What does it mean for the Christian Church to be missionary today in a “post-everything” world? In attempting to answer this question, Andrew Kirk focuses on the “post-modern” experience which he sees as an extension rather than the overturning of modern consciousness since each holds “the same basic secular assumptions” (xii). While post-modern thought allows some space for the ‘spiritual’, it is not
about to acknowledge the possibility of there being any absolute truth, Gospel or otherwise, which could be “applicable to all people and cultures” (xiii).

This being said, Kirk does not unilaterally denounce the secular world in either its modern or post-modern guise. His intention is precisely to bring the Gospel into dialogue with the world as it is – focusing on the “post-Christian” West. His opening chapter is a good example of his overall method: he uncovers the positives and negatives of “secular freedom”; then he presents his Christian vision of freedom which alone, he argues, accounts satisfactorily for human meaning, value and action. Here, and throughout the book, the prophetic, countercultural dimension of Christian mission is emphasized.

His argument is that Christian mission needs to be dialogical with those who espouse a secular or non-religious interpretation of life (chapter 2). His agenda for dialogue with the secular world includes immersion into secular thought-forms leading to the exploration and communication of the inadequacies of the “secular creed”. If all this sounds intellectual, we are reminded of the importance of practical expressions of care, compassion and community which flow from faith in Jesus Christ. In this way, Christian mission provides both an intellectual and a practical response to issues confronting humanity.

Exploring the new, post-Christian situation (chapter 3), Kirk says we should not bemoan the loss of Christian power and influence, or indulge in nostalgia for an irretrievable past. Rather, he sees here an opportunity for the Church to reassess its calling, review its activities, renew its hope and reconsider its relationship to society and culture. He even provides a “mission audit” whereby the Church can appraise its missionary effectiveness in terms of engagement, identification and communication with the post-Christian, secular context.

Subsequent chapters reflect on this engagement with reference to topical issues: validating Scripture in a pluralist context (chapter 4); proclaiming the Gospel to followers of other religions (chapter 5); the role of conflict in religion (chapter 6); violence, peace and reconciliation (chapter 7); same-gender relationships (chapter 9). He
handles these questions with intelligence, thoughtfulness and subtlety producing, once again, a counter-cultural voice which, he readily admits, will not be uniformly welcomed by liberally-minded Christians of the West. Moreover, he also admits there is no guarantee Christian faith will persist in the world’s ultra-developed, traditionally Christian nations.

Kirk underscores the call to “prophetic mission” with a chapter dedicated to the prophetic voice of the South American Church (chapter 8). He situates this discussion with reference to “the coming of the ‘Third Church’” to replace the European model of ‘Second Church’ which has basically existed since Constantine. His preference for the Latin American model of the poor Church focused on Jesus Christ liberator is based on his conviction that it most clearly resembles the early Church – and lives most truly the Christian prophetic calling.

The final chapter accentuates Kirk’s insistence on the need for radical discipleship of Jesus as the basis for mission. He does this in context of the current crisis of Western civilization and what he perceives to be a lack of missionary nerve in many churches. Consequently, while admitting the evangelical importance of dialogue, witness, peace-building and social justice involvement (“secondary evangelism”), he stresses the priority of missionary proclamation (“primary evangelism”). In this regard, he is not foolhardy but readily admits the Church’s many historical errors and shortcomings. What is called for is a “chastened evangelism” which is courteous, gracious, listening, considerate (Kirk) – or what David Bausch ingenuously calls a “bold humility”.

Many other currents of thought—religious, philosophical, colonial, and economic—are evident in the text which is both scholarly and accessible. Its argument is also clear: the proclamation of the Gospel cannot be held ransom to theological or political correctness; yet that same proclamation demands sensitive engagement with a world that has moved into a post-Christian phase. Not all readers will agree with the author’s strongly dialectical bent which perceives such a sharp distinction between “core Gospel truth” and “postmodern secular
values”. Some will say he is insufficiently attentive to the secular prophets of our time and inadequately alert to the ‘other side’ of the Gospel—its call to inculturation in the postmodern context. However, there are few who will not find the book’s scrutiny of Christian mission challenging and thought-provoking.