to become self-determined individuals, free from the authority structures of religious communities. However, this thinking is a thinking that does not a priori denounce all theological questions, but instead makes it possible to critically engage in debates about questions of existential importance in the post-Christian culture.\textsuperscript{52}

According to Martinson himself, \textit{The Cathedral in the Center} is a direct continuation of \textit{Post-Christian Theology}.\textsuperscript{53} The latter Martinson starts with an experimental theology, the former begins with a complementary discussion of philosophy, criticism of religion, and atheism, to then return the discussion to theological hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{54} Also the 303 pages of \textit{The Cathedral in the Center} are

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Thomas Ekstrand and Mattias Martinson, \textit{Tro och tvivel: systematiska reflektioner över kristen tro} [\textit{Faith and Doubt: Systematic Reflections about Christian Faith}] (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2004).
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 6–7.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Martinson, \textit{Postkristen teologi}.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Mattias Martinson, ”Nästan religiös: Katedraler och sekulära teologier”, \textit{Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift} 92, nr 1 (2016): 25–27.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Martinson, \textit{Katedralen mitt i staden}, 32.
\end{itemize}
divided into two parts, now titled “Atheism” and “Theology.” The first part looks at proponents of atheism and the criticism of religion since the 1950s both in Sweden and internationally. The aim is to establish the structure of the basic arguments against the Christian faith. Martinson then criticizes the simplicity and structure the arguments often take and gauges whether such criticism could potentially be included into theology rather than being rejected by theology. The investigation concludes that the atheist criticism is both misplaced and tame, accepting rather than challenging fundamental Christian positions. Part two looks at the possibilities of reforming academic theology. Here Martinson presents his case for a middle ground between a simple rejection of the Christian theological tradition and a naïve acceptance of the Christian faith as a guiding norm. One possibility of such an ‘in-between’ theology is to recast theological questions in terms of a radical immanence that sees the importance of providing society with much needed assistance in its worldview discourse, rather than arguing for the existence of transcendental realities no one believes in. The second part also includes a discussion of the Lutheran bias in Swedish theology and a consideration of post-Christian bible studies, both as illustrations of the possibilities and difficulties in reforming academic theology.

In addition to these two larger works, two of Martinson’s articles help to establish his theological project. In 2004, Martinson published “Nio teser om kritisk religionsvetenskap i dagens Sverige,” in which he outlines the task of today’s theology.55 “Nine Theses” can therefore be understood as outlining the research program Martinson follows with his post-Christian theology. In “Nästan Religiöss: Katedraler och sekulära teologier” (2016),56 Martinson relates his own thinking to Swedish theologian Bengt Kristensson Ugglö,57 and reflects over the differences in his own and Kristensson Ugglö’s approach. “Almost Religious” contains a brief evaluation and reflection by Martinson on his post-Christian theology, and thus sheds further light on his project.

In order to examine the ecclesiological implications of Martinson’s post-Christian theology, this essay develops an analytical framework that understands the Christian church as the nexus of three interrelated tensions. To ensure the groundedness of the analytical framework in the self-understanding of the churches, the tensions are related to the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Paper No. 214, The Church: Towards a Common Vision (2013)58 and the constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, primarily the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium.

promulgated on November 21, 1964.\textsuperscript{59} The World Council of Churches (WCC) describes The Church as a convergence text with the same status and character as the 1982 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.\textsuperscript{60} As such, the document is a common point of references for many of the Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Pentecostal, and various national and international United/Uniting and Free/Independent churches. The Church is therefore an ideal document to ground the analytical framework in the self-understanding of a broad range of Christian churches. Since the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the World Council of Churches, the Vatican II documents are used to complement the WCC perspective. Together the WCC and the Vatican represent roughly 1.7 billion of the estimated 2.2 billion Christians in the world.\textsuperscript{61} While the character, intention, and authority of the two documents differs, they are thus able to provide a grounding in the ecclesiological thinking of the major church traditions.

1.4 Method

Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology exist in texts, especially in the books Post-Christian Theology and The Cathedral in the Center. It is however not the texts themselves that are theology, so that it is important to differentiate between text and content. Despite this difference, the text is here understood as a full embodiment of Martinson’s post-Christian theology. That is, rather than postulating the text as an unperfect representation of a theology that only exist in Mattias Martinson’s body—his brain, or heart, or stomach—the text is seen as a complete realization of Martinson’s thought, which stands independent from its author, so that the text is understood separate from the person Mattias Martinson. This means that the question about the relationship between the author and the text becomes secondary. No attempt is made to deduce what the author ‘really’ means. The emphasis is hence solely on content. Still, the focus on content requires an investigation of the differences between the text and its content, that is, a method of textual analysis.

To this end, this study employs hermeneutics as a method of textual analysis, understood as a content-oriented, interpretative, and constructive reading. While all reading is interpretative, the hermeneutical method distinguishes itself from other forms of textual analysis through the level of consciousness in interpretation, its prerequisites, possibilities, and limitations.\textsuperscript{62} This consciousness


\textsuperscript{60} World Council of Churches. The Church, 46.


is established through a number of movements, between the parts and the whole of the text, between the text’s structure and content, between the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text, between the text and its context, and, lastly, between a hermeneutics of acceptance and a hermeneutics of suspicion. These movements increase the understanding of the message of the text and thus the quality of the interpretation.63

Sælid Gilhus has established guidelines for the application of the hermeneutical method. To deal with the movement between the parts and the whole of the text I started, in accordance with Sælid Gilhus first guideline, with a slow and thorough reading. After reading the text in its entirety, I chose 212 text fragments. These single citations consisted of one to three sentences and were chosen due to their ability to precisely formulate one central idea. The next step was a coding of the various parts, which made it possible to reassemble the parts into a new whole. Importantly, this new whole had a different structure than the original text. The movement has thus gone from the whole to the parts and back to a new whole. The method made it possible to combine the text corpus of the two books into a unified whole, in which the two works inform each other. Furthermore, the method allowed various statements pertaining to the same topic to be collected and brought together from their various placements in the text. The movement between parts and whole thus established a general understanding of Martinson’s post-Christian theology that went beyond his description in any single part.

The movement between structure and content points to the close relationship between form and meaning. Martinson explicitly terms the form of his text “essayistic” and relates it to his discussion of Adorno’s thinking about the essay as a form in part two of The Cathedral in the Center.64 As structure informs content this movement is discussed in detail in chapter three. Here it is only noted that the movement between structure and content is a privileged tool of analysis that ultimately generates a better understanding of the meaning of the text’s content.

Hans-Georg Gadamer has analyzed interpretative understanding in his well-known work Truth and Method as a fusion of the horizons of the text and the reader. Gadamer starts from the recognition that all readers or interpreters already possess a specific foreunderstanding, which is essential for interpretation. The reader does not meet the text as a tabula rasa, but carries a multitude of already existing interpretations of terms, concepts, and facts about the world. It is this foreunderstanding that relates the text to all the reader already knows and thus makes understanding possible.65 It is however important for the reader to accept that h/her foreunderstanding is only one possible way of seeing the world, so that the text can represent something strange, wholly other than what the reader already knows. To be able to understand that

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63 Ibid., 276.
64 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 32.
which is strange, the reader requires some level of hermeneutical consciousness about the limitations in h/er foreunderstanding and a consequent openness towards the otherness or strangeness of the text.\(^66\)

It is however not possible to be conscious about all of one’s foreunderstandings, so that understanding is always limited by the interpreter’s concrete standpoint, which makes it possible to see some things and not others. This possibility of different views Gadamer calls the horizon.\(^67\) Since human beings are historically implicated in constant change, also the horizon changes constantly. Understanding occurs when the reader’s horizon changes in the meeting with the text in such a way that the reader’s horizon and the horizon of the text overlap and fuse.\(^68\) When this happens, the reader and the text hold the same standpoint and see the world in the same way. The reader is able to understand how the text sees the world. Gadamer describes this process as a conversation; “when we have discovered the other person’s standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him.”\(^69\)

The movement between the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text requires, consequently, a certain level of consciousness about one’s own horizon as a reader, even as it remains impossible to describe the horizon in its totality. For my part this consciousness includes an acknowledgement of my theological convictions and religious beliefs. I grew up in the Apostolic Tradition\(^70\) and have since converted to the evangelical-Lutheran church in Sweden. I have received my theological education mainly at Uppsala University, a secular Swedish state university, and later at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, a Jesuit institution in the United States. All this has shaped my understanding of God, theology, church, and so on. My standpoint does not only make me see the vital importance of theology for today’s society, but includes an understanding of the Christian faith as a possible foundation for a world without death, mourning, crying, and pain. Furthermore, my foreunderstanding includes a positive appreciation of the Christian church as the concretization of the Christian faith in community. I consequently approach Martinson’s post-Christian theology doubly predisposed. On the one hand, I appreciate the attempt to think through how theology needs to change in order to be an effective means of reflection on existential questions in our time. On the other hand, I am skeptical about endeavors to discard Christianity as useless, especially if based on an understanding of Christianity that differs

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\(^66\) Ibid., 269.
\(^67\) Ibid., 302.
\(^68\) Ibid., 306.
\(^69\) Ibid., 303.
\(^70\) For a summary of the Apostolic Tradition see Henk de Roest’s chapter in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, 256-258. de Roest describes the Apostolic Tradition as a part of the pre-millenialist churches together with Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, and Brethren. In a nutshell, the Apostolic Tradition holds that the Spirit has called new Apostles in the last days to gather and prepare the church for the Second Coming. The tradition is generally marginal and engagement with the wider society or other churches has tended to be weak.
from mine. While I have attempted to check both my enthusiasm and my skepticism, both have undoubtedly continued to inform my interpretation of the text subconsciously.

Looking at the movement between the text and its context, Sælid Gilhus argues that each text has always several contexts to which it speaks. Another guideline for the application of the hermeneutical method is therefore to examine how reading the text in relation to any specific context shapes the interpretation.71 I choose here to read Martinson in an ecclesiological context. The focus on the ecclesiological implications of Martinson’s post-Christian theology raises specific ecclesiological questions, such as the divine origin and human nature of the church, questions of the transmission of the Christian faith through time, the goal and orientation of the community, and the issue of belonging and the relationship to the ‘world.’ This context shapes my interpretation and reading of Martinson. Addressing the text with a different set of hermeneutical glasses would surely generate slightly different results, which Svensson’s reading of Martinson in a post-secular context demonstrates.

The specificity of foreunderstanding requires a conscious approach to the text. Concretely, interpretation needs to combine a hermeneutics of acceptance with a hermeneutics of suspicion. A hermeneutics of acceptance is an empathic reading that attempts to reconstruct the meaning of the text based on the text’s own intentions. A hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, is a critical reading strategy that tries to uncover hidden positions and to deconstruct claims to power.72 Basing his analysis on Paul Ricoeur, Björn Vikström calls this movement between acceptance and suspicion the conflict of interpretation. Vikström argues that it is only in the movement between acceptance and suspicion that understanding becomes possible. Acceptance ensures that interpretation continues to be grounded in the message of text, while suspicion ensures a continuous questioning of the text that unravels new understanding of its message.73 The two approaches are thus not mutually exclusive but complementary. A hermeneutics of acceptance is needed for a constructive dialogue with the text, while a hermeneutics of suspicion becomes necessary to critically analyze Martinson’s arguments. In practice, this fifth movement checks any unwarranted criticism or enthusiasm spurred by my particular foreunderstanding. A hermeneutics of acceptance questions any criticism by defending the actual message of the text. A hermeneutics of suspicion mistrusts any premature embrace of the text. Put differently, the movement between acceptance and suspicion works to establish the necessary distance between the reader and the text that is a requirement for critical analysis.74

The movement between acceptance and suspicion also points to the fact that interpretation is neither completely bound nor completely free.75 Interpretation is more than the faithful derivation

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72 Ibid., 280–281.
74 Ibid., 40–44.
75 Ibid., 104–106.
of the text’s message. Interpretation is constructive, in that the reader constructs an understanding of the meaning of the text. It is a creative process in which the reader’s own foreunderstandings and standpoint influence the construction of the message. Interpretation is thus not entirely bound to a faithful representation of the text. Still, this construction needs to be rooted in the text itself, and is hence not completely free either. The hermeneutic method is thus a content-oriented, interpretative, and constructive reading.

A persistent issue in interpretation is the question of language. As a second language speaker, I acknowledge that my command of Swedish is limited. Even though I always understand the primary meaning of the text, there are often secondary meanings or further connotations that might escape me. The various Swedish idioms are here only the tip of the iceberg. However, even native speakers have this difficulty to some degree. As interpretation, reading is always open to the difficulties of partial and misunderstandings. To justify my interpretation, I have opted to include central quotes in full length. This allows the reader to critically evaluate the adequacy of my interpretation.

Difficulties of understanding necessitate a conscious reading strategy in relation to key terms. One such term is religion, which the Oxford Dictionary defines, amongst others, as “belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship.” However, Swedish theologians appear to use religion at times interchangeably with Christianity. Bengt Kristensson Ugga writes in a section with the title “We are more Christian than we think,”

> religion, both in its enchanting and secular variants, is always with us. We are formed by traditions that can never be completely separated from religion – and are therefore more Christian than we think.

The only way to understand Kristensson Ugga is that religion throughout denotes Christianity and only Christianity. Likewise, it is unclear what Martinson refers to when he asks in the introduction to *Post-Christian Theology*,

> what has theology with its religiously formed traditions to offer a de-Christianized intellectual debate in our times?

Seeing that *Post-Christian Theology* deals foremost with Christian theology, it appears likely that a “religiously formed tradition” really is the specific tradition formed by Christianity. It is, however,

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76 To pick a simple example, when a Swede says, “There is no cow on the ice,” that has nothing to do with cows or ice but is to say that there is no immediate concern. It is thus possible to understand all the words and to still not understand their meaning.


not immediately apparent what Martinson means with ‘religious.’ To avoid these difficulties of
reference, I employ the terms religion and religious only to denote the larger cultural phenomena
of belief in a transcendent reality, which includes Christianity. Furthermore, I choose to read
‘religion’ and ‘religious’ as Christianity and Christian in the material, unless it is clear from the
context that the terms refer to something else. Similarly, I understand theology throughout as
Christian theology, and opt to understand even religious studies as including theology, so that
Martinson’s discussion of religious studies applies in full also to theology. This choice is motivated
by Martinson’s own explanation in 2016 that he included academic theology under the rubric of
religious studies in his research project on experimental theology.80 However, ultimately it is the
ecclesiological context which justifies the overall reading strategy.

Taken together, these methodological reflections speak to the difficulty of any interpretation to
establish the single true meaning of a text. No interpretation is ever exhaustive or complete.
Continued movements along the axis of part-whole, structure-content, reader-text, text-context,
and acceptance-suspicion always generate new and different interpretations that question and
complement established readings. My reading of Martinson can therefore not be described as
‘correct’ in any simple way. This does not mean, that interpretation can fall into relativism. The
hermeneutical method is not a ‘anything goes’ approach, but rather a means to conscientize the
reader to the open-ended nature of interpretation, which remains, precisely as interpretation, always
subjective and incomplete to some degree. Still, one can distinguish better or more adequate
interpretations from worse or less adequate ones. This is especially so, since all interpretation is
done in relation to an interpretative community, which sets the bounds for valid interpretation. It
is the community that ultimately establishes whether an interpretation is acceptable.81 For academic
texts, intersubjective agreements remain a criterion for interpretation. That is, an interpreter must
be able to explain to another how s/he arrived at h/her interpretation. As such, I submit the
evaluation of the validity of my interpretation to the larger community of scholars.82

1.5 Theoretical Perspective

Reading Martinson in an ecclesiological context means raising questions that relate to the Christian
church. In matters of the church one can distinguish between sociological and theological
approaches. The focus of a sociological approach is on the human community, its history, rites,
rituals, and organizational structure. The sociological perspective understands faith to be a social
construct and emphasizes the fundamental similarity between the community that is called the

80 Martinson, ”Nästan religiös,” 26.
church and other forms of human communities. There is thus nothing special about the church from a sociological perspective. Ekstrand and Martinson give voice to such a sociological approach, when they understand the church to be the Christian name for the community that gathers around the Christian faith.83 This leads Ekstrand and Martinson to claim that the current fascination with the church in theology is unfortunate. They maintain that pondering the nature of the church is not only a waste of time, it risks leading theology back to an outdated understanding of the world, which theology has left behind in other areas. It is not only the interest in the church that is problematic, Ekstrand and Martinson find that the very idea of the church needs to be critically questioned.84 These reflections are motivated by their sociological understanding of the church which sees any claim to the church’s essential difference and uniqueness in relation to other human communities as ill-founded and potentially dangerous.

The sociological view can be contrasted with a theological view of the church. Avery Dulles exemplifies this approach when he argues that the church is a continuation of the mystery of God that ultimately defies definition.85 As the site of God’s self-revelation through Christ in the Spirit, the church is a unique community that is essentially different from all other human groupings. This also implies, that the church can never be reduced to the human community that gathers around word and sacraments. The theological study of the church therefore attempts to understand how the self-revelation of the triune God continuously occurs in a human community as the very foundation of that community. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge give voice to this understanding of ecclesiology when they maintain that

> theology does not become ‘language about God’ on the basis of its contents or argumentative strategies alone, as if human discourse could lift itself to God by its own bootstraps. It becomes language about God because it is the language of a certain kind of witnessing, serving, community. Hence theology’s root question is whether, in the light of what we know today about the relativity of cultures and about language’s limited ability to access reality, a community in and through which the God of Jesus Christ becomes present within history’s contingencies can be conceived.86

The theological study of the church is hence guided by a concern for the possibility of a human community to realize the self-revelation of God. As part of theology, the study of the church needs to relate the understanding of the human community to those parts of theology that deal with the self-revelation of God and its consequences, such as christology, pneumatology, eschatology, soteriology.

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83 Ekstrand och Martinson, *Tro och tvivel*, 203.
84 Ibid., 201.
Ecclesiology can then be understood as the discipline that holds together a sociological and a theological understanding of the church, keeping doctrine and practice together. In Gerard Mannion’s words, ecclesiology is the science of envisaging and envisioning the church. Ecclesiology thus assembles a particular understanding of the church as a theological reality and locates this understanding in a concrete social reality. The church can then be understood as a site in which a theological and a sociological reality merge. This entails however a fundamental difficulty for any study of the church. On the one hand, the church is always an empirical reality. There are no unrealized churches. Every purely theoretical understanding of the church is always informed, at least implicitly, by the concrete realities of the churches. The invisible church exists only as a concept. That is, to speak of the church in Sweden in abstract terms is somewhat nonsensical. The church in Sweden only exists as a number of concrete churches. Furthermore, any understanding of the church needs to reckon with the empirical observation that there are many different communities that claim to be the church. While some of these recognize each other as being part of the one Christian church, other churches are not recognized as church by the churches, but are instead referred to as ecclesial communities or sects. On the other hand, the church refers also to the theological understanding of a particular doctrine about the community that transcends the empirical reality of the churches. That is, there are certain theological aspects of the churches that are not only understood to be common to all churches, but to form the foundation of the Christian church. Put differently, there are a set of characteristics that are commonly regarded as the necessary condition for any community to be the church, even if there is no universal agreement on these criteria, much less on their prioritization. In this understanding, the church refers to an ideal type ‘church.’

It is this ideal type understanding of church that is the subject of this essay. Put differently, the focus in this essay is not on the church as an empirical reality nor on the complex processes in which the understanding of the ideal type church interacts with the concrete reality of any single concrete church. Instead, the focus is on how the understanding of the church as an abstract theoretical-theological concept could be understood from within Martinson’s post-Christian theology. The term Christian church therefore denotes this ideal type understanding throughout,

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90 The declaration “Dominus Iesus” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church is a case in point. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_cura/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html
whereas the plural churches denotes the concrete empirical reality. A simple reference to the church describes the complex reality of the ideal and empirical church as the combination of the theological and sociological understanding.

As a theoretical-theological ideal type, the church can be studied in distinct but related ways. Sven-Erik Brodd makes a distinction between three meanings of ecclesiology, or three ways in which Mannion’s envisioning of the church is employed in ecclesiological research. First, ecclesiology studies concrete envisionings of the church. This is the most traditional way of doing ecclesiology. It looks at explicit formulations of what church is and examines these critically and constructive. An investigation of the Second Vatican Council’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium” or the World Council of Churches’ document “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” are good examples. A second type of ecclesiological investigation looks at understandings of church in material that does not explicitly sets out to describe the church. Ecclesiology is then a method or a way of studying something. This something can be anything from party programs to specific religious practices. Last, ecclesiology is also the result of the study, that is, a concrete envisioning of the church based on a number of ecclesiological considerations.92 Both Gerard Mannion’s post-modern communion ecclesiology and Rodney Clapp’s ‘peculiar people’ ecclesiology are examples in which the authors set out to argue for a specific understanding of the church. This study aligns most closely with Brodd’s second meaning of ecclesiology as an investigation of the understanding of the church that emerges from material that does not explicitly treat of the church.

This however raises the difficulty of disclosing the “hidden ecclesiologies” in a text or social phenomenon.93 In the ecclesiological research seminar at Uppsala University two methods have long been in currency, operative ecclesiology and implicit ecclesiology. Operative ecclesiology denotes the self-understanding of the church, that is, the cause for a particular expression of the Christian tradition in a concrete community, such as a specific element of the liturgy. Implicit ecclesiology refers to the understanding of the church that is embedded in specific Christian practices.94 Both terms thus relate to the relationship between theory and practice. The difference is that operative ecclesiology emphasizes the effects of a particular theory (a specific self-understanding of the church) for practice, and implicit ecclesiology highlights the importance of practices for the understanding of theory. In contrast to the stress on practices, the current study looks at the effects a certain understanding of theology has on the understanding of the church. These theoretical-theological effects are understood as ecclesiological implications.

93 Ibid., 13.
Ecclesiological implications differ from both operative and implicit ecclesiology in that they focus on a theory-theory relationship. That is, the central question relates to the consequences a change in the understanding of one Christian doctrine has for the understanding of the church as an ideal type. Ecclesiological implications denote then not the hidden and embedded understanding of church, but the explicit repercussions for the church a particular theological position entails. Ecclesiological implications can also be distinguished from ecclesiology proper in the first meaning Brodd ascribes to the term. The difference is mainly the intention of the text itself. An explicit treatment of the church, an ecclesiology understood as a specific envisioning of the church, aims at describing the Christian church. One consequence is that ecclesiologies can be expected to contain a forthright treatment of the various elements that form the church. However, no such comprehensiveness can be expected from material whose purpose is not an explicit treatment of the church. Ecclesiological implications can then be seen as a limited version of a full-scale ecclesiology.

The task of analyzing these implications requires first to construct an understanding of the Christian church from the material. This demands in turn a theoretical guideline that can order the material and function as a criterion for which positions should classify as ecclesiological implications. That is, there needs to be an analytical tool that determines which positions impact or shift the understanding of the church. This criterion needs, in turn, to be anchored in the established literature on ecclesiology and the churches’ self-understanding, if it is to keep true to some shared fundamental understanding of what the Christian church is. If the ideal type church is a set of common features of the theological self-understanding of the churches, this understanding naturally needs to be non-confessional or trans-denominational. In other words, there is no reason to assume that Martinson’s post-Christian theology contains ecclesiological implications that resembles the Church of Sweden or the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, as a treatment of the fundamental discursive possibilities of theology, Martinson’s argument can be expected to relate to the Christian church in its most basic and foundational aspects. Furthermore, as each ecclesial tradition and concrete denomination gives different weight to the various elements of the church, a trans-denominational reading, in which different traditions can balance out any one-sidedness, promises the best prospects for the construction of the post-Christian church.

A first possible strategy is to employ an inductive criterion. Such an approach would start with a reading of the text and then relate explicit references to the church back to the understanding of the Christian church as an ideal type. The difficulty with this approach is that the researcher has no organizing principle. Instead, the organizing principle is the material itself. This approach fails if the material employs a different or diffuse categorization of church, so that explicit mentions of church do not function as an adequate criterion for ecclesiological implications. It is also ill-suited for material that does not treat the church explicitly.
A second strategy is to start from a specific understanding of the Christian church, generate the salient categories, and then analyze the material in light of these. Roger Haight’s *Christian Community in History* presents an example framework. Based on his analysis of the developments of ecclesiological thinking throughout the history of Christianity in volumes one and two, Haight established five salient features of the church in the third volume of *Christian Community in History*. According to Haight, the church can be understood through its nature and mission; its organization, including the question of different ministries and positions of authority; its membership and the question of baptism; the different activities of the church, such as worship, pastoral activities, and fostering the Christian life; and the church-world relation, including the question of mission and service to the world.\(^5\) It is then possible to take these five elements as constituting the criteria for ecclesiological implications. That is, instead of explicit mentions of church, the researcher can focus on discussions of mission, organization, membership, church activities, and the church-world relation. However, this approach presupposes that the material actually addresses these different areas and is thus most suitable for theological projects that treat of the church more concretely.

To circumvent this difficulty, chapter four constructs a loose analytical framework of three central tensions the ideal type church displays. These tensions are developed based on general ecclesiological considerations, grounded in the World Council of Churches and the Second Vatican Council. First, the church is generally thought as the site in which the divine self-revelation becomes manifest in a human community. The church has therefore both a divine and a human element. These two elements and their relation to each other have been variously understood in the Christian tradition and can be seen as two poles on a spectrum pulling in different directions. The holiness and sinfulness of the church is the clearest example. The divine and human elements form the first tension. Second, Christianity is a historical faith in that it postulates the inbreaking of the divine into the concreteness of space and time. This points to a tension between the past and the future of the church. The tension relates to the degree to which the church receives its identity from the past—the church’s apostolicity—or the future—the church’s mission and God’s plan for salvation. The tension between these two poles defines the present and presence of the church. Third, as a specific human community and the site of divine revelation, the church necessarily occupies a temporal-spatial location in the world. Seeing the church as a unique reality in the world demands the acceptance of something that is non-church. The third tension is therefore between the necessary openness and boundedness of the church to the non-church. This tension thus relates to the question of identity and the catholicity of the church, the degree to which it is a specific and separate as opposed to an open and all-embracing community. The three tensions can here be understood as the stretching that happens between forces that pull in different

directions. In this sense the church is the space that opens between the divine and the human, between the past and the future, and between openness and boundedness. This abstract understanding of the church functions as a heuristic model to consider the ecclesiological implications of Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology.

1.6 Disposition

After this introduction, chapter two presents the theological context for Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology. While the section on previous research has already introduced a number of core distinctions, the emphasis in that section was on the academic literature to which the present study relates most closely, that is, the intersection between ecclesiology and that part of the post-World termed post-Christian. In contrast, chapter two presents the developments in academic literature that are closest to Martinson’s project. The aim of the chapter is to familiarize the reader with the various speaking partners of Martinson’s post-Christian theology. Chapter three develops the bulk of the analysis. Using the movements between parts and whole, structure and contents, and acceptance and suspicion, the chapter constructs the outlines of a post-Christian theology from Martinson’s writings. The main purpose is the exposition of Martinson’s arguments, even if the chapter blends more expository with more analytical passages, as described by the hermeneutics of acceptance and suspicion, respectively. Chapter four turns attention to the movement between text and context and addresses the question of ecclesiological implications. The chapter first considers Martinson’s explicit statements on the post-Christian Christian church, before it develops an analytical tool for the analysis of the ecclesiological implications of post-Christian theology. In chapter four, the development of the analytical framework is directly tied to the analysis of Martinson’s post-Christian theology in an attempt to sketch an understanding of the post-Christian church. Lastly, chapter five gathers the discussion thus far into a more coherent picture of the ecclesiological implications of post-Christian theology and discusses its salient features in relation to the analytical framework of tensions. Chapter six concludes.

2. Post-Theologies for a Post-World

Martias Martinson’s post-Christian theology did not originate in a vacuum. The many references to various theologians, philosophers, and thinkers in Post-Christian Theology and The Cathedral in the Center attest to that. Martinson relates freely to theologians such as Thomas McEvilley, Eugenio Trías, Daphne Hampson, John Shelby Spong, and Stanley Hauerwas, all of whom Martinson sees to attempt to transcend traditional theology to some degree. A second influence are theologians

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96 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 47–57.
such as Thomas Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, and Don Cupitt, but also George Lindbeck and Rodney Clapp, who have variously been termed postmodern theologians or have related explicitly to the post-Christian situation.\(^\text{97}\) Philosophical influences are supplied by Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gilles Deleuze, as well as Slavoj Žižek and Gianni Vattimo.\(^\text{98}\) Lastly, Richard Dawkins is accompanied by a number of Swedish atheists and critics of religion, such as Ingemar Hedenius, Thomas Anderberg, Torbjörn Tännsjö, and Lena Andersson, to complement the set of references.\(^\text{99}\) The selection of thinkers and scholars Martinson engages indicates the research field he most closely addresses to be the field of postmodern, secular, and post-Christian theology. In order to relate Martinson’s thinking to this context, this section sketches a brief outline of the development of these theological ‘schools’.

As indicated, the post-Christian conditions is related to what can be termed the post-World more generally. Many theological accounts of the post-World link the current situation to processes in modernity, and especially to the processes of secularization. The processes of differentiation, rationalization, privatization, and pluralization that comprised secularization led to the establishment of a specific religious sphere, separated from other spheres of society.\(^\text{100}\) One theological response to these developments was the traditionalist approach that rejected modernity’s emphasis on science and emancipation and insisted on the Christian church’s unique narrative and truth claims. Another approach accepted the logic of modernity and attempted to accommodate the Christian faith accordingly.\(^\text{101}\) The result of both strategies was a marginalization of the Christian faith in Western European societies and the spread of individual disbelief in the form of atheism.\(^\text{102}\) These developments led also to the belief that modernity would invariably result in the demise of Christianity.\(^\text{103}\) Thus, in the 1970s, most observers expected a gradual fading out of belief in transcendental realities in modern societies.

The death of God theologies that developed in the 1960s in the United States developed out of this assumption of the widespread demise of traditional Christian belief. Inspired in part by Bonhoeffer’s prison letters, the death of God movement is most closely associated with Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul van Buren.\(^\text{104}\) The concept of the death of God has a long tradition in theology, starting with the Christological disputes in the third century and finding expression in Luther’s theology, before being reworked by Hegel and, perhaps most famously, by

\(^{97}\) Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden*, 89–96.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 96–106, 182–204.

\(^{99}\) Ibid., 37–73.


\(^{101}\) Boeve, *Interrupting tradition*, 48–49.


Nietzsche. Altizer follows the death of God in its Hegelian formulation as the death of an abstract otherworldly entity that stands removed from the world. The death of God renders the divine instead immanent and thus accessible to human beings. The demise of belief in the traditional trinitarian formulations of the Christian faith is thus not in opposition to Christianity, but is the natural outflow of the Christian gospel as the divine leaves unchanging eternity and becomes part of human history. The central motive of Altizer’s Christian atheism is thus kenosis, the emptying of the divine in the incarnation.

In the 1980s, Mark C. Taylor criticized Altizer’s project for not taking the death of God far enough. Inspired by Jacques Derrida, Taylor argued that the death of God is not limited to a divine self-emptying into the world, but entails the end of all metaphysical truth claims. This criticism applies equally to traditional Christian formulations and to Altizer’s Christian atheism. Taylor consequently argued that the death of God should not be understood to result in atheism, but in the deconstruction of all theological truth claims. Taylor maintained that “deconstruction is the ‘hermeneutic’ of the death of God,” and the starting point for a postmodern a/theology, a theological reflection situated between the atheistic and the theological. The secular death of God theologies of Altizer and Taylor became the springboard for the development of postmodern theologies.

While secular theologies still tried to grapple with the implication of secularization for Christian theology, the secularization narrative itself became increasingly unsettled by the development of postmodernism. Postmodern thinkers started to question the ability of science to produce objective knowledge, arguing instead for the interpretative character of all human thinking. With the questioning of objective knowledge came also increased scrutiny of authority and power structures, the contingencies of language, and the absoluteness of history. These developments did initially contain a further challenge for the Christian faith and the churches. If it is forever impossible to gain certain knowledge and if, furthermore, all knowledge is historically and linguistically conditioned, then religious claims about an ultimate reality lose their epistemological basis. Christian doctrine is not the explication of divine truth, but a social construction that at best aids people in leading good and decent lives and at worst functions to oppress and subjugate people to ecclesial power. The end of the meta-narrative appears consequently also as the end of

106 Hyman, A Short History of Atheism, 156–161.
107 Ibid., 168–175.
110 Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 10-12.
Christianity. Still, postmodernity also presents an opening for faith. The inherent criticism of the meta-narrative and the possibility of certain knowledge do not only apply to the Christian faith, but also question the foundations of atheism. That is, the questioning of the possibility of objective knowledge opens up the possibility of faith. The theological projects that seize this opportunity see a new possibility for a critical and constructive theology that combines serious engagement with divine revelation with an openness towards the world.

Postmodern theologies have taken a number of distinct forms. Gerard Mannion collects under the label of ‘postmodern’ schools of theological thought such diverse movements as the secular theologies of Thomas Altizer and Harvey Cox in the 1960s, the non-realist theology of Don Cupitt, the deconstructive theology of Mark C. Taylor, the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck, the emerging church movement, the ‘resident aliens’ theology of Stanley Hauerwas, and John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement. Postmodern theology is hence a broad and varied field. Indeed, the differences between the various postmodern theologies are at least as pronounced as their similarities. Since postmodern theologies developed, at least partially, out of the God is dead theology, it is difficult to neatly distinguish between postmodern and post-Christian theologies. There is a large overlap between Mannion’s listing of postmodern theologians and Mike Grimshaw’s account of post-Christian theologians, including Altizer, Cupitt, and Taylor. Also John W. Riggs illustrates post-Christian theology with Mark C. Taylor, but for Riggs also Mary Daly classifies as a post-Christian theologian, even if of a different type than Taylor.

The proliferation of different theological responses to postmodernity is closely related also to the theological treatment of the post-secular society, which some see to signal the return of religion or the new visibility of religion. Scholars, such as Jan Eckerdal, have argued that post-secularity entails new openings for religion and the Christian church, especially when connected with the concept of post-Christendom. Others, such as Ingolf U. Dalferth, hold that post-secular societies are not characterized by a new openness to religion, but rather eschew reference to questions of religion or spirituality all together. On this account, the post-secular society is characterized by a disinterest in religious questions.

Truly post-secular societies are neither religious nor secular. They do not prescribe or privilege a religion, but neither do they actively and intentionally refrain from doing so. They are neither for nor against religion(s), whether in the private lives of their citizens or in the public realms. Rather,

112 Boeve, _Interrupting tradition_, 6.
115 Mannion, “Postmodern Ecclesiologies,” 132–140.
117 Riggs, _Postmodern Christianity_, 82–86.
118 Eckerdal, _Kyrka i mission_, 97.
they take no stand on this matter, because it is irrelevant for their self-understanding and without import for the communicative, civic, legal, political, or economic operations by and through which they define themselves. For them, religion has ceased to be something to which a society has to relate in embracing, rejecting, prescribing, negating, or allowing it.\textsuperscript{119}

Dalferth continues to distinguish a number of different meanings of the secular. In opposition to the divine, the secular represents the created world. Similarly, in relation to the religious, the secular denotes activities that are directed towards created reality, such as cooking and plumbing, as opposed to activities directed towards the divine, for example worship or prayer. However, these binary oppositions have been criticized from within theology under the rubric of secular theology. A secular theology is then any theological project that rejects the dichotomization between sacred and profane, religious and non-religious, holy and secular, and clergy and laity.\textsuperscript{120} Clayton Crockett argues that the secular should not be seen as the opposite of the holy or of the religious, but simply as the non-religious. Crockett maintains that the secular is simply the realm of time and space, liberated by the death of God to come into the view of theology.\textsuperscript{121} This understanding of secular has inspired a new wave of secular theology, well illustrated by Gianni Vattimo. Though distinct from Altizer, also Vattimo focuses on the processes of incarnation and kenosis, by which the divine enters human history in a process of “secularization,” the transcription of God into the world.\textsuperscript{122}

As a background to Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology, it is most important to understand the tight connection between the postmodern, post-secular, and post-Christian. First, post-Christian theologies have been grouped under the post-modern label, so that postmodern and post-Christian overlap to a significant degree. However, as an instance of ‘post-Christianism,’ post-Christian theology is strictly related to the strand of postmodern theology that developed out of the atheistic or secular death of God theologies, rather than the cultural-linguistic variant exemplified by George Lindbeck.\textsuperscript{123} This points, second, to the fact that post-Christian theology has its historical roots in the secular theologies of the God is dead movement, as well as various atheist positions that challenge belief in a transcendent and removed unmoved mover who controls the fate of the world. Third, the discussion about post-secularity has nuanced the current understanding of the secular, giving rise to current incarnations of secular theology, which continue to emphasize the presence of the divine in immanence. To conclude, post-Christian theology has been around since long before Mattias Martinson started his ‘experimental theology’ research

\textsuperscript{120} Dalferth, “Post-secular society,” 10–12, 22–23.
\textsuperscript{123} Caputo, “Atheism, A/Theology, and the Postmodern Condition,” 276.
project in 2004. Nonetheless, addressing his Swedish context, Martinson gives post-Christian theology a particular and distinct shape.

3. Mattias Martinson’s Post-Christian Theology

Mattias Martinson shares many of his theological starting points with David Tracy. A short excursion into Tracy’s *The Analogical Imagination* helps to frame also Martinson’s starting point. In 1981, Tracy argued that all theology is public discourse. As such, the theologian always addresses three distinct social realities, “the wider society, the academy, and the church.”124 The first public, wider society, can in itself be differentiated into three realms, the technoeconomic realm, the realm of the polity, and the real of culture, which includes both a society’s ethos and worldview.125 It is this realm of culture theologians usually address, and here theology is the study of various responses to the existential questions raised by human existence. Tracy argues that the practice of theology becomes ever more important due to the otherwise almost desperate impasse in a serious reflection on values.126

Also Martinson understands theology as a public discourse. However, while Tracy insists on three publics, Martinson drops the church as a public for theology.127 While Martinson himself addresses mainly the academy, he argues that the primary public for theology is the wider society. Theology should assist society in its worldview discourse.128 This theological task becomes ever more pressing, as Martinson finds, just as Tracy, that there is a lack of a qualified discussion on existential and worldview questions in today’s Swedish society.

This position is most succinctly formulated in Martinson’s “Nine Theses” from 2004. Looking at the situation in Sweden, Martinson laments the dichotomic separation of religious studies and theology, which has resulted in a situation in which religious studies engages Christianity uninterestedly through the application of historical-critical and empirical methods, while theology aims to take part in the Christian debates themselves. Martinson argues that academic theology is therefore either purely descriptive or uncritical, with the result that the task of a critical academic theology is left undone.129 The inability of Swedish academic theologians to contribute critically and constructively to the public debate about Christianity leads to a public discourse that lacks the necessary knowledge about religious phenomena and the theological tradition. More importantly, theology is no longer capable of contributing normatively and constructively to society’s public

125 Ibid., 7.
126 Ibid., 13.
129 Martinson, “Nio teser om kritisk religionsvetenskap i dagens Sverige,” 147.
discourse about religion and the value of religious ideas. Martinson therefore maintains that academic theology needs to be redefined in such a way that it can fulfil the crucial function of informing the public discourse. This requires that academic theology no longer be steered by exclusively Christian interests, even as it needs to acknowledge its indebtedness to the Christian tradition.

The “Nine Theses” can be read as Martinson’s research agenda for academic theology. For Martinson, academic theology is predominantly concerned with a general worldview discourse about Christianity. The primary public academic theology addresses is the wider society. This requires academic theology to accept the premises of society’s discourse instead of focusing on a preestablished Christian research agenda. It is this kind of academic theology Martinson attempts to formulate in Post-Christian Theology (2007) and The Cathedral in the Center (2010).

Indeed, Post-Christian Theology is inspired largely by the “frustration about the lacuna that emerges when the academic discussion about religious interpretations and worldview questions loses its public arena.” To address this situation, Martinson inquires into “a more normative conception of theology, that is, a theology that is founded on a living tradition of interpretation, but that does not isolate the production of theology to either a clearly identified religious sphere or to the most private aspects of life.” The aim of Martinson’s post-Christian theology is thus to “challenge and problematize a misguided position in theology, which does not question the timelines, legitimacy, and potential of the Christian faith with sufficient rigor, but allows it to function as the self-evident and uncontested raison d’être of the academic theological discourse.” Martinson thus sees a need for a fundamental reform of theology.

I think that the way forward is not to contend the collapse of Christianity and theology as a public discourse (independent of whether one turns this into something negative or positive for theology). Work is instead needed in realizing a thinning of theology’s Christian deep structure, which can work its way from the depths through to the surface. If this thinning happens, theology can eventually assert that it has opened itself towards a multifaceted reflection about the mysteries of existence and people’s approach to life—that is, a reflection that is not only accessible for a single language group (the Christian), which in important parts has lost its ability to lead our current seeking.

Martinson’s post-Christian theology is thus an attempt to liberate theology as a specialized academic discourse from its exclusive focus on Christianity and to contribute to the establishment of a pluralistic academic theology in which not every research agenda is dominated by Christian concerns, a field with a multitude of relevant perspectives on how the theological task can shift.

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130 Ibid., 157–58.
131 Ibid., 148.
132 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 11.
133 Ibid., 9–10.
134 Ibid., 11.
135 Ibid., 33.
and change.\textsuperscript{136} The guiding question of such a theological project becomes: “how can we, from within the Western European intellectual tradition, continue to think theologically without immediately entering into absolute loyalty to the Christian faith and the Christian church?”\textsuperscript{137}

Post-Christian theology is the attempt to formulate a theological project that allows for an elemental uncertainty in its own positioning and situation in relation to the various faith claims of Christianity and atheism, a project that neither functions as the defender of a Christian civilization or a peculiar Christian people, nor as the herald of atheism based on a definite denial of central Christian doctrines.\textsuperscript{138} Martinson argues that such a project necessarily needs to start in the realities of the present cultural situation.\textsuperscript{139} It is only once theology seriously addresses the current state of dis/belief, that it is able to contribute to the worldview discourse of wider society.

\section*{3.1 Context}

Martinson boldly claims that “few would seriously dispute that we live in a post-Christian society, even if such a term can be variously construed.”\textsuperscript{140} Martinson further holds that

\begin{quote}

in Sweden—which is the primary context of this book—religion has once disappeared into the background, at least in the sense that the common Christian heritage is slowly losing its significance for the majority of people.\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

Martinson thus paints the picture of a society in which Christianity has lost its essential influence, so that “its central ideas and practices have lost their substantial power, import, and meaning for many people.”\textsuperscript{142} Sweden is a society in which “the Christian faith and Christian morals no longer constitute a common cultural language,” so that Swedish society has clearly moved beyond its Christian cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{143}

Instead, Sweden is today characterized by widespread atheism. Martinson presumes that contemporary Swedish culture can be described as “an atheist culture in analogy to the way in which medieval Europe […] is generally seen to have had a Christian culture.”\textsuperscript{144} This new cultural situation is permeated by doubt, disbelief, and agnosticism.\textsuperscript{145} It is a cultural situation in which “the intellectual moral defended by atheists has long since been accepted by very many religious

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\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{139} Martinson, \textit{Katedralen mitt i staden}, 29.
\textsuperscript{140} Martinson, \textit{Postkristen teologi}, 8.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{142} Martinson, \textit{Katedralen mitt i staden}, 10.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 15.
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people.”

Martinson thus argues that “atheism can be understood as the given and by now tested cultural norm with important implication for everything else.”

However, this atheist society can only be understood in relation to its Christian past. Martinson reckons, “it was European Christianity that finally turned atheist.”

The development from a Christian to an atheist society is, however, in no way characterized by clear rupture. There are important lines of continuity, as well as evident signs of change. Consequently, the situation is more complex than a simple ‘after’ Christianity. Instead of observing an epochal shift in which everything changed, we are confronted with a situation in which certain, specifically Christian beliefs, have slowly given way to a different set of beliefs characterized by the rejection of traditional Christian doctrines. Still, the Christian cultural heritage continues to exert influence in atheist culture and is even cherished to some degree. The cathedral’s continued placement in the very center of the city illustrates this point. The cathedral, which for Martinson represents Christianity, could have been torn down and replaced with a shopping mall a long time ago. But, also atheist culture tends its cathedral. Martinson concludes that “in this situation both society’s and the academy’s de-Christianization appear as palpable, paradoxical, and seeming, all at the same time.”

Atheist culture is hence closely connected to its Christian predecessor, without any clear-cut lines between them. Atheism continues to rely on Christian language to voice that which it denies and continues to be informed by the Christian tradition from whence it developed. The connections between atheist culture and Christianity are indeed so many, that it is more meaningful to describe Swedish culture as post-Christian.

The designation of post-Christianity finds further support in recent developments. In Sweden, there is an evident development in which questions about religion and faith once more take place in media and political debates. The result is a situation in which “the traditional faith continues to charge the secular Swedish society with a certain theological energy.” It would thus be wrong to assume that atheist culture has put aside religion and Christianity for good.

Martinson’s starting point is thus the post-Christian society, which he understands as a cultural situation of essential ambivalence. On the one hand, most people in today’s Sweden have rejected the Christian faith, at least in its traditional formulations, and can aptly be described as atheist. Then again, Christianity continues to exert influence on Swedish society, not least as the lingering cultural-historical context from which current society developed. Martinson’s understanding of

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146 Ibid., 77.
147 Ibid., 23.
148 Ibid., 21.
149 Ibid., 46.
150 Ibid., 179.
151 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 8; Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 23–24.
152 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 11.
153 Ibid., 10.
theology’s post-Christian context thus relates most closely to post-Christianity. Martinson’s focus is on the change in beliefs and attitudes that are the result from a widespread loss of individual faith. The post-Christian society is most fundamentally an atheist society, with the difference that it is a particular European form of atheism that developed in response to the Christian faith. It is this cultural situation that academic theology needs to take seriously and address. In formulating a specific theological response that incorporates post-Christianity, Martinson can be said to develop a theology of post-Christianism.

3.2 Post-Christianism

Mattias Martinson does not set out to formulate a comprehensive, systematic treatment of a post-Christian theology. That is, the ‘experimental theology’ research project is not an attempt to formulate a coherent post-Christian systematic theology that addresses all the traditional theological loci from a post-Christian perspective. Instead, Martinson approaches theology structurally, as a discourse and a discursive possibility. This approach is rooted in the post-Christian theological project itself. As post-Christian theology questions the prioritization inherent in the Christian tradition, it does not follow the traditional structure of Christian theology, especially as post-Christian theology attempts to free itself of its absolute dependence on the Christian faith. Still, it is possible to distill the contours of a post-Christian theology from Martinson’s project. To this end, this section presents the findings of the movement between the parts and the whole of the text. Considering the various aspects and different elements of Martinson’s discussion makes it possible to assemble a coherent sketch of a post-Christian theology. Even though this theology remains vague on traditional theological questions, the discussion of the discursive possibilities of theology implies a specific understanding of what theology is and should be, as well as pronounced ideas of the appropriate method and scope of theological reflection. It is thus possible to construct a sketch of Martinson’s post-Christian theology even if he does not intend to formulate a theology proper.

During the second half of the 20th century, religious criticism grew strong in Sweden. The attacks on Christianity, the reproach of academic theology, and the dwindling influence of the church resulted in a situation in which the Christian faith appeared unseemly, obsolete, and naïve. Theology was excluded from the realm of fine culture and lost its ability to contribute to a public worldview discourse. This has led to a cultural state in which

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155 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 20.
156 Ibid., 20.
157 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 37–38.
the intellectual sensibility for religious questions has almost vanished from public debate, with the consequence that there is very little room for a serious and problematizing discussion of religion, which does not at once fall into one of the two extreme positions of an either unconditional defense of religious faith or an unconditional atheistic rejection of religion.¹⁵⁸

There consequently emerged a lacuna in religious interpretation and worldview questions.¹⁵⁹ Still today, there is no qualified public debate that can assist people in critically and consciously relating to religion, the Christian faith, and the Christian cultural heritage.¹⁶⁰

However, the problem goes beyond a mere lack of knowledge and the accompanying sensibility in treating religious questions. Post-Christians need a qualified worldview discourse just as much as anyone else. Martinson relates this existential need back to Paul Tillich’s ultimate concern, when he discusses the enduring necessity of a reflection about “that which concerns us deepest.”¹⁶¹ However, while Martinson follows Tillich to some degree, he contends that our ‘ultimate concerns’ or ‘that which concerns us deepest’ cannot be specified once and for all. The ambivalent situation of post-Christianity necessitates the recognition that our ultimate concerns are contextual and open to change. Theology always needs to address the ultimate concerns of a specific context anew. The task of theology in the post-Christian society is then not to provide society with definite answers derived from the Christian faith and tradition, but to support people in asking the questions that can unearth the ultimate concerns in their concrete situation.¹⁶² Martinson thus envisions a theology that addresses the religious needs of today’s post-Christian and religiously ambivalent people, a theology that contributes to a qualified public worldview discourse. This theology engages that which concerns us deepest in the particular cultural situation of post-Christianity.¹⁶³ Martinson’s post-Christian theology is then not dictated by a specific form of religious belief, but presents a vital and critically engaged thinking about post-Christianity’s ultimate concerns.¹⁶⁴

To be able to deliver on this vision, theology needs to set aside its historical loyalty to the Christian faith. Theology can no longer be limited to only one specific religious discourse and leave everyone who does not naturally relate to Christianity out of the theological reflection.¹⁶⁵ Post-Christian theology hence challenges and problematizes those theological positions, which uncritically accept the primacy, legitimacy, and potential of the Christian faith for theological reflection.¹⁶⁶ Such a theological project needs to start by addressing its own relationship to

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 38.
¹⁵⁹ Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 10.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 9.
¹⁶¹ The original phrase in Swedish is “det som berör oss djupast,” literally “that which touches us deepest.” It would also be possible to translate the phrase simply as “that which concerns us ultimately,” or simply “ultimate concern.” The translation of “that which concerns us deepest” attempts to highlight both the similarity and the difference between Tillich and Martinson. Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 19, 41.
¹⁶² Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 42–43.
¹⁶³ Ibid., 10.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 8.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 11.
Christianity and consequently necessitates a critical questioning of its Christian deep structure. Only when theology frees itself from the Christian bias in its own thinking, can it adequately address the post-Christian situation.

However, while theology cannot continue in absolute loyalty to the Christian faith, it can neither simply reject Christianity. Indeed, Martinson argues that if post-Christian theology is to continue to be theology in any significant way, then it needs to be thought in relation to theology’s Christian history. The same continuity that exists between Christian and post-Christian culture exists between Christian and post-Christian theology. As was the case for culture more generally, also in the case of theology there is no clear and sudden rupture that separates Christian theology from its post-Christian successor. As a development out of Christianity, post-Christianity cannot deny Christian theology without denying itself. A denial of theology’s historical developments would furthermore make it impossible for theology to critically analyze its own situatedness in a larger historical discourse. Far from freeing theology from its Christian deep structure, such a denial would make it impossible for theology to critically distance itself from the Christian faith. Only through a critical engagement with its own history can theology divest itself of its Christian bias. This requires an “unending will to distance oneself from oneself as a product of tradition.” This requirement stems in part from the fact that the very language post-Christian theology employs is a product of Christian theological thought. Post-Christian theology is dependent on the Christian language game, even when it uses the Christian language to distance itself from the Christian tradition. Thus, even the most pronounced forms of post-Christian theology need to become part of a constructive theological process of self-interpretation. Hence, while post-Christian theology does not require an acceptance of any specific form of faith or religion, it is neither possible to completely separate itself from its intimate contact with the religious ideas and models dominant in Christianity. Martinson concludes,

> if one wants to be a theologian or a philosopher in a post-Christian culture and work on different forms of worldview issues both critically and constructively, one needs to equip oneself with a certain appreciation of the Christian faith, a true engagement, even if this ultimately remains only a methodological appreciation. In short, one cannot trivialize.

Martinson is thus critical of any atheistic rejection of the Christian theological tradition, which does not acknowledge theology’s historical indebtedness to Christianity nor the resources the theological tradition offers also to a post-Christian theology. Ignoring the continued influence Christian

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167 Ibid., 12.
168 Ibid., 13.
169 Ibid., 89.
170 Ibid., 104.
171 Ibid., 17, 92.
172 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 71.
173 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 16.
thought exerts on the present situation only risks to unconsciously reproduce Christian interests. An outright rejection of Christian thought does not allow for a thorough analysis of the multiple ways in which Christianity continues to inform also a post-Christian culture, and therefore often falls flat as a sustained criticism of religion.

Martinson therefore also repudiates any uncritical reworking of traditional Christian thought in an atheist guise. The Swedish Humanist Association is increasingly launching humanist versions of traditional Christian practices that reject Christianity but fail to adequately address their own Christian roots. Central tenants of the Christian faith are thus reworked in a secular fashion without dealing with the Christian deep structure embedded in the practices themselves. A simple rejection of Christianity is not workable for a critical post-Christian theology.

Post-Christian theology thus stands in a complicated relationship to Christianity. Post-Christian theology replaces Christian theology as the site of reflection about that which concerns us deepest. However, post-Christanity is a progression or development out of Christianity and thus stands in some form of continuity with Christianity. Post-Christian theology is thus a theology that is based on a critical self-understanding that indicates that “it is not sure within which confession of faith it is at home,” but which nonetheless takes the theological question very seriously and does not denounce philosophical fantasy and constructive ambitions of interpretation. The transcendence of traditional Christian theology entails new possibilities for post-Christian theology to relate to established truths and arguments. Post-Christian theology therefore displays a specific constructive potential. Martinson’s attempt to bridge Christian and atheist arguments to broaden and deepen the field of worldview reflections underlines this point.

As noted, Martinson describes this theology as “a multifaceted reflection about the mystery of existence and people’s approach to life.” Once theology accepts the ambivalence of the post-Christian situation characterized by both continuity and rupture in relation to the Christian tradition, theology can become a reflection that is accessible to more than one single Christian language group.

Martinson formulates this requirement in terms of a thinning out theology’s Christian deep structure, a process in which theology’s Christian identity is slowly “weakened, thinned, and changed into something else.” To accomplish this, post-Christian theology needs to be wholly immanent. Martinson thinks that

174 Ibid., 32.
175 Ibid., 47.
176 Ibid., 67–68.
178 Ibid., Katedralen mitt i staden, 167–168.
179 Ibid., Postkristen teologi, 33.
180 Ibid., 33.
181 Ibid., 33.
Immanence is here the opposite of transcendence and denotes the material, worldly, and concrete in contrast to the spiritual, divine, and removed. Martinson takes the concept of immanence and a plane of immanence from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. He writes,

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\text{a plane of immanence is roughly equivalent with a conceptualizing practice which in its operation does not refer to anything outside of itself. Extended over chaos (that is to say the world that has no transcendentally established order) is the immanent conceptualization (philosophy) related only to its own inner logic and consistency, which emerges in coherent conceptualizations and chains of equivalence.}
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A post-Christian immanent strategy thus establishes theology as a reflection based on life as it is lived in the world without reference to anything otherworldly or transcendent. Post-Christian theology thus leaves aside all questions of a transcendent God and the in-breaking of the transcendent into the immanent in revelation and incarnation. Instead, post-Christian theology focuses attention on the ultimate concerns disclosed in the lives of people in a particular cultural context. Post-Christian theology is accordingly not atheist in the sense that it maintains that there is no God. Still, the question of the transcendent is no longer decisive. It is a theology done “as if God did not exist.”

The immanent strategy has far-reaching consequences for post-Christian theology and its reevaluation of traditional theological loci. An immanent christology is neither interested in the Jesus of history nor the Christ of faith, but in Christ as a product of culture. As a consequence of its transcendence of Christianity, post-Christian theology is not bound to the Christian faith and its historical origin, so that the Jesus of history is of only secondary importance. Moreover, post-Christian theology does not address any reality outside of the world. The Christ of faith relates directly to the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent in the associated theological doctrines of creation, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. None of these has any preeminence in post-Christian theology, which is instead interested in how the cultural image of Christ has been established and renegotiated in relation to various cultural contexts and how this Christ of culture has affected and continues to affect people’s lives.

Also soteriology is radically redefined in post-Christian theology. Instead of conceding authority to a divine plan for human deliverance, salvation is recast in immanent terms. Martinson writes,

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\text{I am not opposed to an idea of salvation, but I do not think salvation as a theological endpoint of deliverance. Salvation is found in giving each of us—individually on which worldview position}
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we take on the post-Christian field—the possibility of thinking further, to deepen our relation to one another, to open our eyes to our own responsibilities, so that we get the possibility to continue living in a more constructive way.\textsuperscript{186}

Salvation is then simply the possibility to live constructive lives, and while it is open to interpretation what exactly “a more constructive way” entails, salvation is here tied to a form of human flourishing or \textit{eudaimonia}. Post-Christian salvation is thus fully immanent in scope. The goal is to live good lives in the here and now, independently of any eschatological kingdom of God or a divine plan of salvation. Salvation is simply “the possibility to see things differently, so that change—if it is possible at all—can be accomplished.”\textsuperscript{187}

Martinson also addresses the relationship between an immanent post-Christian theology and Scripture. He claims that almost two thousand years of biblical exegesis have not been able to establish how thundering damnations and moral tales about evil breeding death can be reconciled with appealing stories such as the parables of the lost son or the Good Samaritan.\textsuperscript{188} The biblical narratives remain incoherent and contradictory. Large parts of the biblical stories are characterized by a black and white worldview, which can guide neither wider society nor theology. Consequently, the fragmented stories of the Bible no longer serve today’s people as the foundation of their worldview reflections.\textsuperscript{189} A post-Christian approach to the biblical narratives reconfigures the biblical stories and understands the Bible not as divine self-revelation, but as an ever-expanding field of meaning.\textsuperscript{190} The biblical stories do not gain purchase due to their assumed divine origin. Instead, it is the wealth of meanings and interpretative possibilities, that makes the Bible an interesting resource for post-Christian reflections.\textsuperscript{191}

This section has established Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology through a movement between the parts and the whole. Through a consideration of the various aspects of Martinson’s proposal, a theology of the immanent emerges, which eschews contemplation of everything that generates outside of the palpable world. Its task is to contribute to a public worldview discourse that does not stand in any relation of absolute loyalty to any one religious system. This does not mean that post-Christianity completely breaks with the Christian theological tradition. There are important lines of continuity between the Christian faith and a post-Christian theology, not least, because it is only by acknowledging the historical roots of post-Christian theology in the Christian theological tradition, that post-Christian theology can attempt to free itself from its Christian deep structure. Post-Christian theology positions itself outside of the traditional Christian belief system, and recasts traditional theological \textit{loci} in a radically new light. According to Martinson, this

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 43–44.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{190} Martinson, \textit{Katedralen mitt i staden}, 245–246.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 280–281.
A reworking of academic theology is necessary if theology is supposed to be able to engage a post-Christian people, who are otherwise forced to “define themselves atheologically as standing outside of the field of theology.” Theology cannot remain bound up in a discourse that the wider society no longer shares. A post-Christian society necessitates a post-Christian theology.

3.3 Theological Method

Post-Christian theology as described by Mattias Martinson is a reflection about that which concerns post-Christian people deepest. As such, its theological method is primarily a worldview reflection. Post-Christian theology has then the character of philosophy. This follows naturally from Martinson’s insistence that post-Christian theology does not need to be grounded in any one religious tradition. Moreover, it is the very absence of any declared loyalty to established doctrines that allows post-Christian theology to address people living in the ambivalent situation of the post-Christianity. As people have left the Christian faith behind and stand doubtful and unsure before Christianity’s grand narrative, theology needs to incorporate their doubts and ambiguities instead of clinging to outdated doctrines. Post-Christian theology is thus no longer “founded on a concrete and specific belief,” but is as adaptable and ambivalent as the post-Christian culture itself. This also implies that the traditional separation between theology, as faith seeking understanding, and philosophy, as an investigation into the conditions of truth in general, becomes meaningless. For Martinson, theology and philosophy are “principally of the same kind.” Martinson thus emphasizes that post-Christian theology is not essentially different from philosophy. It is true that post-Christian theology relates back to its own particular history and takes seriously the Christian tradition’s claim to a specific access to truth, distinct from the truth established by science and philosophy. However, that does not in itself establish an essential difference between theology and philosophy. Also philosophy relates back to its particular history and its own narrative about itself. The difference between theology and philosophy is then not of kind, but merely of the type of questions traditionally addressed in these related fields of inquiry.

The fundamental similarity between theology and philosophy does not mean however, that one should abandon theology and collapse it into philosophy. Theology retains a particular value due to its historical tendency to address the ultimate concerns. That is, in the post-Christian society theology is better apt at providing the needed worldview reflection than philosophy, due to its situatedness in the ambivalence of the post-Christian situation itself. The post-Christian tension between the demise of the Christian faith and the continued influence of cultural Christianity is

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193 Ibid., 35.
194 Ibid., 35.
epitomized by theology, which in itself has “an extreme precarious situation between modern science and a premodern church.”\textsuperscript{196} This precarious situation leads to “a critical potential to lead the academic discussion back to the annoying question of the legitimacy and plausibility of the scientific quest for knowledge and truth.”\textsuperscript{197} By acknowledging this position in between the premodern and the modern, faith and reason, belief and doubt, and Christianity and post-Christianity, post-Christian theology opens up a new space for reflection, a space that philosophy generally shuns away from.\textsuperscript{198}

Post-Christian theology is also characterized by its experimental character. Martinson maintains that theology “should always be experimental and conscious of the fact that all thinking always happens in artificial environments in which things are ordered in a way that does not really correspond to the historical developments of reality.”\textsuperscript{199} Theology, as a second order reflection about the mystery of existence, is always the encounter of an induced problem of its time and an abstract understanding of Christianity.\textsuperscript{200} Theology is thus foremost an intellectual activity. Theology does not engage the religious reality in itself, but works only at an abstract level with representations of those problems. The processes of induction and abstraction lead to a situation in which theology has no “unproblematic contact with any supposedly religious reality.”\textsuperscript{201}

Martinson employs the image of a laboratory to describe these processes. Theology works as a kind of laboratory in which experiments are conducted under precisely controlled conditions. Even though these conditions do not resemble real life, theology is not completely separated from existence outside the laboratory. Also experimental abstraction is based on real problems and phenomena. Thus also

the theology that results from such laboratory activities [is] a theology deeply ingrained in both the present experience and the tradition. But it is at the same time a theology that despite its qualifications cannot claim to grasp more than an extremely fragmentary—frozen—aspect of experience and the tradition.\textsuperscript{202}

An experimental theology can therefore never hope to represent life as it is outside of the laboratory. What such a theology can try to achieve is in the best case a “qualified perspective or a good example of a way to reason under specific conditions.”\textsuperscript{203} As an experimental theology, post-Christian theology is thus conscious of its own constructedness. Since it is the theologian who extracts an understanding of the religious reality and the Christian tradition before they meet in the

\textsuperscript{196} Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 182.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{199} Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 106.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 109.
laboratory, post-Christian theology cannot make any claims to any absolute and eternal truth outside of the conditions of the laboratory.\textsuperscript{204} Positively, this entails that post-Christian theology sets aside any attempt to “represent everyone who believes according to a certain norm and then establish which form religious practices should take according to that norm.”\textsuperscript{205} Post-Christian theology does not lead a homogenizing charge, which aims at ascertaining a single unchangeable theological truth. Instead, it allows for a broad spectrum of different views which are only connected in their common attempt to “problematicize their norms and practices.”\textsuperscript{206} Post-Christian theology thus finds it meaningless to attempt “to separate (pure) Christians from other (impure) people.”\textsuperscript{207} As any conception of pure Christianity is ultimately only the result of specific processes of abstraction, there is no pure Christianity, detached from human interests and particular considerations, that theology could claim to be independent of time and space. Post-Christian theology thus breaks with the theological tradition because it has stopped believing in itself.\textsuperscript{208} That is to say, Martinson’s post-Christian theology has left all claims to a single normative theology as the right interpreter of divine revelation.\textsuperscript{209}

Post-Christian theology thus differs from Christian theology to the degree that it has accepted the provisionality of its own claims. The theological method Martinson prescribes is part philosophical worldview reflection and part experimental theology. This theological method does not attempt to establish an eternal truth or guarantee the correct interpretation of divine self-revelation. Instead, the theological method of post-Christian theology contents itself with raising important issues for the wider society and to exemplify a way of valid reasoning around questions of religion. Post-Christian theology thus accepts that everything is dependent on specific perspectives and individual opinions and consequently rejects all claims to divine truth.

### 3.4 Structure and Content

The second movement of the hermeneutical method is between structure and content. As mentioned, structure and content inform each other and together shape the message of a text. Accordingly, the experimental nature of Martinson’s post-Christian theology is not limited to the content of his theological project, but includes his theological method as well as the structure of his texts, which is curiously ambivalent. On the one hand, the text is traditional academic literature. Martinson addresses primarily academic theologians and religious studies scholars and follows the usual requirements for academic writing. However, Martinson also chooses to call the structure of

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 109.
his text “essayistic” and refers to his discussion of Adorno’s reasoning about an adequate form for critical philosophic writing.\textsuperscript{210}

In the referenced passage, Martinson takes from Adorno the notion that all intellectual pursuit is creative. However, as a creative pursuit, philosophical knowledge is never complete, nor can it be seen as “an unequivocal progress of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{211} Essayistic writing, which “starts where the author wants, goes the way it sees fit, and ends when it appears warranted,” mirrors this incompleteness of thinking and the radical openness of intellectual pursuits by denying demands of clarity and precision.\textsuperscript{212} Consequently, the essay does not attempt to conclusively demonstrate all the steps of an argument, but contents itself with partial and fragmentary representations. Opting for an essayistic structure is then more than a matter of style. By choosing the essayistic from, Martinson joins an intellectual tradition that problematizes the assumption of a final truth in philosophical and theological arguments. Instead, the essay as form argues that the last word is never spoken. The essayistic style is thus itself an argument for an experimental theology that aims to examine and challenge without concluding how things should ultimately be.

The text’s essayistic form does however make it difficult to know when to read a statement as a reflection and when to read it as a statement of fact that could, at least in theory, be empirically verified. An example of the latter is Martinson’s account of the current cultural situation in Sweden, quoted above. Martinson writes,

\begin{quote}
in Sweden—which is the primary context of this book—religion has once disappeared into the background, at least in the sense that the common Christian heritage is slowly losing its significance for the majority of people.\textsuperscript{213}
\end{quote}

This is clearly a statement of fact that can be critically evaluated and potentially falsified. On the other hand, when Martinson asks,

\begin{quote}
why do we not conclude that the current cultural situation, the post-Christian experience, in itself is a clear sign that the established Christian faith has played out its historical parts, that it was wrong all along in its interpretation of God’s love as it was expressed in the Christ event?\textsuperscript{214}
\end{quote}

this is a reflection and a kind of thought experiment that cannot be judged according to the same standards as a statement of fact. Rather than asking whether a reflection is true or verifiable, one should see whether it is plausible, valuable, constructive, and critical, and which potential implications such a reasoning could have. The difficulty arises when it is less clear whether a particular statement is the expression of a theological reflection or a statement of fact. For example, Martinson asserts,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{210} Martinson, \textit{Katedralen mitt i staden}, 32.  \\
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 164.  \\
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 164.  \\
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 10.  \\
\textsuperscript{214} Martinson, \textit{Postkristen teologi}, 28.
\end{flushright}
one could also conclude that we in today’s situation no longer can have much use of the Didaché and its black and white worldview. That could be the case, but if we allow ourselves to conclude that we not avoid accepting that the same also holds for large parts of the Bible and other documents which are far more central for the different Christian traditions than what the Didaché has ever been.215

In this citation it is difficult for the reader to neatly separate between a reflection and a statement of facts. One the one hand, the citation has the character of a statement of fact. It relates the proposition that in today’s situation we no longer have use of the Didaché or large parts of the Bible. This statement could be tested and would either find empirical support or could be rejected. On the other hand, it is unclear if the citation really functions as a statement of fact. That one “could conclude” and that this “could be the case” does not mean that one should conclude and that this is the case. The citation thus speaks to a possibility, a likely way in which the importance of the Bible can be understood in the current situation, and it is thus perhaps more of a reflection than a statement of fact.

To give another example, Martinson writes,

> a large problem for atheism, independently on whether it is fighting or calm, is that the basic assumptions in the intellectual moral which atheism defends has already been accepted by very many religious people—not least by theologians who struggle with the texts of religious traditions.216

Again, this citation first appears as a mere statement of fact. The text says something about how reality is structured and can therefore be evaluated accordingly. It is possible to speak to very many religious people and ask them whether they have already accepted the intellectual morals of atheism. At the same time, it is not entirely clear whether the text really tries to make a factual statement. The theologians who have accepted atheism’s basic intellectual reasoning appear as a mere afterthought. Since these theologians are not named nor referenced in a footnote, they function rather as a musing than as a statement of fact. The function of the theologians in the citation above could then be understood as an invitation to the reader to contemplate how an atheistic theologian who struggles with the Christian texts would relate to atheism as a cultural phenomenon. The function of the citation is then rather to raise a question than to provide a clear answer. The essayistic form is thus a means to question, contemplate, and muse over reality, rather than to make simple statements of fact.

The difficulty the essayistic style entails is that the reader does not know how a particular passage should be understood. This difficulty highlights the importance of the movement between a hermeneutics of acceptance and a hermeneutics of suspicion. Reading the citation at face value establishes the text as a factual argument. However, on a closer reading guided by suspicion, the

215 Ibid., 76.
216 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 77.
text is seen to have a reflective character. The text does not make claims about the nature of reality at all. Going back to a hermeneutics of acceptance ensures that the reflective meaning of the text continues to be rooted in the text itself. These examples demonstrate that it is only in the movements between accepting what the text actually says and an inquiry into the genuine meaning of the text founded on suspicion, that the message of the text becomes accessible. To take a last example, Martinson writes,

a little hesitant does the perplexed atheist at last make herself at home in the pew, where she listens to the preacher, who also denies the God of faith and no longer offers any sustainable answers, but who by her poetic speech creates a space for the longing after the God she was not really able to deny through her denial of God.217

The text fragment is not strictly an argument. There is neither a clear premise nor any definite conclusion. However, it is possible to understand Martinson’s intention. The citation points towards the continued significance of Christianity for an atheistic culture in which Christianity itself has become post-Christian. The atheist does return to the pew where the preacher herself has renounced God and does no longer offer any lasting answers. Moreover, the text part demonstrates the ambivalence of the post-Christian situation in which a denial of God is ultimately not a denial but an affirmation of the God who is denied. Still, the essayistic form leaves the text’s meaning unfinished and provisional. The fragment thus raises the question of how a theology could be constructed that addresses the undeniable longing after God and therefore opens up for a continued conversation. It is however only in the critical distance created in the movement between acceptance and suspicion that meaning is created through interpretation.

A related issue is the question of perspective. Martinson emphasizes that he does not understand himself to follow any one specific theological school, but rather attempts to cross traditional boundaries.218 This becomes evident in his description of post-Christian theology as situated in the in-between. Martinson writes in Post-Christian Theology,

I have now attempted to describe a fleeting and unspecified problem—the dialectics of the theological discourse and the ethics that follow from such a dialectic. In doing so, there emerges a model for theology that positions theology in a series of in-betweens: between the Christian and the non-Christian, between the apologetic and the non-apologetic, between theology and philosophy, between Christian notions of salvation and a teaching of self-salvation that is heretic in a traditional meaning. This vague and perhaps even unsatisfactory positioning is not unintentional, but rather part of the strategy that will be followed even as we go forward.219

Similarly, Martinson maintains in The Cathedral in the Center that

one today often meets a sharp dichotomization between faith and disbelief, religion and atheism (Hedenius, Dawkins, Onfray). This is an inheritance from the time when the dominance of

217 Ibid., 126.
218 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 18.
219 Ibid., 44.
Christianity was challenged by a secularism that felt irresistible. The cure for those who do not accept such a polarized model often ends up being a strong post-secular synthesizing: faith and disbelief, atheism and theology share fundamentally the same principles (Altizer, Žižek, Vattimo, Elvander, de Duve). Both positions are attractive. The first is easy to accept due to its focus on renewal, while the second has a clear sense due to its focused Hegelian confession. But on closer inspection appear neither dichotomization nor synthesizing as satisfactory in a culture in which one, on the one hand, lives de facto secular lives, etsi deus non daretur, but, on the other hand, is fundamentally bound to specific religious forms and norms. Instead of dichotomization (either/or) or synthesizing (both/and) one could claim that a post-Christian and atheistic culture is about a ‘neither/nor.’

Post-Christian theology is thus a theology of the ‘in-between’ and the ‘neither/nor.’ Both expressions underline the fundamental provisionality of all knowledge that is the hallmark of Martinson’s post-Christian theology. As a theology of the immanent, post-Christian theology denies the importance of any grounding of truth claims in a transcendental reality. Similarly, Martinson’s post-Christian theological method emphasizes the experimental and shifting character of all theological claims. The essayistic style underscores the conviction that theological reflection always remains incomplete and open. The position of the in-between and the assertion of the neither/nor thus result in a post-Christian theology that is persistently vague, tentative, and experimental. Martinson’s theology can thus be seen to illustrate Gianni Vattimo’s contention that we have entered the age of interpretation, in which there is nothing but interpretation. Vattimo rephrases Nietzsche and contends that “there are no facts, only interpretations; and this is an interpretation.” Just as with Vattimo’s claim, also Martinson’s assertion of the neither/nor opens up a space of fundamental uncertainty. However, while Vattimo leaves the reader with interpretation, Martinson’s neither/nor opens the reader to a void, a space of non-meaning.

The position of the in-between and the assertion of the neither/nor have a direct impact on the hermeneutical movement between the reader and the text. As noted, Gadamer maintained, that true understanding becomes possible in the merging of horizons. This requires the reader not only to be open to the otherness of the text, but also to be able to discern the position or standpoint of the text based on the text’s own intentions. However, here the in-between present a difficulty. Martinson’s post-Christian theology fundamentally denies the possibility of conclusively determining its position. An in-between has no position but is precisely the space between two positions. Likewise, the neither/nor does not denote any specific standpoint, but defies the usual rules of language by rejecting the fundamental claim to meaning altogether. Instead of the distinct standpoints indicated by the ‘either/or’ or the overabundance of meaning of the ‘both/and,’ the neither/nor denotes an absence of meaning, an empty space. The position of Martinson’s post-Christian theology, as a phenomenon of the in-between, thus remains indeterminable. This

220 Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden*, 167. *Etsi deus non daretur* is latin for “as if God did not exist.”
221 Martinson, “Nästan religiös,” 27.
however means, that it becomes impossible to enter the world of the text. If, as Gadamer suggested, the horizon is the range of possible views attached to any specific standpoint, then a theology of the in-between does not reveal its horizon. Post-Christian theology then eschews dialectic, renouncing all dialogical attempts at establishing understanding and instead embraces the vagueness and ambiguity of the undetermined and indeterminable.

The radical openness that characterizes post-Christian theology does not result in the acceptance of all theological positions as equally valid, however. That is, while the neither/nor suggests a vague positioning, Martinson is highly critical of those theological attempts that advocate certain theological positions. The criticism is primarily directed at the Christian theological tradition, from which post-Christian theology needs to free itself. Martinson speaks here of the necessary “liberation” of academic theology from its fixation on Christianity through a process of thinning theology’s Christian deep structure.\textsuperscript{223} Martinson maintains that we who live today in the post-Christian cultural situation do not yet have effective tools to think theologically or to criticize theology without being sucked back into the traditional Christian language. This is a genuine problem and it requires a long-term strategy of resistance that can change these conditions.\textsuperscript{224}

The openness of post-Christian theology is thus in itself prescriptive. It is an openness that does not accept theological positions that privilege the Christian faith, but claims that only the liberation from the dogmatism of the Christian tradition can result in a workable theological position in the post-Christian society. Christian theology is “something we increasingly need to be saved from.”\textsuperscript{225}

Martinson undergirds this liberation motive with several critical observations of Christianity. While Martinson does not want to deny the good that Christianity has represented throughout history, he nonetheless contends that “one cannot deny that this good is interwoven with as much evil, violence, and death.”\textsuperscript{226} Martinson also maintains that “the very message of the Gospel depends in part on unacceptable premises which constantly threaten to turn the Good News into Bad News.”\textsuperscript{227} Moreover, “most Christians who seek guidance in Scripture end up on the side of the oppressor,” which becomes apparent once one realizes that “violence is never far removed from the engaged debates about the true Christian faith, and violence can find incredibly many more or less subtle expressions.”\textsuperscript{228} Martinson’s post-Christian theology thus understands Christianity to be something problematic that needs to be addressed and transcended. Martinson aptly summarizes this thrust of his theological project when he says, “what was meant as a message

\textsuperscript{223} Martinson, \textit{Postkristen teologi}, 12.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., 103.
of salvation has for many people [...] become a necessary burden, something that makes spiritual change and renewal impossible.” According to Martinson, this does not mean his theological project is hostile towards Christianity. Instead, Martinson describes his position as critical. And indeed, Martinson also prescribes an approach to Christianity that is guided by “competence, insight, and empathy,” and argues that one “can no longer defend the dismissal of people just because they indicate that they have a religious faith or believe in God.” Post-Christian theology is thus critical mainly towards dominant Christianity that through its advocates in theology claims a unique and superior position. It is the history of Christianity itself that demonstrates that there is nothing inherently superior in the Christian faith. Any claims to uniqueness have therefore to be discarded even if personal belief can be retained as part of the multiplicity of relevant perspectives.

In sum, Martinson’s post-Christian theology refuses to position itself in any simple sense. Martinson claims not to follow any one theological school and situates the post-Christian theological reflection in a space in-between that asserts the neither/nor. It is therefore impossible to specify its position or horizon with any certainty. It is a theology that is constantly on the move, a theology of shifts, changes, and adaptations. This vague and provisional theology is a result of Martinson’s experimental theological method, which denies the possibility of establishing any one divine truth. Also, the essayistic style itself argues that theology needs to remain radically open, unfinished, and incomplete. The strong emphasis on change is also the basis for Martinson’s criticism of Christianity and Christian theology, which he sees as failing to adapt to the new cultural situation of fundamental doubt, disbelief, and agnosticism, so that traditional theology fails post-Christian society in addressing that which concerns us deepest.

### 3.5 Placing Martinson’s Post-Christian Theology

Post-Christianity denotes a range of different approaches to the current socio-cultural situation in the West. What distinguishes Martinson’s project from other post-Christian analyses is first his insistence on the widespread loss of individual faith. Post-Christianity denotes here a situation in which Swedish society is predominantly atheist, even as it continues to be influenced by its Christian cultural heritage. There are consequently no post-Christendom openings in Martinson’s analysis of the current situation. Moreover, Martinson’s proposal could be classified as ‘post-Christianism,’ a theory in response to the situation of post-Christianity. While such treatments are marginal in the international literature on Christian theology today, Martinson’s proposal carries a certain creative potential to adapt theology into something new and unruly.

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229 Ibid., 102.
230 Martinson, ”Nästan religiös”, 26.
231 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 11.
232 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 70.
The novel aspect of Martinson’s proposal is foremost his refusal to set theology on any sure footing. Theology becomes a reflection of the in-between and the neither/nor. One could thus claim that Martinson’s post-Christian theology is neither Christian nor atheist, neither religious nor secular, neither theology nor philosophy. In a sense, Martinson can be read as a strict application of Mark C. Taylor’s a/theology. Martinson follows Taylor in the basic rejection of both Christianity and atheism as strong metaphysical positions that cannot be conclusively established. However, Martinson tries to avoid Taylor’s tendency to ultimately subjugate theology under nihilism. To accomplish this, Martinson employs Tillich’s concept of the ultimate concern, arguing that post-Christianity is in need of a theological reflection of that which concerns us deepest. However, in marked difference to Tillich’s method of correlation, Martinson does not suggest that theology should produce the answers to the questions of post-Christian society. Instead, the best thing experimental post-Christian theology can hope to achieve is to assist the wider society in asking the right questions and giving examples of possible ways of reasoning. Martinson’s approach is then clearly postmodern in its embrace of perspectivism and provisonality, as well as its rejection of certainty and truth.

Theological reflections around the ultimate concerns can therefore only be based on the concreteness of the world. Here, Martinson shares the attention to the concrete world with secular theologies, such as the thought of Gianni Vattimo. Understanding the death of God as the end of strong thinking, Vattimo argues for an appreciation of the secular order as the space where salvation is ultimately possible. The processes of incarnation and especially of kenosis remain central. Thus, secularization becomes the inscribing of the divine into time and history. It is the death of God as a transcendental reality that makes possible the coming of the kingdom of God. The death of God is thus a positive force that works towards the destruction of idols and frees human beings from superstition. Understanding secular theologies, as a development out of the death of God theologies, as post-Christian theologies, Caputo argues that post-Christian theologies are essentially Christian theologies. It is in this respect that Martinson offers an alternative to other post-Christian or secular theologies. Instead of focusing attention on processes of incarnation or kenosis that lead to the inbreaking of the kingdom in secularity, Martinson distances his post-Christian theology from the transcendent all together. The death of God becomes a non-question. Whether God exists as a transcendent truth or has become an immanent reality, theology is carried out as if God did not exist. Thus, while Vattimo understands the postmodern weakening of metaphysical presuppositions as an opening to think God anew, Martinson understands the same

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234 Ibid., 7.
processes of weakening certainty to result in the futility of the question itself. In line with Dalferth’s analysis of the post-secular society, Martinson’s position could then be termed post-secular theology in contrast to Vattimo’s secular theology. Post-secular theology would then be a theology that has discarded the question of the transcendent and instead continues with the theological task as if God did not exist.

However, this leaves the ultimate concerns Martinson’s theology addresses strangely empty. If that which concerns us deepest can and should be thought without any relation to a divine reality, it appears unclear how an ultimate concern can be distinguished from any other concern. And if there is no essential difference, as the ultimate concerns of any time are merely a reflection of the ruling socio-cultural conditions, one needs to wonder if Martinson does not end up in the same situation as Taylor, privileging the atheistic over the theological.

4. Ecclesiological Implications

Just as Martinson did not attempt to formulate a comprehensive, systematic post-Christian theology, he did not attempt to frame a post-Christian ecclesiology. However, just as Martinson’s reflections relate an understanding of a post-Christian theology, they also entail consequences for the understanding of the (post-)Christian church. As argued above, changes to any central Christian doctrine impact the understanding of all others, and thus the understanding of the Christian church. Seeing that Martinson addresses only a few of these consequences explicitly, it is not possible to rely on a simple ecclesiological reading of Martinson’s text. Instead, analyzing these implications means to construct an understanding of the (post-)Christian church from Martinson’s post-Christian theology, in general, and his explicit discussion of the “post-Christian Christian church,” in particular.

This constructive endeavor is guided by an analytical framework that sees the Christian church to be the nexus of three central tensions; the tension between the divine and human elements of the church, the tension between the past and future of the church, and the tension between the church’s openness and boundedness. The different poles of the tensions function as a heuristic tool to guide the discussion and to capture those positions in Martinson’s post-Christian theology that have an impact on the understanding of the Christian church. The different poles are then six themes around which an understanding of the church can be constructed. Put differently, any understanding of the church has to detail at a minimum how it relates the church to the divine and to the human community, how the church is related to its past and to its future, and, lastly, how the church relates to that which is non-church, including questions of scope and membership, that is, the question of the boundedness and openness of the church. These themes function as the

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criteria for ecclesiological implications in this essay. Their inherent imprecision makes them applicable also to texts, such as Martinson’s, that do not explicitly deal with the church. At the same time, the three tensions are so foundational for the Christian church that they make comparison possible between the established Christian churches and the accepted ecclesiological understanding of the Christian church, on the one hand, and the church as it emerges from post-Christian theology, on the other hand. The ecclesiological implications of Martinson’s post-Christian theology convey a rough sketch of a post-Christian ecclesiology, which is best understood when discussed in relation to traditional Christian ecclesiology. To this end, the three tensions are related to the Christian church’s holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity, which together with the church’s oneness make up the four traditional marks of the Christian church as confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Thus, to ground the tensions in the established thinking about the church, each is first related to two normative statements of ecclesiological self-understanding, the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium and the World Council of Churches’ document “The Church: Towards a Common Vision.” Various Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians broaden the discussion. The trans-denominational approach also helps to balance the potential one-sidedness of these documents.

4.1 The Post-Christian Christian Church

Before treating the ecclesiological implications of Martinson’s post-Christian theology, it is worth to look at his explicit references to the church. In the same way Mattias Martinson understands Swedish society to be post-Christian, he also claims that the “post-Christian Christian church” has already become a reality. Martinson writes in relation to the changed position of the churches in the post-Christian society,

As with post-Christian theology more generally, also when it comes to the church it is difficult to neatly separate statements of fact from theological reflections. It is possible to understand the citation above as a statement of fact, asserting that the churches in Sweden have transformed from Christian to post-Christian Christian churches. However, it is also possible to read the citation as a theological reflection that points to the fundamental changes in the understanding of the church in post-Christianity rather than to an empirical reality. The ambiguity in Martinson’s use of the term ‘church’ contributes to the ambiguity of the text. Moving between different parts and the

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238 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 115.
whole of the text suggests, however, that Martinson postulates the post-Christian Christian church both as an empirical reality and as an ideal type church.

A number of references suggest that the post-Christian Christian church is an empirical reality. For example, Martinson writes that “the Christian church today should be understood as an extremely thinned and differentiated public” and that “the church itself has become vague.” There is consequently “no universal church which [theology] could credibly lean on, there are only ambiguous churches and believing individuals.” Martinson further argues that an increasing number of the churches’ members are atheists, who understand the importance and significance of the churches exclusively in terms of their experience, cultural heritage, and the connected humanitarian potential. The same tendency to portray the empirical church as a post-Christian community can be observed when Martinson portrays KG Hammar, Archbishop of Uppsala and head of the Church of Sweden from 1997 to 2006, as an atheist and quotes historian of ideas Svante Nordin to the effect of demonstrating that the Church of Sweden under Hammar was far-removed from a traditional understanding of Christianity.

Other references appear to portray the post-Christian Christian church more in terms of an ideal type or a vision for the churches. For instance, Martinson contends that the church no longer has a solid core that corresponds to the hard shell of the church’s confession, and stresses further that

> this could be a way to illustrate a process in the direction of a post-Christian theological church life, in which no one any longer knows with certainty what the church believes and above all, in which no one knows how to interpret the consequences of the church’s faith for morals, politics, yes, for life in the wider society altogether.

Again, the text part is characterized by ambiguity. It is unclear whether the illustration of the processes in the direction of a post-Christian theological church life is an illustration of empirical processes or of a theological reflection on the changes one would expect—or perhaps hope for—in the cultural situation of post-Christianity. The citation can then also be read as a vision for a future church, an ideal type post-Christian Christian church.

While it remains unclear what exactly Martinson means with the oxymoron “post-Christian Christian church,” from these parts emerges the understanding that Martinson sees at least some of the churches to have developed into a situation of radical theological plurality that has on many accounts broken with traditional Christianity. Also the quote about the hesitant atheist in the pews and the preacher who denies God cited above illustrates this point. Still, the most probable reading is to understand the post-Christian Christian church to be both an empirical reality and a changed

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239 Ibid., 115, 118.
240 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 32.
241 Ibid., 115–118.
242 Ibid., 166, 178.
243 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 116.
understanding of the Christian church. That is, the post-Christian church is both a theological and a sociological reality.

More important than Martinson’s description of the post-Christian Christian church, however, are the ecclesiological implications of his post-Christian theology more generally. While some of these implications can be established on the basis of Martinson’s “post-Christian Christian church,” his discussion of the church is not exhaustive. It is therefore necessary to go beyond his explicit statements on the church. The question whether Martinson’s description of today’s churches is accurate or whether any of the churches in Sweden can and should meaningfully be described as a post-Christian Christian church is hence secondary for the present purpose. Instead the question is what kind of church emerges from Martinson’s post-Christian theology. That is, the emphasis is not on Martinson’s description of the empirical reality of the churches in Sweden, but on the theological understanding of the church implicit in post-Christian theology. To facilitate the discussion, the term ‘post-Christian church’ is used to denote the specific understanding of the church that emerges from post-Christian theology. This understanding is contrasted with the ‘Christian church,’ that is the trans-denominational ideal type church of traditional Christianity.

4.2 Divine and Human

The starting point for traditional theological reflection on the Christian church is the triune God. The World Council of Churches declares,

> the Church is not merely the sum of individual believers among themselves. The Church is fundamentally a communion in the Triune God and, at the same time, a communion whose members partake together in the life and mission of God (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4), who, as Trinity, is the source and focus of all communion. Thus, the Church is both a divine and a human reality.\(^{244}\)

Similarly, the Second Vatican Council states that “the Church has been seen as ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,’”\(^{245}\) and, further,

> Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element.\(^{246}\)

The church is here understood as a mixed or theandric reality, a union or joint operation of the divine and human. According to Sven-Erik Brodd, the theandric reality of the Christian church is

\(^{244}\) World Council of Churches. *The Church*, § 23.


so foundational, that all ecclesiological investigation needs to take this claim seriously, if it wants to avoid deficit.\textsuperscript{247} The Christian church’s theandric reality encapsulates the first tension: the church is both divine and human.

The divine element stems from the Christian church’s foundation in the triune God, the Father’s plan for salvation, the Son’s earthly ministry, and the Spirit’s continued guidance.\textsuperscript{248} In this perspective, the church is divine presence in history, both in its origin and as a site of continuous divine self-revelation in word and sacrament. The Christian church is a divine reality.

The church is however also a human reality. The church originates in history as human beings respond to God’s initiative. Seeing the church as a community of people, means recognizing that the church is a group of human beings gathering in worship and practicing common rituals.\textsuperscript{249} As human beings remain separated from God, the church, as a human reality, is removed from God, to the point that it can turn away from God, and remains sinful. It is sinful human beings who make up the Christian church as the body of Christ, occupy positions of ministry, and establish church order.\textsuperscript{250} Still, God does not abandon his church and the community continues in in communion with God. Grace does not function mechanistic, however, and the church as people remain in constant need of conversion towards God.\textsuperscript{251} The church is then at the same time sinful and justified.\textsuperscript{252} Put differently, the church receives from God its holiness, even if it remains separated from God. This tension can also be expressed by the normative and empirical church,\textsuperscript{253} the church triumphant and the church suffering, or the mentioned tension between the church as a theoretical-theological ideal type and a concrete historical reality. The same idea is expressed in Luther’s \textit{simul iustus et peccator} (simultaneously justified and sinner).

The tension between the divine and the human elements of the church establishes the church as a site for the relation between God and human beings, it is a point of encounter which requires both the divine and human realities. At the same time, the relationship between the divine and the human in the community institutes the church as holy. By virtue of the divine presence, the church is a particular reality distinct from other parts of the created world. In the words of Sven-Erik Brodd, the church is \textit{sui generis}.\textsuperscript{254}

The most obvious contrast between the traditional theological understanding of the Christian church and Martinson’s post-Christian theology is Martinson’s insistence on immanence as the only valid realm for theological reflection. While post-Christian theology does not deny the

\textsuperscript{248} World Council of Churches. \textit{The Church}, § 1–3; Vatican Council II, \textit{Lumen Gentium}, § 1–4.
\textsuperscript{250} World Council of Churches. \textit{The Church}, § 21, 24; Vatican Council II, \textit{Lumen Gentium}, § 11, 18.
\textsuperscript{251} Richard Lennan, “The church as a sacrament of hope,” \textit{Theological Studies} 72, no. 2 (2011): 262.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{254} Brodd, “Ecclesiology Under Construction,” 16.
existence of a transcendental reality or belittles faith in a personal God, it does not employ these notions in its reflection about that which concerns us deepest. Instead, theological reflection is entirely focused on the here and now of the palpable world. Consequently, post-Christian theology sets aside all consideration of the divine origin of the church or any possible way in which the church is an expression of the divine in history. As Martinson contends, “the traditional philosophical question about God is simply no longer primary.” Post-Christian theology is instead aimed at the worldview discourse of wider society and therefore needs to accept the premises of post-Christianity. This includes the realization, that post-Christian people no longer believe that God designed the world, Jesus was the son of God in any actuality, that his crucifixion is related to the forgiveness of sin, that the resurrection was a tangible event, or that Christ becomes present in the Eucharist. Post-Christian theology therefore discards questions of transcendence and focuses exclusively on the immanent. Martinson announces,

in an atheist environment, whose internal contradictions and ambiguities are constituted by the obscure cathedral and the ceremonial primacy of theology, theology becomes radically incapable of generating the transcendental light that its traditional formulation promised with a certain inexorableness. But if theology reestablishes itself in this situation as an immanent philosophy, it casts a critical light over its context—that is, over the society overshadowed by the cathedral and science that in secrecy parasitizes the broken promise of theology’s transcendental light.

Post-Christian theology thus attempts to provide critical insights into the current situation of the wider society and the academy. It abandons, however, all attempts to reckon with any form of divine presence in its reflections and, consequently, tries no longer to establish a divinely grounded truth. In this way post-Christian theology avoids defense of and reference to the nonsensical and obsolete notions of creation, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, which only work to alienate people. In a sense, Martinson’s post-Christian theology is thus the completion of the liberal theological project that sought to adapt the Christian faith to the cultural situation in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The exclusive attention to immanence in post-Christian theology means that the church is no longer understood as a theandric reality. Eschewing the inbreaking of the divine into history, the post-Christian church ceases to be the site in which the divine and the human fuse. Put differently, post-Christian theology denies the divine element of the Christian church and consequently understands the church not as a divinely instituted reality, but as a human community like any other. This also means that the post-Christian church is not understood as a site of divine self-revelation. The exclusive focus on immanence has then a direct impact on the church’s holiness.

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255 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 20.
256 Ibid., 11.
257 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 187.
The WCC states, “the Church is holy because God is holy.” Karl Rahner asserts the same for the Roman Catholic understanding of the church’s holiness. Understanding holiness as the opposite of the profane, the Christian church is holy because it is not only a human, but also a divine reality. As a special locus of divine-human relation and the site of continuous divine self-revelation, the church is thus removed from the profane. However, the post-Christian church does not function as the realization of a transcendental reality. Consequently, the post-Christian church denies holiness as a characteristic or mark of the church. This does not imply, however, that the post-Christian church is sinful, as also sin is only intelligible in relation to a transcendental order. Instead, the post-Christian church is wholly profane, being part of the secular world, rather than separated from it.

4.3 Past and Future

The second tension is the relation between the past and the future. As argued above, the Christian church understands its origin to be the triune God. The Father instituted the church through the Son in the Spirit. Theologically, the church originated from Jesus preaching of the eschatological kingdom of God. After his death and resurrection, the Spirit directed the followers of Jesus to establish the church to promulgate his teaching. And it is the Spirit who continues to direct the church towards the kingdom. It is also through the Spirit, that this community renders Christ present in history.

The church’s historicity signifies that the church becomes part of the historical processes of change that continuously instigate the present as the flow from past to future. The Christian church is in this way intimately connected to the past from which it receives its mandate and purpose. The historical moment of the incarnation grounds the theandric reality of the church and the concrete ministry of Jesus gives it its essential shape. Both the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Second Vatican Council tie the relationship between the Christian church and its past to the concept of apostolicity. In relation to the triune foundation of the Christian church, the WCC asserts that “the Christian Community is called to be ever faithful to these apostolic origins.”

While not explicitly concerned with divine revelation and the Catholic concept of tradition, also Lumen Gentium clearly acknowledges the apostolicity of the Christian church as the faithfulness to

263 World Council of Churches, The Church, § 22.
the original ministry of Jesus throughout history.\footnote{Vatican Council II, \textit{Lumen Gentium}, § 8, 20.} The Christian church is therefore bound to faithfulness with its historical foundation.

The Christian church is likewise determined by its future. Both the WCC and Vatican II relate the church to God’s salvific intent.\footnote{World Council of Churches, \textit{The Church}, 5, 12; Vatican Council II \textit{Lumen Gentium}, § 2.} The Christian church is both part of God’s plan of salvation and has a concrete mission, which orients the church towards the future. The WCC and Vatican II converge at this point, understanding the mission of the Christian church to be evangelization and the proclamation of the kingdom of God.\footnote{World Council of Churches, \textit{The Church}, 7; Vatican Council II \textit{Lumen Gentium}, § 5.} As an extension of Jesus preaching of that kingdom, the church remains grounded in eschatological hope and thus necessarily concerned with the future.\footnote{Lennan, “The church as a sacrament of hope,” 269.} Also, due to the kingdom’s ‘already’ and ‘not yet,’ the Christian church remains pilgrimming towards the future of the fulfilment of God’s promise.\footnote{Walter Kasper, \textit{The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission}, (trans.) T. Hoebel (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 124.} Lastly, the inclination towards the future is also the recognition that the church in the present remains incomplete and contingent, “it remains a work in progress.”\footnote{Stephen Pickard, \textit{Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology} (London: SCM, 2012), 228.} The church’s mission is thus both the founding imperative of the church and its future orientation. It is the mission of the apostles the church carries forward through time, so that past and future are inherently related.\footnote{Paul Avis, “Anglican Ecclesiology,” in \textit{The Routledge companion to the Christian church}, eds. Gerard Mannion and Lewis Seymour Mudge, 202–216 (London: Routledge, 2008), 213.} The church thus receives its identity not only from its past, but also from the future towards which it journeys, and which already today informs its present.

Consequently, the church’s present is both past and future. Being past, the church was instituted by the triune God at a specific point in history, which enables the church to actualize Christ in the present through the Spirit. The church has therefore an obligation to remain faithful to that originating act.\footnote{World Council of Churches, \textit{The Church}, 11; World Council of Churches, \textit{The Church}, 11–12; Vatican Council II, Dogmatische Constitutionen: Die Verkündigung \textit{Dei Verbum} (18 November 1965) § 8–9, at The Holy See \url{http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html}, Vatican Council II \textit{Lumen Gentium}, § 2.} At the same time, the church is oriented towards an eschatological future and in need of constant change, reform, and conversion. The tension between past and future is a tension between consistency and change. The tension of time thus understands the church to constantly balance a faithfulness to its foundational memory with the necessary adaptations required for living the faith faithfully in the here and now. Both the WCC and the Second Vatican Council refer to the Spirit’s guidance of this dynamic process as tradition.\footnote{Lennan, “The church as a sacrament of hope,” 269.} In this understanding, it is the tradition that preserves the Christian church through time and ensures fidelity to its foundational memory and promised future.
In contrast to the Christian church, the post-Christian church does not recognize any obligating ties to its past. Instead, the post-Christian theological project displays a strong tendency of liberation from the Christian tradition itself. As detailed above, Martinson argues that his post-Christian theology “needs to some degree be directly critical towards the Christian faith,” so that “it becomes possible to question all aspects of the Christian faith from within theology without ceasing to be a theologian.” Christianity is something post-Christian theology needs to be liberated from. Accordingly, the goal of Martinson’s project was a thinning of theology’s Christian deep structures to bring an end to theology’s fealty to the Christian faith. Post-Christian theology therefore stands in no relation of loyalty to any Christian doctrine. Post-Christian theology hence makes no attempt to guard any theological tradition, understanding instead all theological positions to be in constant flux. Consequently, post-Christian theology does not value the past as an original witness to divine revelation. Instead of the living tradition, there is only history. This indicates that also the post-Christian church needs to be thought free of all obligations towards the Christian church’s past. The post-Christian church stands only in a historical relationship to its Christian past, as that out of which the post-Christian church developed. This allows the post-Christian church to use those resources from the Christian tradition it finds useful and discard the rest, without further implications for the nature or self-understanding of the post-Christian church as church.

Likewise, the post-Christian church is not bound to a specific future. Martinson is critical to the idea of the kingdom of God, arguing that the idea of salvation expressed in the kingdom’s “already and not yet” has often been used as a smokescreen for a particular kind of theological arrogance that assumes that it already knows everything. Instead of looking for salvation in a distant future yet to come, post-Christian theology locates salvation in the concreteness of the here and now, seeing the possibility for change and the common attempt at establishing the good life as the only salvation necessary. Instead of being bound by a divinely instituted mission, the post-Christian church is thus free to pursue salvation as it appears warranted in its specific context.

The mark of apostolicity denotes the Christian church’s faithfulness to its origin and mission throughout time. Put differently, apostolicity is the loyalty to a specific past and a particular vision of the future as preserved in the living tradition of the Christian church. It is this fidelity to the dynamic Christian tradition that establishes the community as the Christian church at any point in time. The post-Christian church however rejects theological fidelity to the Christian tradition, its origin and goal. It denies the idea of mission and salvation based on a divine plan for salvation. Instead, the post-Christian church is free to cherry-pick from the tradition, using only what seems useful at any given time. The post-Christian church does not recognize apostolicity as a valid mark

273 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 11.
274 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 188.
275 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 44.
of the church. The implication for the post-Christian church is a radical openness to change and a willingness to adapt to the situation in which the church finds itself.

4.4 Bounded and Open

To speak of the Christian church is only meaningful if there is something which is not the Christian church. The non-church has traditionally been designated the ‘world,’ even if the distinction between church and world is in practice often difficult to make. Especially in the theological traditions that emphasize graced creation and understand God to work in the world as much as in the Christian church the distinction between church and non-church is complicated. Similarly, also the different strands of secular theology discussed above stress the difficulty of separating a religious from a non-religious sphere. Still, the very notion of the Christian church’s triune origin and divine mission necessitate a conceptual other, who is the receiver of evangelization. Thus, the WCC asserts that

since God wills all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4), Christians acknowledge that God reaches out to those who are not explicit members of the Church, in ways that may not be immediately evident to human eyes. While respecting the elements of truth and goodness that can be found in other religions and among those with no religion, the mission of the Church remains that of inviting, through witness and testimony, all men and women to come to know and love Christ Jesus.

The WCC thus supposes at least some difference between the explicit church and the world that makes it possible for the former to address the latter. Still, the WCC also speaks of the Christian church being “in and for the world,” stressing the tension between a necessary distinctiveness and a fundamental similarity between the Christian church and the world. Similarly, Vatican II makes a clear distinction between the church and the world when it speaks about the role of the church in the world. Thus, apostolic identity and divine mission require the Christian church to have bounds if it is not to dissolve into the ‘world.’ At the same time, the church’s identity is bound up in its relation to the world. Mission and salvation are generally thought as open, outward-going concepts that open the church to that which is non-church. Consequently, the church has to remain open to that same ‘world’ if it is understood as a general means of salvation. Serene Jones describes

276 Moe-Lobeda, Public church, 50.
277 World Council of Churches, The Church, § 25.
278 Ibid., § 58–66.
this tension as *bounded openness*. The bounds and openness of the Christian church constitute the third tension.

The relationship between the Christian church and the world is consequently a result of the balancing of the church’s boundedness and openness. Boundedness requires the possibility of a valid distinction between these two realities. Various criteria for the distinction have been proposed throughout the Christian tradition. Both the WCC and Vatican II mention the four marks of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The churches of the Protestant reformation have often focussed on the two marks of word and sacrament. However, also the Catholic Church understands the Christian church to be related to the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. These attempts have in common that they try to separate the (true) Christian church from that which is non-church. The basis for this separation is the Christian faith itself. The World Council of Churches understands the Christian church to be the community that hands down the faith in the truine God established in Christ through the Spirit and testified to in the creeds. The church is thus understood to receive through its foundation in Christ and the spirit a unique identity. This identity is grounded in the authoritative witnesses to God’s intention, generally understood to be Scripture and tradition. Serene Jones therefore describes the church as a community which receives its identity from beyond itself, by divine gift. As God’s intention is the same everywhere, the Christian church’s identity is essentially the same everywhere. That is, the Christian church is catholic.

Instead of proposing an apologetic theological project that works towards the explication of the Christian tradition in today’s Sweden, Martinson charges academic theology with the task of thinning its Christian deep structure. There are no absolute authorities for a post-Christian theology based on an immanent strategy, just as there is no single normative truth. Martinson writes,

considering the association between the creative grace of radical immanence and Christianity’s *lumen gratiae*, today’s theology needs to distance itself from its traditional claims to be the discipline that works with transcendence *per se*, the truth, or the “ultimate” questions.

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286 Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden*, 71.
Post-Christian theology’s insistence to speak from a position of the in-between and to assert the neither/nor deny identification and, hence, ultimately any stable identity or boundedness. The in-between as a neither/nor is a non-space, an empty room which does not lend itself to the grounding of any strong identity. Thus, post-Christian theology produces an understanding of the post-Christian church as a community guided by radical openness, ambiguity, and change. However, this identity always threatens to be negated into a non-identity. Indeed, it is this direction Martinson appears to be pursuing when he argues that the post-Christian Christian church is a collective of unequals, not in terms of power, but in terms of a/theological positions. In a discussion of the Post-Christian Christian church, Martinson notes,

the visible church [is] an extremely ambivalent factor that can go far to protect pluralism—to provide a public space for a diversity of voices—but which therefore also can become a sine qua non for democratically unacceptable ideologies and interpretations of the faith.

As discussed above, the post-Christian Christian church is characterized by plurality to such a degree, that “no one any longer knows with certainty what the church believes.” The post-Christian church is then not tied to a common confession or a shared faith. Instead, the post-Christian church functions as a public space for a diversity of voices. However, even as the post-Christian church is reduced to the provision of a public space, it risks effecting the established order of the wider society negatively. Post-Christian theology thus not only questions the concrete foundation of any ecclesial identity, it implies a questioning of the very notion that the church needs to have a unified identity. That is, the post-Christian church is not only confessedly profane and unapostolic, it rejects the validity of the marks of the church all together. Instead, the post-Christian church acts simply as an open space that through its very openness establishes its value for the post-Christian society. As the identity of the church is dissolved, the distinction between the church and the world collapses and the post-Christian church is no longer separated from the world in any important respect. The post-Christian church becomes part and parcel of the world, and it is in this capacity that it can be seen to once more attempt to serve the people as a shared gathering point.

The post-Christian dissolution of the boundary between the post-Christian church and the world also carries over to any boundary between different members of the church. As discussed, Martinson’s post-Christian theology is highly critical of any attempt to define the one true Christian faith, to separate the wheat from the tares. Not only does Martinson question if such a separation is theologically feasible and intellectually defensible, he also sees it to be closely related to the violence that has accompanied Christianity throughout its history. A further implication of post-

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289 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 200.
290 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 118.
291 Ibid., 116.
292 Ibid., 78.
Christian theology for the church is thus a weakening of the community’s identity and a blurring of the boundary between true and false Christians. However, rejecting the distinction between true members of the Christian church and false members, ultimately erodes the concept of membership all together. The post-Christian church has no membership then. Everybody and nobody can be and is a member. Post-Christian membership is only constituted in so far as members share the common space that is the post-Christian church as an umbrella for a diversity and plurality of personal views and beliefs.

Both the collapse of the post-Christian church into the world and the denial of any strong concept of membership ultimately lead to the elimination of catholicity as a mark for the post-Christian church. Instead of being the one Christian church everywhere, the post-Christian church is a human community in the particular cultural situation of post-Christianity. Since the post-Christian theology insists on the adaptation of the theological discourse to the premises of the worldview discourse of wider society, also the post-Christian church becomes a product of the prevalent beliefs and values in a specific context. The post-Christian church is consequently wholly contextual, with the consequence that the post-Christian church is not the same everywhere, but different where ever it takes shape. The particularity of the post-Christian church is furthermore a consequence of the rejection of a transcendentally ordered world which would guarantee a single truth. If everything is interpretation and only interpretation, there is no valid core of beliefs that could support the church’s catholicity. Instead, the post-Christian church’s radical openness to change and its willingness to adapt to the particular cultural situation in which it exists, establish the post-Christian church not as a catholic, but a particular reality.

4.5 The Post-Christian Church

The post-Christian church that emerges from Martinson’s post-Christian theology is a profane community of human beings, which is characterized by its fundamental openness and willingness to adapt to its context, and therefore its particularity. Put differently, the post-Christian church emerges as the rejection of the traditional marks of holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity. Just as with the other marks of the Christian church, the post-Christian church is then neither one. Traditional Christian theology understands the oneness of the church to follow from the oneness of God. Theologically, there is only one Church of Christ. This one church is holy, apostolic, and catholic. However, the rejection of the importance of the divine element for the post-Christian church also means that the oneness of God is not thought to be manifested in the post-Christian community. Similarly, the rejection of apostolicity and catholicity as valid marks of the church establish the post-Christian church as a contextual and particular reality that does not stand in any

relation of intrinsic sameness with other communities. Put differently, the assumption of post-Christian theology that there is no divine truth that is manifest in the Christian church entails that the post-Christian church has no foundation that could function as the common basis of a larger unity. Instead, the post-Christian church is distinct and separate. Similar human communities could exist in other context, but these communities do not share a common nature. It is not even apparent that the communities in other context would be post-Christian churches rather than post-secular, post-religious, or post-transcendental churches. The post-Christian church has consequently no appreciation for the restoration of unity among the churches. The post-Christian church hence also eschews ecumenism as attempts to violate the dis/beliefs of post-Christian people. Consequently, the post-Christian church is not oriented towards other churches, but opts for isolation. It is thus also a church that tries to avoid the realm of the religious and transcendent, instead embracing the secular and immanent.

A related observation concerns the function of the church in relation to the individual believer. The issue hinges on the question of whether the church is a primary or a secondary reality in relation to the faith and, consequently, theology. Mannion and Mudge argue that the church is primary to theology as the social space that traditions not only the Christian faith and teaching, but also the Christian language. It is the church, which makes faith possible.294 Also the Swedish theologians Ola Sigurdson and Jayne Svenungsson give voice to this perspective when they contend that many forms of postmodern theology recognize their dependence on the Christian church, precisely because it is the church that defines and traditions the Christian language, social space, culture, and history that makes an understanding of the Christian tradition possible. The church is then primary to theology rather than secondary.295 However, for Martinson the church appears to be secondary to theology and the individual believer.

Post-Christian theology is aimed firstly at the public discourse about that which concerns us deepest.296 Indeed, while post-Christian theology acknowledges its historical dependence on the Christian tradition, and thus on the Christian language, the church no longer functions as an arena for theological reflection. It is instead the university that becomes the center of theology and its discursive practices are established in relation to the wider society, not the church. This also means that questions of faith are not decided in relation to the church, but in connection with the discourse of wider society informed by academic theology. The post-Christian church is thus entirely secondary to the individual believer. The church is not the result of a divine inbreaking into immanence, but the subsequent coming together of dis/believing individuals. The post-Christian church originates from post-Christianity as the social processes that have resulted in the

294 Mannion and Mudge, introduction to *The Routledge companion to the Christian church*, 4.
pluralization of theological opinions and the individualization of dis/belief that characterize post-Christian culture.

A further question is the role of the human community as such. Especially Catholic theology has a long tradition of emphasizing the community over the individual. The church is a community, its faith is expressed in the common creeds, and its purpose is to bring together the community in the presence of God. In contrast, Martinson focuses on the rights and freedoms of the individual believer. Pluralistic post-Christian theology aims at broadening the theological field so that no single religious tradition can exercise discursive power over individuals. Instead, everyone is allowed h/er individual dis/belief without fear of coercion or belittlement. In line with the primacy of the individual believer over the community of the church, Martinson understands faith as a personal choice. Thus, even when he recognizes the churches’ creed to be communal, a confession of the common faith shared by the churches throughout space and time, he sees the churches’ creed as a means to force the individual into the acceptance of a norm of faith. Breaking away from the common creed is thus an act of liberation in which the individual is finally free to dis/believe as s/he sees fit. The post-Christian church is hence not only a church liberated from the unfathomable idea of a transcendent mystery, it is also freed from the coercive pressures of a human collective that attempts to dictate how one can and should believe. Just as post-Christian theology sets aside its loyalty to the Christian tradition, so does the post-Christian church cast off the yoke of the one true Christian faith.

As noted above, the post-Christian church engages wider society from the perspective of an immanent worldview reflection. Instead of being grounded in the divine self-gift and plan for salvation, the post-Christian church is the result of social trends and the latest shifts in beliefs and values. That is, the post-Christian church is no longer oriented towards the kingdom by the continuous divine self-revelation in the Son and through the Spirit. Instead, the post-Christian church offers a space for reflection on that which concerns us deepest without dictating the final answers. This also means, that the post-Christian church has essentially set aside the notion of mission. There is no final mission or goal the post-Christian church attends to. If there is a purpose at all, the post-Christian church would function as an arena for the questioning of post-Christian theology. As Martinson argues,

I think that, instead of postulating a pursuit after specific Christian theological answers to essential questions—or a significant lack of meaning—which arise within the conditions of secular and post-Christian thinking, theology's primarily task needs to be to create better prerequisites for the pursuit of that which concerns us deepest itself, so that the inquiry can uncover new patterns that are

297 Ibid., 100.
298 Ibid., 185.
299 Ibid., 194–96.
not based on uncritically presupposed Christian answers. The primary task for theology is then to complicate the critical theological questioning of all dimensions of life.300

Directly applied to the post-Christian church, Martinson’s reasoning paints the picture of a community without definite answers. Even where better questions would display answers that do not presuppose a Christian understanding, these answers remain provisional and incomplete. The goal of the post-Christian church is then to assist people in asking the right questions instead of providing concrete guidance on how to live their lives. This conception of church is far removed from the models of church Avery Dulles calls “herald” and “servant,” which understand the church as engaging wider society in an attempt to convert or liberate the world.301 Likewise, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s model of the public church as a witness to the Good News finds no expression in the post-Christian church.302 A further implication of Martinson’s post-Christian theology is then the post-Christian church’s passivity in relation to the world. Instead of engaging the world in an attempt to change it, as described in the Christian notion of mission, salvation, and service, the post-Christian church is merely a collection of diverse post-Christian people. Put differently, just as the post-Christian church does not engage other churches, it is not oriented towards the wider society either. The post-Christian church that emerges from Martinson’s post-Christian theology is thus neither interested in the religious sphere, nor is it the space in which dis/beliefs are formed and traditioned, or a counterpart and critic of the world. The post-Christian can hence be said to not only have a weak identity, but to be a weak reality—a reality without definite bounds and allegiances and with no clear purpose. The post-Christian church thus appears as the remnants of the Christian church that left as the Christian church is divested of Christianity.

To conclude, traditional Christian theology understands the church as a complex reality. The church is divine and human. The church is past and future. The church is both open and bounded. While there is no universal agreement on how these multiple tensions should be balanced, most churches acknowledge all three and agree that they compete without ever cancelling out. Post-Christian theology however attempts to break free from traditional understandings of the Christian faith, declaring its independence of all norms and doctrines. Consequently, also the post-Christian church emerges as a wholly separate reality. Each of the three tensions that mark the Christian church is negated. The post-Christian church does not claim any fathomable relationship to the divine, it is neither loyal to a specific past nor a particular future, and it frees itself of all bounds. The post-Christian church is instead a collective of individuals loosely held together in a public space characterized by radical openness and a plurality of opinions and dis/beliefs. The post-Christian church discard the traditional Christian marks of the church, and is no longer one, holy, catholic, nor apostolic. In the same way post-Christian theology is a radical reworking of the

300 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 42. Emphasis in original.
301 Dulles, Models of the church, 68–94.
Christian theological tradition, the post-Christian church is thus characterized by a fundamental deviation from the understanding of the Christian church. If the ‘post-Christian Christian church’ is an obvious oxymoron, that is so because in light of the ecclesiological implications of post-Christian theology few observers would attest the post-Christian church a Christian character. Thus, just as Martinson argues that post-Christian Swedish society is fundamentally atheist, so perhaps also the post-Christian church is better understood as a post-Christian atheist church.

5. The Church in the Post-World

Mattias Martinson’s research project on experimental theology was guided by a concern for the role and function of theology in the post-World. Addressing the apparent deadlock between religious studies and church dogmatics, Martinson tried to establish a perspective from which academic theology can both critically and constructively contribute to the worldview discourse of wider society. However, David Tracy has argued that theology has three publics, the wider society, the academy, and the church. The question thus arose how Martinson’s theological project impacts this third public, that is, what ecclesiological implications Mattias Martinson’s post-Christian theology has. However, before this question could be addressed, the specific way in which Martinson contrived post-Christian theology needed to be studied.

Employing a hermeneutical method, Martinson’s post-Christian theology emerged through the related movements between parts and whole, structure and content, reader and text, text and context, and lastly, acceptance and suspicion. The result is an experimental theology of the immanent that decidedly breaks with the Christian tradition while recognizing its historical ties to the Christian faith. As Martinson states at the beginning of Post-Christian Theology,

people’s tendency to cast aside or be indifferent towards the Christian faith needs to be taken more seriously by a critically oriented academic theology than has been the case thus far. It needs to be possible to question the Christian faith on all levels from within theology without therefore ceasing to be a theologian. Put differently, theology needs to be able to host forms for a more cataclysmic and painful development than what has previously been normal.303

Post-Christian theology is then most fundamentally an attempt to go beyond Christianity in a conscious break with the Christian tradition. According to Martinson, this development has become necessary due to the developments within society itself. Today, we live in a distinctly post-Christian culture that is characterized by widespread loss of individual faith, a situation in which the Christian faith has no longer any purchase, and in which the Christian language itself no longer functions as a common expression of our ultimate concerns. Post-Christian theology is then primarily a reflection about that what concerns us deepest directed at the wider society and hosted

303 Ibid., 11.
by the theological academy. Martinson thus sets aside the church as a third public of theology. The relationship between the academy and wider society is then understood as one in which the former addresses the latter on its own terms. Consequently, post-Christian theology needs to reckon with post-Christian culture.

Martinson’s theological method is decidedly experimental. This combines with the essayistic style to form a theology of the immanent that refuses univocal statements and absolute positions. It is a theology of the in-between and the neither/nor, a theology characterized by vagueness, ambiguity, and a radical openness towards change. Post-Christian theology no longer believes in any objective truth. Accordingly, post-Christian theology sets aside all considerations of a transcendental God or the inbreaking of the divine into immanence. Instead, traditional theological loci, such as soteriology or biblical hermeneutics, are recast in purely immanent terms. Other theological loci, such as eschatology, are discarded all together. The post-Christian theology that emerges is thus a radically redefined Christian theology that has abandoned all loyalties to specific religious traditions. It is a theology in the modus of *etsi deus non daretur*, that has realized that theology needs to accept and incorporate the widespread societal and cultural changes of our time if it hopes to be of any future use.

As a contextual theology, the value of the post-Christian theological project depends first on whether society actually is post-Christian in any meaningful way. In the end, this is an empirical question that needs to be answered not *in abstracto*, but in practice. However, even if society is characterized by widespread atheism and a consequent rejection of the Christian faith, Martinson’s post-Christian theology represents only one possible response. More specifically, the underlying assumption that theology should adapt to wider society is not shared by all. Especially those theological projects, such as Rodney Clapp’s *A Peculiar People*, that retain a significant position for the church, have tended to stress that the Christian church needs to confront and change society, rather than adapt to it. Ultimately, the value of any theological project depends on some criterion for evaluation. Theologically, this criterion can be tied to a specific idea of salvation. The value of post-Christian theology then depends fundamentally on the specific idea of salvation that guides the evaluation. If salvation is understood in entirely immanent terms, an immanent theology is appealing. However, if salvation is understood to be intrinsically related to something transcendent, post-Christian theology will not be considered a valuable approach.

Similarly, the value of post-Christian theology also depends on one’s appreciation of the Christian theology which it aims to transcend. It is not immediately apparent, however, from which Christian tradition post-Christian theology frees itself. Put differently, it remains at times unclear if the post-Christian criticism of the Christian tradition applies to all forms of Christianity or only to some of its concrete manifestations. On the one hand, Martinson recognizes Christianity’s
heterogeneity and argues for an insightful and emphatic approach to the Christian faith. Then again, he appears to understand the Christian faith as a single coherent norm of faith. As such, Martinson argues that his strategy needs “to some degree also be directly critical to the Christian faith.” Here Christianity does not appear in its heterogeneous and quarrelsome plurality but as a self-evident unity. A possible reason is the tendency of Swedish theology to equate Christian faith with the dominant form of evangelical Lutheranism in Sweden. The value of post-Christian theology thus also depends on how its Christian ‘Other’ is constructed and understood. As such, it also remains an open question whether Christianity is sufficiently homogeneous so that it can be transcended in all its forms. Perhaps Mattias Martinson’s contextual post-Christian theology should rather be understood as a post-‘Swedish Lutheran theology.’

The post-Christian theology that emerges from Martinson’s texts has multiple implications for the understanding of the church. While these implications do not form a detailed and comprehensive ecclesiology, it is possible to combine them into a rough sketch of the post-Christian church. This post-Christian church is no longer understood as a site of divine revelation or the presence of the divine in history. The church is no longer a theandric reality, but a human community like any other. The post-Christian church is thus a sociological, but not a theological reality, in the traditional Christian understanding of the terms. The church is thus not gathered by God, but is instituted by human beings. Furthermore, the post-Christian church is not a primary community, but an assortment of individuals, free to dis/believe as they please. Faith is not formed in the post-Christian church, but in wider society, and the church is merely the public space in which individuals can meet.

The indifference with which post-Christian theology relates to the transcendent also means that the post-Christian church understands neither its origin nor mission to be grounded in the triune God or a divine plan. The post-Christian church thus discards the past as normative and denies any divinely ordered future. The post-Christian church thus rejects apostolicity as a valid post-Christian concept. This leaves the post-Christian church free to embrace change and to adapt to the people who constitute it without restraint.

As the post-Christian church accepts a weak identity prescribed by the in-between and neither/nor of post-Christian theology, there are no guiding principles or discursive rules that govern the post-Christian church as a social space. As a consequence, the post-Christian church is freed of the discursive violence of the dominant theological tradition, Martinson sees in traditional Christianity. It is a church from below that, rather than trying to change the world in accordance to a predefined notion of salvation, attempts to mirror the changes in wider society. The weak identity entails difficulties in determining the membership of the post-Christian church, as well as

304 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 87; Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 75.
305 Martinson, Postkristen teologi, 11.
306 Martinson, Katedralen mitt i staden, 205–236.
its boundaries. As a consequence, the post-Christian church dissolves into the world in an embrace of the immanent reality of life.

In other words, the post-Christian church breaks the tensions that traditionally have existed between the divine and the human, the past and the future, and the openness and boundedness of the church. Instead, the post-Christian church attempts to establish a radically open, human church that is entirely committed to the present. If these tensions are understood as forces that by pulling into different directions open the space that is the church, the post-Christian church can then be described as a thinned, weakened, or flattened church. Such a weak church corresponds to the weak post-Christian theology that emerges from the thinning and weakening of theology’s Christian deep structure.

Setting aside the empirical question of whether the “post-Christian Christian church” is already a reality, the ecclesiological implications of post-Christian theology are helpful for an attempt to consider the church in the post-World more generally. That is, Mattias Martinson’s experimental theology raises important questions for the church in our time. Independently on whether the analysis is guided by post-Christianism or by any other post-terms, there is growing awareness that we live in a time of fundamental cultural changes that impact the way in which we understand ourselves and reality around us. As Lieven Boeve has argued, the changes in the churches’ contexts require a response. If Martinson’s post-Christian theology and the post-Christian church that emerge from it are understood as attempts of recontextualization however, it becomes clear that recontextualization is a double-edged sword. That is, most traditional Christian theologians would agree with Martinson that the post-Christian Christian church remains an oxymoron. There is little ‘Christian’ left in the post-Christian church. At the same time, Martinson’s astute analysis and creative proposal demonstrate the necessity to fathom new and unconventional spaces for theology and ecclesiology in the post-World. The challenge that the post-Christian church raises to traditional Christian theology is how to construct a theological project that ensures the church’s apostolicity while also being grounded in the lived reality of wider society.

Looking at the ecclesiological implications of post-Christian theology as a complementary discussion of post-Christian theology from the perspective of ecclesiology, also refines our understanding of the post-Christian project. Specifically, as the study of the complex reality of the church, formed by the intersecting theological and sociological realities, ecclesiology combines aspects of systematic and practical theology. The ecclesiological perspective then not only highlights the consequences of the ecclesiological implications of post-Christian theology for an understanding of the church, the analysis also shines light on the underlying relationship between theory and praxis. Martinson’s instance that individual dis/belief is primary to the community of the church and his experimental laboratory method result in a post-Christian theology that is foremost an intellectual activity. The church becomes a community of dis/believers in which personal dis/belief is the primary marker of identification. In contrast to systematic theology, which
has traditionally worked at the level of theory, practical theology starts from the recognition that theory and praxis, while distinct, cannot be separated. Richard Osmer describes the practical theological process as a hermeneutical spiral starting from an analysis of ecclesial praxis, its inherent goal and rules, and moving to the normative question of how praxis should look like and how it can be adapted. The lens of practical theology aims therefore foremost at scrutinizing the existing praxis and suggesting adaptations that could realize aspects of the church more fully than the current praxis does. Leaving actual church praxis aside, Martinson’s experimental theology works entirely at the level of ideas, beliefs, and opinions. The basic thrust of post-Christian theology is then to accept the current atheistic cultural situation and to adapt praxis accordingly. The post-Christian church becomes a community geared towards public discourse and not public activities. This in turn reduces the possibilities of the church to manifest around specific rituals, which in themselves could establish identity.

The central problem with this approach to the theory-praxis relationship is that it fundamentally undervalues the importance and complexity of praxis. Construing a unidirectional causal relationship from theory to praxis relegates praxis to mere application. Human beings are, however, not set into an empty space, which is only subsequently made meaningful through theory. Instead, being and acting in the world are already inherently meaningful, independently of whether this meaning has been conscientized in theory or not. As such, participation in church rituals can be meaningful also to a person who knows little to nothing about the theological ‘theory’ behind the liturgy. Theological theory undoubtedly informs all ecclesial praxis. Yet, theological theory is, in turn, based on concrete expressions of Christian living. There is hence neither pure theory, nor pure praxis. Theory and praxis inform each other and the primacy of either theory or praxis needs to be rejected. In relation to post-Christian theology, the theory-praxis relation asks to which degree post-Christian theology is grounded in the practices of actual people, and in relation to the post-Christian church it inquires whether a community centered exclusively around a shared will to a public space can validly be contrived. Put differently, the interrelation of theology and praxis demonstrates that the value of post-Christian theology, especially for the post-Christian Christian church, is tied to its ability to provide more than a thought experiment. If post-Christian theology is to engage also the public of the church, it needs to be anchored in and informed by the practices of the community.

6. Conclusion

We live in a time of profound cultural change. This change in society’s most fundamental attitudes, values, and beliefs has been called the post-condition and our era correspondingly the post-World. Opinions vary on which of the various post-terms is the most salient, and, while most post-terms share some commonality, each post-term is capable of producing its own academic literature. The concepts of postmodern, post-secular, and even post-Christendom have each produced substantial research. In contrast, scholarly engagement with post-Christianism, as a specific theological theory based on the condition of widespread atheism and dis/belief, remains fairly marginal in the theological academy today. However, as noted in the beginning, the margin is often a space for creativity and innovation. Anyone who is interested in the future of theology or the Christian church in the post-World is thus advised to pay attention also to these more marginal academic theologies.

While the general assumption in Sweden today is that academic theology is unconfessional and thus detached from the churches, Martinson’s post-Christian theology demonstrates that also those theological projects that do not explicitly engage the church as a public for theology have important implications for the church. That is, post-Christian theology contains by implication an understanding of the church as a post-Christian church. Even where it is not explicit, this understanding of the church potentially shapes the churches, who continue to be a public of theology. There is hence a potential direct effect on church leadership. More importantly, if the theological discourse changes in line with Martinson’s proposal, also the general understanding of the Christian church changes towards the ideal type of the post-Christian church. This indirect effect could in time combine with the direct effect to fundamentally alter the understanding of the Christian church. That is, instead of understanding the church as a nexus of tensions, in which a theological and a sociological reality fuse, post-Christian theology argues for an understanding of the church as a sociological reality. It is the function of ecclesiology to study and disclose these processes to enable a broad discourse about the future of religion and the future of church in which the wider public, the academy, and the churches are included. This form of academic theology remains unconfessional, but it is not disinterested.
7. References


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