The term “post-Christian” has of late years become a familiar one and for that reason it is used in the sub-title of this book. It cannot be said, however, despite its familiarity and the freedom with which it is employed by many writers, that the phrase “post-Christian age” is altogether unambiguous. What do we really mean when we call the age in which we are living “post-Christian”? Broadly speaking, either of two interpretations is possible, although neither of them, as we shall see, is free from difficulty. On the one hand, to speak of this as the “post-Christian age” could be a reference to the present phase of development in western society. In most of the areas in which that society flourishes Christianity is apparently no longer the religion or working spirituality of the great majority of the people. Its claims are explicitly denied by few of them, but they are ignored in practice by the overwhelming majority. In western countries, it is often said, and not altogether unjustly, where once and for many centuries Christianity was the predominating influence, it now survives only on the periphery of society. It is an archaic and tolerated relic, rather than an active contemporary force. Western civilization was Christian at one time, but has now ceased to be Christian in any real sense at all.
On the other hand, the term “post-Christian age” is sometimes employed to refer not to the present phase of development in western society, but to the contemporary stage in the history of mankind. The human race, it is sometimes claimed, has moved into a new period of history, to which Christianity no longer speaks or is relevant. Mankind has grown away from and perhaps beyond Christianity, and possibly beyond anything else of the same kind. Sometimes observers and interpreters of events still believe religion in some form to be a necessity, but they would hold that the religion of the future cannot be Christianity or any other known form of religion. This is the “post-Christian age”, in other words, because it is the age that has grown up and out of Christianity.

The “post-Christian age” may also be interpreted as a new phase of history in which western nations and western ideas are no longer a dominating force. This interpretation rather takes it for granted that Christianity is a western idea. Actually, neither in its origins nor in most of its history, do we find any intimate or exclusive relationship between Christianity and western culture. Its early spread was both eastern and western, and for a considerable period its great strength was concentrated in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. It was the rise of Islam which restricted Christianity to Europe and the world of western civilization, not only by stopping any further advances to the east and to the south, but also by isolating it from most of the missionary outposts already established, so that few of them were able to survive. The Coptic and Abyssinian Churches in Africa and the so-called Mar Thoma Church of South India are perhaps the most interesting examples of Christian institutions that managed to survive this catastrophe. The modern missionary movement was thus not so much a novel expansion of western culture as a return by the Christian Churches to
work which had been left unfinished at the time of Mohammed. Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century spread of Christianity to the non-western nations was certainly regarded by most observers as a symptom and consequence of the political predominance of the West. Similarly the retreat of Christianity in the twentieth century has been interpreted by many people as a symptom of the decay and decline of the West. Mankind has grown up, and, in doing so, has grown out of its Christian swaddling clothes. Therefore from this point of view, the decisively Christian age of the world’s history has now come to an end. What lies beyond it we do not yet know, but at least we can let the dead bury their dead.

These contrasted interpretations of the term “post-Christian age” call for careful analysis by the Christian mind. No doubt, as descriptions of the contemporary situation there is much to be learned from them but, viewed analytically rather than descriptively, they are both in their own ways misleading. The first identifies Christianity with the western past, whereas the second identifies it with western world predominance. In this sense both interpretations take as their point of departure the same erroneous assumption—i.e. that the West was once both Christian and great and that it is now neither. Perhaps both of these assumptions ought to be challenged. The world predominance of the West belongs to the very recent past, to the period in the history of the West in which the spiritual leadership of Christianity was being actively challenged in the so-called Christian countries themselves. The period in the history of the West—if there ever was such a period—in which the claims of Christianity went unchallenged, when it was accepted by the western nations almost universally, was not in fact the period of its world-wide political predominance. In other words, when Christianity came
closest to spiritual predominance in the western soul, it was farthest from political predominance in its contemporary world. On the other hand, the great period of the flourishing of the western empires was not the period of Christian spiritual predominance. On the contrary, it coincided with widespread movements of scepticism and apostacy. In other words, the great period in western history was not the overwhelmingly Christian period, and conversely the Christian period was not a time of universal political dominion.

But we may go further, and call in question the assumption that there ever was an overwhelmingly Christian period in western history. During the declining years of the Roman Empire the Christian Church was continually at war with surviving remnants of classical paganism and with new synthetic cults which claimed to combine the beauties and advantages of paganism with the new spiritual powers of the Christian Gospel. We do not find when we read the Christian writers of this early period any feeling that they were entering into a Christian age in which they would have vanquished all possible rivals. On the contrary, they are very much concerned about what seems to them the overwhelming strength of the opposition to Christianity. They are, of course, always hopeful about the ultimate issue of the conflict, but never particularly sanguine or optimistic about the proximate issue. They tend to take at one moment an eternal perspective which fills them with unconquerable and unswerving hope, and then to adopt a merely temporal perspective which arouses considerable gloom about the outlook for to-morrow or the next day. They are rather like the Englishman in the dark days of 1940 who was heard to say, “Of course, we shall muddle through to victory somehow, but I’m hanged if I can see how we’re going to do it”.

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During the Dark and early Middle Ages the Christian Church had to wrestle with the pagan Teutonic tribes and the military and political predominance of Muslim powers based on the Middle East, with whom sporadic offensive warfare was waged over several centuries. So far as the Teutonic tribes were concerned, the Christian mission was successful in a way that brought with it disastrous consequences. The social structures of the time compelled the Church to resort to what seemed then the inevitable policy of converting the leaders and chieftains of the Teutonic hordes and leaving it to them to constrain their followers, sometimes by fair means but frequently by foul, to follow in their footsteps. As a result Christianity was superimposed upon what remained a fundamentally pagan population.

Even during the High Middle Ages, which many romantic historians describe as above all the "ages of faith", we find the Christian writers of the time by no means filled with confidence or optimism. Rather, surrounded as they were by pagan survivals and the desperate moral problems of the age, menaced also by insidious infiltrating heresies like Manichaeism, their mood was one of crisis and "backs to the wall". If such men were indeed living in an "age of faith" they were certainly unaware of the fact, and much more concerned about the rising tides of unbelief than people living in a blissful age of faith have any right to be.

The analogy is with Israel in the age of the Prophets. No reader of the great Hebrew prophets could possibly imagine that they felt themselves to be living in a time of universal faith in and loyalty to the God who had chosen the Hebrew people and called them by his name. Perhaps great religious personalities do not arise in an age of faith. The periods of history that witness the emergence of great men of God are not for that reason periods of widespread or quasi-universal religious faith at all. It is the illusion of those
who come afterwards that an age in which the greatest and best remembered figures were such men of insatiable appetite for God, and tremendous effectiveness in declaring his word, must have been a period of widespread religious zeal and interest. It was precisely because it was nothing of the kind that these gigantic figures stand out so sharply against the background of the smaller and more mundane men surrounding them. We think of the Middle Ages as the age of faith because it was a period during which the greatest and most representative men were religious teachers of extraordinary penetration and ability, or saints living lives of exceptional beauty, like Francis of Assisi, or the creators of great works of art dedicated to religious themes, like the magnificent European cathedrals. But it was the carelessness and indifference to such things that stimulated in a comparatively small minority vastly creative energies and labours.

If we turn to the modern period, since the Renaissance and the Reformation, we find that here also we must abandon any illusions that this was a time of quasi-universal faith. Throughout this period religious leaders have been prone to suppose that they lived in a Christendom, a state of mind and a social climate in which all their fellow citizens were in some way pledged like themselves to Christian spirituality and truth. But this period was not a great age of the prophets. Nothing dulls the prophetic spirit in the Christian so much as the conviction that he has the great good fortune to live in a Christian country. Sensitive churchmen like the great Bishop Butler, or Frederick Denison Maurice, a century later, were well aware that they lived in nothing of the kind. In Denmark, Søren Kierkegaard denounced the notions of a Christian and a national Church. Nevertheless, illusions about Christendom and Christian countries were so widespread as in effect to destroy
the prophetic spirit and to sap the vital energies of the Church.

A fuller discussion of the extent of religious indifference and anti-Christian propaganda in the more recent past must be postponed to a later chapter, but already we have said enough to indicate that when we call this age "post-Christian" we must not be taken to imply that there was some earlier age which was authentically Christian. The conservative mind is continually prone to contrast the maladies of the present time with some reputed golden age in the past. From this point of view, the only solution to our contemporary predicament is an impossible one—a return to the past. God has so made the world that that must always be out of the question. For the Christian mind the golden age is never in the past nor even perhaps in the future. The golden age, or the Kingdom of God, does lie in our future. It is part of the destiny of man. But emphatically it does not lie in the future of the world. So long as time continues, time which is split up into past, present, and future, it will be the temporality of a fallen world, bearing all the marks of the fall. Thus the golden age belongs to neither past, present, nor future, but rather to eternity. This is what the Christian theologian calls the eschatological doctrine of history. The end of history is neither now, nor then, nor later, but in the Kingdom of God, which is discontinuous with the world's history although very much continuous with the unfolding of our human destiny.

For the moment, however, we are most of all concerned to reject any idea that the Kingdom of God can be found in the past. The conservative idolatry of the past is the chronic heresy of ageing minds. Sometimes, of course, the ageing minds seem to be housed in rather young heads—just as some of the people who are most successful in resisting this heresy are paradoxically at the latter end of life—but the
ageing of the mind is more than an individual or merely chronological phenomenon. It is the mood and mentality of a group, class, or generation who have been left behind by the pace of events, and no longer see how they can contribute usefully and successfully to life except through the re-establishment of the context in which their forefathers once did so.

The real trouble about the phrase “post-Christian”, in whichever sense we use it, is the lurking implication that there was once an age which could be called Christian without qualification, and this we have seen reason to doubt. No doubt there have been periods of past history in which the influence and prestige of Christianity were in many ways much greater than they are to-day, but the tides of protest and rebellion, public or private, individual or collective, have never been altogether contained or controlled. Probably they never will be. Christianity is not a form of power, and its hold upon peoples and civilizations has never been so precarious as when the Christians are so far from its essential spirit that they endeavour to use and project it as though it were.

Perhaps the real origin of the idea of specifically Christian countries, in which Christianity is a part, indeed the basic part, of the régime itself, goes back to the period following the Reformation and the Renaissance during which—on the basis of the maxim Cuius regio, eius religio—men supposed that religious unity was necessary to national unity and that religious profession was the basis of public order and constitutional obedience to law. Out of this arose the notion of the national Church, a supernatural unity of the whole people on which their secular peace was supposed to depend. Thus, for example, the fifth book of Hooker’s *Ecclesiastical Polity* describes religion as the “stay of states”. “So natural is the union of religion with justice,” we are
told, "that we may boldly deem that there is neither where both are not."¹ Yet even in the great book in which the national Church is defended on these grounds, Hooker was contending against incipient nonconformity. Most modern readers will sympathize with Hooker because his national Church was broad and comprehensive, in the modern sense "liberal", and contrasted very favourably with the Puritan fanaticism of his antagonists. When they got the upper hand, as under the Cromwellian military dictatorship at home, or in Puritan New England across the ocean, they proved, as might have been expected, far more bitterly intolerant and conformist than his national Church would ever have been.

Nevertheless the form of Hooker's argument is embarrassing even to the loyal Anglican churchman who agrees with his conclusion. Churches are not national. Whatever else it is, Christianity, unlike the Hebrew faith from which it sprang, is not an ethnic religion. Even though there may be some truth in the contention that religion is the energy that makes civilization possible, that it is indeed essential to the security and peace of States—and with some embarrassment I confess that there is perhaps rather more to this contention than it is fashionable nowadays to allow—it is, nevertheless, true that to give security and peace to the social order is not the conscious intention of a Christian man for the sake of which he becomes a Christian. What social services Christianity may perform are a by-product of its spiritual power. Its heart is set in another direction. Its purposes are of quite another kind. It is more concerned about the Kingdom of God than about the kingdoms of men. It is interested in secular arrangements because it would like to see them filled with charity and justice, the really essential virtues, but it is more anxious to see men truly virtuous than

to see them successful in any secular sense. All its secular loyalties are drastically qualified. Christians can only obey the laws of men “so far as the Law of Christ doth allow”. They have no king but Jesus, and therefore their allegiance to human authority is always from the point of view of fervent secular loyalists somewhat half-hearted and lukewarm. With half of their being they are in the Kingdom of God already, and God is the only absolute authority in their lives.

The political effect of such an attitude often appears to the outward observer indistinguishable from modern individualism and liberal democracy. Actually it is a very different thing. The liberal democrat of the past mistrusted and sought to restrict the power of the State in order to make room for the power of men over themselves, and too often for the power of forceful or wealthy men over their weaker or poorer neighbours, but the Christian does the same thing in order to make room for the power, or rather the authority, of God. States and social orders, forms of society with their characteristic “ways of life”, come and go in human history, they have their day and cease to be; change and impermanence is part of the law of their being. But the Christian turns to God with the Psalmist and cries, “Thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.”

It was Søren Kierkegaard, more than a century ago, who first perceived that in the very nature of the case, a Church cannot be national, not at least if it is to be Christian. As we have said, Christianity is not an ethnic religion. It is not nations that are Christian, but people. In the very nature of the Gospel, some of the people will hear when it is proclaimed, and others will forbear. Sometimes, no doubt, a majority prefer to forbear. But mere fluctuations in the relative figures do not make any difference to the basic principle. The Christian way of faith, life, and worship is
practised not by the nation but by the Church. So it has been from the beginning until now, and shall be from now until the end of ages.

The real trouble about this idea of a national Church, to which all the members of a nation are supposed to belong, is its bad effect on the morale of the Christians who have allowed themselves to be deluded by the notion, and for that matter on the minds of the non-Christians who mistake it for a Christian notion. Thus the non-western peoples, who think of the western nations as the Christian nations from which the missionaries come, are very surprised to discover that very few of the western peoples they know, apart from the missionaries, are, or for the most part even pretend to be, Christians at all. Meanwhile, the quiet Christians at home are often agonized by their consciousness that their Church, which they think ought to appear to be a national Church, is really nothing of the kind. Not only does it not recruit into active membership all the people of the nation, but many of those who are Christians do not belong to it.

Nowadays we are greatly preoccupied with the quest for reunion, but unfortunately most of our reunion schemes are negotiated on a narrow national basis and represent rather forlorn efforts to reconstitute something a little bit like the old dead national Church. One Church for Ghana, one Church for Nigeria, Ceylon, or South India, even perhaps one Church for the United States, desperately trying to re-enact the rôle of Hooker’s Church of England, a rôle which, in fact, the latter was destined never to perform.

I fully share the zeal of the present-day search for reunion and the vision that enthralls it, but I am sad indeed to see it petering out in this forlorn quest for more and more of those pathetic shams, national Churches. There never were any
truly national Churches. There never will be. There ought not to be. We should perhaps thank God for the non-viability of this totally misconceived objective. The Church is not in the world to uphold the values of any social grouping; rather its prophetic task is to rebuke and reject the idolatrous values of all social groups in the name of the transcendent values of the Kingdom of God. Thus I cannot share the pessimism and disillusion of the many Christians, particularly in Europe, who are so distressed at discovering that their reputed and self-styled national Churches are not really national Churches at all.

We may conclude that the term “post-Christian” means very much the same thing as the term “pre-Christian”. “Post-Christian” is what the “pre-Christianity” of the world looks like to people who have allowed their minds to be clouded by sub-Christian ideas about a Christian nation or a national Church. They have listened to fairy-tales about some time in the past when things were very much better than they are now, whereas in fact, things have always been very much as they are now. The proportions fluctuate somewhat from generation to generation, but invariably some people are Christian and some people are not. Thus every age is in some sense “pre-Christian”. B.C. and A.D. are not distinct periods of history which come the one after the other, but rather existential terms which describe two distinct modes of life which are contemporary with each other.

Nevertheless, it is not altogether surprising that there are those who hold that there is something peculiar about the present situation. Every age is tempted to suppose that its own peculiar and individuating characteristics are unique, to invest its relativities with an absolute significance. Anti-Christianity or indifference to Christianity in the past, it could be argued, was based upon moral turpitude and
spiritual inferiority. Men fell below the level of the Gospel. Now, however, they have risen above it. Mankind, it is often said, has come of age at last. The childhood of the race is over, and perhaps with a little seemly regret we must put aside childish things. Thus the non-Christianity of to-day is not only quantitatively greater than the non-Christianity of the past, but qualitatively superior. Even some Christians believe that, if Christianity is to survive at all in the modern world, it must do so by adopting a different way of expressing and interpreting itself, so that it can meet the contemporary mind on its own terms. There is, of course, an element of truth in all this, but it is a little disconcerting to find that so often this reinterpreted and re-expressed Christianity is only barely recognizable as any kind of Christianity at all. It is usually so saturated with prevalent and ephemeral philosophical illusions that the intelligent Christian critic of good will can rarely be persuaded to adopt it, not so much because of his previous ecclesiastical and religious loyalties as because of his intellectual integrity. He cannot but feel that many of the self-consciously “modern” Christians are attempting to put over on the public a vast deception with which he does not care to be associated.

For one thing, he is probably not convinced about the alleged growing up of contemporary mankind. As it seems to him, he is still living in a world of massive absurdity and mediocrity. Our age, perhaps like every age, is chronically inclined to overestimate the contemporary intelligence. Presumably the view that modern man is growing up is a narrowly western one and can hardly be true of our largely illiterate world. Can this be the way in which modern western man tries to console himself for the loss of his political predominance? The really intelligent adult can stand on his own two feet without political predominance. Contemporary western man speaks too often as though he
has voluntarily resigned political predominance in a humble
gesture that proudly betrays his intellectual and spiritual
superiority over his wicked imperialist forefathers. Actually,
of course, it was taken away from him, perhaps because he
lacked the energy and determination of his forefathers, or
perhaps merely because it was too expensive. But he may
think to console himself by reflecting that if he is no longer
powerful he is at least supremely intelligent, the first really
grown-up type of man to inhabit this planet.

We sometimes wonder whether those who talk so glibly
about the coming of age of contemporary western man ever
ride in the crowded London tubes or the subways of New
York, ever stroll in Piccadilly or the Champs-Elysées, sur-
rounded by hordes of contemporaries who have also
presumably come of age. Do they ever go to a football
match or a prize fight? Or to a dance hall thronged with
teen-agers? It would be a good thing indeed if some of our
intellectuals looked at some of the other people occasionally,
and banished their illusion that most people are more or less
like themselves, or at least will be very shortly when they
have done a little more educating. If in the contemporary
western world the non-Christians greatly outnumber the
Christians, how much more do the non-intellectuals pre-
dominate over the intellectuals?

In every age the creative intellectuals are a pitiful minor-
ity. We often forget this as we observe the past, for the
intellectual giants of former times had the habit of writing
down their thoughts on paper. They are remembered while
their contemporaries are forgotten. In our time we are
vividly aware of the mediocrity of the mass and the scarcity
of excellence.

Of course, in western society there is nowadays a great
deal of educational activity, but we must be careful not to
exaggerate its effect. Thus, for example, most people in
modern western society are at least theoretically literate. They can affix their signatures to cheques and even contrive to fill in the questionnaires and forms with which modern bureaucratic government repeatedly challenges their intellectual powers. They can read public notices and instructions like STOP, NO SMOKING, KEEP OFF THE GRASS, or the delicately phrased but ambiguous COMMIT NO NUISANCE. But, nevertheless, a large proportion of them may be described as virtually illiterate. They are incapable of reading a book of any depth with profit, and even incapable of getting the point of a newspaper editorial such as we may find in The Times of London or in the New York Times. As for reading Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Freud, or Teilhard de Chardin with any understanding, such an operation is for the overwhelming majority of our contemporaries entirely out of the question. We live in an age in which most people are technically literate, but actually illiterate. Probably the contrast between the small intellectually élite minority and the great virtually illiterate majority has never been so great as it is now.

But to quote what is becoming a cliché: "Over 90% of all the scientists that have ever been are still alive." No doubt the term "scientist" when this claim is made is somewhat narrowly defined, but we will let that pass. The remark is too grossly quantitative. It is equally true that over 90% of the really important, epoch-making scientists are now dead. For that matter, there are no doubt now more professional playwrights in London or New York than in classical Greece. We must not confuse the qualitative with the quantitative. We cannot make a judgement like "Ten Mousetraps equal one Medea", or "Ten John Osbornes equal one Euripides". If we do so we are confusing the excellence of a profession with the transcendence of genius. How many contemporary scientists equal one Copernicus?
There is not a single living man who can possibly hope to enjoy a comparable place in scientific history.

The word scientist, which once described a somewhat remote and solitary genius, working in a laboratory in a cellar rather as a nineteenth-century artist was supposed to labour in a garret, has now become the name of a numerous and respected profession. It is, of course, an important and honourable profession which has made many valuable contributions to contemporary life and thought. Like any other large profession, however, it is not and could not be peopled exclusively by geniuses. We must no more confuse the contemporary scientist with giants of the past like Galileo and Newton than we must identify every contemporary painter or composer as an embryo Titian or Beethoven. The genius has his individual charisma and this is not the same thing as the membership of a respected and honoured profession.

Indeed, scientific thought has its characteristic weaknesses, as well as its massively effective strength. For one thing it is inherently abstract. It proceeds by concentrating upon a single theme and ignoring everything else. The scientist is distinguished not only by a sense of relevance but also by a sense of irrelevance. The former is his strength, but the latter may easily become the source of his weakness, for in reality relevances and irrelevances are much more mixed up than they are in scientific theory. That is why scientific experiments have to take place in a laboratory, in a prepared context from which the irrelevant is much more carefully excluded than it is or can be in real life. In actuality the irrelevant is always interfering and producing unforeseen accidents. The controlled experiment is, so to speak, a sterilized event, and in that sense artificial. There is no necessary harm in this. On the contrary, it is the essence of the process. The only danger that arises is that the scientific thinker may forget and fail to make proper allowances for
the abstractness of his method. It cannot be said that this
danger is always avoided.
Again, the scientific mind up to now has inevitably had to
emphasize its calculative, problem-solving aspects, and
many of the less gifted members of the scientific profession
have tended to degenerate into calculative, problem-solving
men. No doubt, the coming of the computer age will tend
to redress the balance somewhat. Much of the merely cal-
culative, problem-solving element in scientific work will be
carried out by the machines, and these particular depa-
rtments of scientific ability will be less emphatically stressed
in the years to come. The computer age will produce a new
kind of scientist, vividly aware of his superiority over the
computers, and less tempted to function himself as a rather
inefficient human computer. It will set him free to be the
human master of his craft, and conversely the techniques
of his craft will be less likely to master him.
This is often described as a scientific age. It is indeed a
scientific age in the sense that it makes liberal use of scientific
devices, employs more scientific workers, and has an almost
superstitious reverence for science and the scientific mind.
But it is not a scientific age in the sense that most people are
scientists or even understand scientific theories. In this last
sense of the term, in all probability, there will never be a
scientific age. Like every other kind of human excellence,
science is a minority activity.
Considered as a whole the contemporary community in
our scientific and technical age is still far too immature to
bear the burden of its scientific and technical prowess. In
this there lurks a real danger to the future of science itself.
The vast majority of our contemporaries, who do not have
any understanding of scientific theories or any appreciation
of the real excellence of the scientific mind, nevertheless have
to bear the growing economic burden of financing and
supporting scientific research, and the danger is that that those who pay the piper may insist upon calling the tune. If they do so they will almost certainly call the wrong tune.

Indeed, this is not really a scientific age at all. It is primarily the age of immature affluence and naïve materialism. Science has made this age possible, but it does not therefore follow that this age will continue to make science possible. The day may come when the affluent scientist will indulge nostalgic dreams for the laboratory in the cellar just as the affluent artist may sometimes long for a garret in the skies. For those were at least the days of freedom, when great men followed their charisma wherever it might lead them. Of course, whatever may have been their characteristic excellence, these early creative days can never return. Nostalgia for the past is as useless in science and art as in politics. It is certainly the case, however, that an age that idolizes and uses the sciences without understanding them must necessarily be an age in which they are in continual danger.

This, however, is not the theme of this book. In these pages we shall be concerned less with where we are than with how we got here and where we are going. By what intellectual stages have we reached our present situation? No doubt, by a series of philosophical and ideological transitions that embodied real advances and achievements but at the same time incorporated grave errors of judgement and misapprehensions of fact. What, too, of the social developments and transitions which have contributed to the production of the present situation? All this is summed up in the general question: How did we get here? Here we are. Nobody planned it or perhaps even desired it. But here, nevertheless, we are. Of course, we are in a way glad to be here—a little apprehensive about our future, and perhaps too
uncritical of our past, especially of our immediate past—but still grateful for the exciting privilege of living in the twentieth century. It is with questions such as these in our minds, that we turn to the chapters that are now to follow.