

Christendom, Then and Now

In this chapter, I describe in greater detail the particular neo-Christendom prevalent in the United States in the early twenty-first century. Because the rise of that Christendom parallels the loss of conventional, inherited Christian forms, the shift may appear to get us out of the problems of Christendom. However, in most cases, an older, more obvious form of Christendom is simply replaced by a newer, more ironic, and even “secular” form. The new cultural mindset still regards itself as Christian; as a result, it presents the same dangers (albeit in different ways) from the more obviously Christian culture it has replaced.

Two Scenarios

I begin with two scenarios—one fictional, and the other, real.

Modeling for Christ

Along Interstate 75, heading into Atlanta from Macon, Georgia, drivers can see—tucked in between billboards for Waffle House and various car dealerships—an enormous sign adorned by a 30-foot blond with

a sweeping neckline, her perfect mouth smiling over the eight-lane freeway. The billboard advertises “Models for Christ” (MFC), a Christian modeling agency for those “seeking to honor God as they navigate the unique opportunities and challenges within the fashion industry.” When they arrive home, drivers can peruse the organization’s website, where they will learn that MFC seeks to connect models with opportunities to share God’s love with others in the industry, as well as offering “industry-relevant Bible studies” and “leadership discipleship training.”

The website is linked to that of Christian Talent Network, a for-profit company commissioned “to help you find your way safely into the many possibilities available for you in the exciting world of modeling and TV commercials.” Counsel is available from experienced mentors “who have experienced the many challenges in the industry and seen God guide them safely to success.” Their services include agency referrals; composite, portfolio, and head shot photography; international guidance and connections for modeling and TV work; and “work referrals to Christ-honoring photo, TV and film productions.”

The company offers a number of testimonials (both about God’s power and about the worth of the company) from born-again models and actors, almost all of whom follow a script in which they have fallen into sin and despair, and then, found themselves saved by Christ. They speak of eating disorders, conspicuous materialism, consumerism, promiscuousness, shame, self-glorification, and self-loathing; they have fallen into the temptations both of idolizing the profession and of becoming an idol to others. They then speak of the guidance and security they have found in Jesus and that they hope to offer to new recruits.

What is unclear in all of this is exactly what the designation “Christian” means for a particular model’s work in the fashion industry. It seems to be something fairly general, about not falling into the celebrity lifestyle of excess. Jeremy, who became a model after entering a national underwear modeling contest his senior year of

college (“My granddad took a couple of pictures of me and sent them in with my entry form, not really thinking I had a chance . . .”), now decides which fashions he will or will not model by asking whether the job “is truly part of God’s redemptive work.” As one might suspect, however, his notion of “redemptive” is fairly capacious. His advice to beginning Christian models is this: “Don’t think that you have to be part of the ‘party’ scene to be successful. Treat modeling as a business, and be known for your character with your agents and the clients. When working, look for ways to bless the other models and clients by serving and doing your best.” Another model, Laura, commends Christian acceptance and self-confidence in the midst of an industry that preys on insecurity: “If God didn’t make you a certain height or weight, you need to do the best with what He’s given you. Find out what you look good in and work with that.” Finally, there’s Rachel, a former Playboy model—a position that she now calls “a playmate and spokesperson of lies”—who has converted to become a spokesperson for Jesus, “crowned with His beauty.” While “modeling for Christ,” she tells of being tempted to shoot a hair advertisement for a client who wanted a silhouette of her back “with a shaded hint of other areas to be exposed.” Refusing to do the shot, she risks forfeiting the job. But God makes a way out of no way; according to Rachel, “I took a stand for my beliefs and kept the job—Praise God! And I praise Him for MFC!”

Golfing with Jesus

Meet Dr. Thomas More, who, “in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world,” comes to himself in a grove of young pine trees somewhere on the outskirts of Paradise Estates, Louisiana. Recently out of a mental institution where he both practiced his own psychiatry and was treated as a patient, Tom now wonders whether his brooding despair is caused by the seemingly normal surrounding community. “People look and smile and are nice and the abyss yawns,” he says. “The niceness is terrifying.”

Indeed, everything in Paradise Estates appears rather nice and

normal and nonthreatening to all but Tom, whose acute sense of alienation and impending doom may be healthier than the widespread obliviousness that anything is wrong. Life in Paradise Estates is seen as “an oasis of concord in a troubled land.” Amidst violent national conflict between white and black, right and left, residents of this gated community live and let live. Some go to church while others go birdwatching. Some attend American Civil Liberties Union meetings, lobbying for poor and disadvantaged youth, while others support an anti-communist organization. And yet, all “play golf, ski in the same bayou, and give ‘Christmas gifts’ to the same waiters at the club.”

In order to register the malaise that no one else seems to notice, Tom invents an Ontological Lapsometer, a kind of stethoscope of the human spirit, which can detect a person’s alienation from her- or himself. But in a society that gives equal credit to birdwatchers and churchgoers—and in which Christianity has become indistinguishable from patriotism, market economics, and mainstream American culture—the factors working to conceal such spiritual lapses are immense. In fact, based on the names of organizations such as the American Christian Proctological Society or the Kaydettes corps of Christian baton-twirlers, Christianity would seem exceedingly important, second only to that which it qualifies. The same might be said of Louisiana’s leading faith community, the American Catholic Church (ACC), “which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of neighborhoods.” Saint Pius XII, Paradise Estates’ parish church, has retained the Latin mass and plays The Star-Spangled Banner at the elevation of the Host. In preparation for Property Rights Sunday, a major feast day in the ACC, the congregation hangs a blue banner beside the crucifix that depicts Christ holding the American Home with a picket fence in his two hands. Jesus makes other appearances as well: the golf pro at the country club decides to host a “golfarama” outing—a week of golf on a Caribbean island with the Greatest Pro of Them All, where religious revivals conducted by members of the old Billy Graham team would punctuate premier rounds of golf. At last, one can attend to one’s piety while also working on one’s putting.

Of course, combining so many cultural forms with religious traditions and moral precepts does lead to certain discrepancies. For example, as Tom gets sucked further into an apocalypse-sized plot, he comes across leftist students driving nails into golf balls and filling Coke bottles with gasoline as they prepare for a “nonviolent demonstration for peace and freedom in Ecuador.” When Tom asks how their preparations could possibly fit with their professed pacifism, their leader—a famous scholar from Harvard—explains: “We practice creative nonviolence violence, that is, violence in the service of nonviolence. It is a matter of intention.” Another crack in the full enculturation of religion can be glimpsed in the private school in town, which is “founded on religious and patriotic principles and to keep Negroes out.”

Despite such discrepancies, what is thought to be the best of America and the best of Christianity form an alliance that manages to withstand the misgivings of misanthropes such as Tom. Tom himself finally settles down, confesses his sin (or at least, the sin of not feeling sorry for his sins), and returns to St. Pius XII. On one particular Sunday, the service ends by asking for the reunion of Christianity and the United States. After Mass, a “rowdy but likable lot” of children shoot off firecrackers and cry out: “Hurray for Jesus Christ! Hurray for the United States!”

Christian Culture, Real and Imagined

Readers of Walker Percy will quickly recognize the second scenario, which can be found in his 1971 novel, *Love in the Ruins*.¹ On the contrary, *Models for Christ* provides the sort of material that makes Percy’s fictionalized account work so well as a parody of the real thing²—just as “Buddy Jesus,” the smiling, winking, thumbs-up Jesus designed to

1. Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (New York: Avon Books, 1971). Quotations and direct references above are from pages 3, 5, 12, 19, 43, 165, 173, 185, 207, 269, and 377.

2. “Life Portraits,” and “Become a Model,” *Models for Christ*, accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.modelsforchrist.com/>. Compare also “Christian Modeling Agencies: Does modeling conflict with Christian values?,” accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.modelmanagement.com/modeling-advice/christian-modeling-agencies/>.

replace the “wholly depressing” crucifix in the satirical film *Dogma*, really does reflect trends in (usually Protestant) church marketing.³

However believable or exaggerated either of these accounts may sound, both reveal the ways that Christianity has become, or is becoming, combined and allied with cultural forms that would otherwise seem irrelevant or even hostile to it. Both accounts describe the *acculturation* of Christianity into the dominant social ethos. They presuppose that Christianity can meld into other social forms (advertising, baton-twirling, or being a good golfer) without noticeable change on either side. They also describe the *accommodation* that accompanies this cultural melding. Christianity goes from being a distinctive and discernable sub-culture in its own right to becoming little more than a cipher, an empty adjective that can be added to nearly any aspect of mainstream culture. This is what it means to live, not in a Christian culture, but in a “*Christian*” culture—with the quotation marks firmly in place. This term—along with *Christendom* as I am using it here—marks the collective failure to observe and consider Christianity on its own terms, that is, as a network of local human communities sharing common, distinctive, and sometimes countercultural practices, beliefs, and social forms that do not always cohere with all aspects of mainstream American culture. Indeed, some aspects of Christianity would seem to be quite foreign to that culture insofar as Christianity calls for discipleship to a God scandalously made known through a Palestinian Jew, who undergoes persecution and execution by “the establishment” and implores his followers to accompany him. Can such a faith perspective really acquiesce to whatever ethos the dominant culture transmits? Is it really possible to use the qualifier *Christian* to legitimize the nation, the market, or spirit of the times?

Many of us could name times when this temptation to acculturate and accommodate the Christian faith to a nation or ideology has quickly gotten ugly. Take, for example, the “German Christians” in the

3. *Dogma*, DVD, directed by Kevin Smith (1999; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008). See also James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

1930s, who linked their fidelity to Jesus as Lord with allegiance to Hitler as *Führer*. There, a theological account of the Christian church was wedded to a set of political ambitions to restore Germany to a *Volk*—not simply a nation, but a people who share the same loyalties, bloodlines, and language. Or, closer to home, think of the way descriptions of the United States as a Christian nation often dovetail with appeals to tighten national borders and the scapegoating of recent immigrants. A clear example of packaging God with Country can be found in the Tea Party, whose “15 Non-negotiable core beliefs” include the requirement of English as the country’s core language and the “encouragement” of traditional family values. The fifth core belief professes that gun ownership is sacred—not a matter of constitutional rights, or as a necessity, given the perceived threat of governmental encroachment, but as *sacred*. How long until Jesus is depicted with a semi-automatic in his wounded hands, guarding the land of the free?⁴

Or finally, consider the monumental impact on church history when, in the year 312, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, followed by another emperor, Theodosius, declaring it Rome’s official religion in the year 380. Over the course of the fourth century, Christianity went from being an oft-persecuted religion *under* Roman rule to becoming the official religion *of* the Roman Empire.⁵ This “Constantinian shift” can sound like a good thing for Christians, and certainly, fewer of them were killed once adherence to the Christian faith became permitted, and then, sanctioned. But when Christianity becomes the religion *of* empire, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between its own ways (being willing to die rather than kill, as Christian martyrs were trained) and the ways of Rome (being willing to kill rather than die, as Roman soldiers were trained). Practicing Christians who happen to live within the empire now

4. The list of Tea Party commitments (but no such image of Jesus) can be found at: “About Us,” Tea Party, accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.teaparty.org/about-us/>.

5. Church historians clarify that this “Constantinian shift” actually begins around the year 200 and takes more than 200 years to unfold. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 53–64. For even more historical nuance, see Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

become professed “Christian” Romans—with emphasis on the Roman. In the process, Christianity becomes something easy to ascribe to, but difficult to describe as distinctive or to carry out with any real risk vis-à-vis the dominant culture.⁶

Of course, Christian Nazis or America’s Christian Far Right can become red herrings in depicting the dangers of a so-called “Christian” culture. Modeling for Christ seems much more innocuous, as does Walker Percy’s depiction of the Homeowner’s Christ or Kevin Smith’s Buddy Jesus. From another angle, however, the very innocuousness of more subtle forms of Christendom is part of what makes them so dangerous. Early Christian supporters of Nazism did not think of it as a dangerous betrayal of their faith; for many, the connections between Christian belief and a strengthened German state seemed benign and banal.⁷ We may feel the same way about, say, pledging allegiance to “one nation under God,” placing the American flag behind the altar, or calling on voters to elect the most “Christian” candidate. But are contemporary American Christians any more discriminating than the German Christians of the 1930s or the Roman Christians of the fourth century? Perhaps the most significant danger of Christendom lies precisely in its ability to look so innocent.

All of this cultural accommodation can, however, nudge us toward an equal and opposite mistake. If Christianity’s acculturations also dilute, compromise, or accommodate Christianity itself, the alternative would seem to be to keep the Christian faith pure by keeping it *spiritual*—a matter of personal conviction, and so, divorced from politics, culture, or any other public form. But this move contributes to

6. Readers familiar with H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* will know that his book has defined much of the debate about Christianity and social and cultural forms since its first publication in 1951 (now published through New York: Harper Collins, 2001). In Niebuhr’s terms, the present book could be seen as pushing toward his “Christ against Culture” or “Christ and Culture in Paradox” models of Christian identity and community. Its larger goal, however, is to help readers rethink the terms of the debate, as do, for example, Craig A. Carter in *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006); Rodney Clapp in *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 58–75; and David S. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 106–109.

7. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1977).

the same problem. By removing overtly political action and language from all conversations about faith and the church, we can unwittingly endorse the status quo—leaving unquestioned whatever political arrangements currently reign. If, in order to depoliticize Christianity, we find ourselves spiritualizing and privatizing it, this does not prevent it from being accommodated to culture. In fact, by depriving the faith of its distinctive social shape, it can become so empty of real content that it can be attached to just about anything else without having to make any adjustments whatsoever.

Whatever else, quests for a “pure” and “spiritual” Christianity risk betraying the central claim of the Christian faith, a claim that God enters history through a covenant with God’s people and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who calls followers not to some free-floating spiritual realm, but to the way of the cross, a life of radical discipleship.⁸ Similarly, specific Christian practices—including, for example, active peacemaking, the forgiveness of sin, and a commitment to the poor and marginalized—end up being set aside when “personal” beliefs must be checked at the door of the public square.

As noted in the Introduction, the word *Christendom* is traditionally used to refer to Christian-majority countries or countries in which certain elements of Christianity play a dominant role. Today, such lands tend to be found in Africa and the Global South.⁹ In a more historical sense, *Christendom* typically designates the medieval and early modern period of Western Europe, when Pope and Emperor kept church and empire allied and dominant within their cultures. It can also refer to the post-Reformation rise of established state churches, such as German or Scandinavian Lutheran bodies or Catholic France, Italy, and Spain, where national citizenship and church membership largely matched. Finally, the word is sometimes used to describe a consensual “civil religion,” as espoused especially in the United States almost since its founding, whereby a plethora of Christian denomi-

8. Compare Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 33–43.

9. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

nations—though officially decoupled from the state—nonetheless imagine themselves as nominally unified and as sustaining civility and upholding American “Judeo-Christian” culture.

This last version of Christendom—more tacit and cultural, less institutionalized—is the primary target of my descriptions and critiques in this book. But I will also make the case that America’s newest form of Christendom might even circumvent the implicit ecumenical and interreligious ties of American churches and synagogues. Our own culture no longer functions to stitch together one “sacred canopy” that houses the ethical-religious ethos of the United States as a whole. Instead, it would seem to legitimize a sense of togetherness that is so thin that it allows us to remain largely *disconnected* from one another—venerating the right of individuals and affinity groups to decide what is helpful, true, or moral for themselves. Even with its quotation marks in place, can “Christian” culture or the term *Christendom* be used to designate so individualist and dissolute a culture as ours?

Christendom’s Tenacity and its “Very Ironic Advantage”

Many writers believe we are beyond the problem of Christendom in any form—or, at the very least, that we no longer live in a Christian culture (with or without the scare quotes). As noted in the Introduction, the authors of these books—while using the word *Christendom* in various ways and disagreeing over the nature of its consequences—largely agree that the political disestablishment and cultural diminishment of Christianity is a godsend for authentic Christian community and discipleship. According to these authors, present-day Christians can now be Christian without compromise, since they no longer need worry about being influenced by the state, by the market, or by social conventions. Instead, they can undertake an authentic discipleship that entails personal commitment and intentional choices—freed from the powers of culture as a whole.

Often, such “authentic disciples” are also portrayed as having been freed from the rituals and hierarchy of the institutional church, which

is portrayed as having been beholden to these same cultural forces. Not only in books, but also in Christian communities, many folks calling themselves *missional* or *emerging* or *emergent* Christians experiment with creative, mobile, and transient forms of Christian life that are also interpersonal, non-institutional, and social-media savvy. If “Christendom” or “Christian culture” was a mighty fortress, these new disciples seem quite satisfied to pitch their tents among its ruins—replacing a sanctuary’s hard pews with coffee shop-style couches and throw rugs, adding yoga practice to the anointing of the sick, or preaching and posting sermons that look and feel more like TED Talks.

I share with post-Christendom authors and emerging church movements their deep concerns about established or “inherited” churches that are fading away, as well as their hope for a revitalized Christianity that may take unexpected forms. Where I part company with them, however, is in their assumption that Christendom has practically vanished, that we have become a secular society, and that this, in turn, will allow the emergence of more faithful Christian “networks.” In other words, they assume a zero-sum game between Christendom and the secular world, where the advance of the latter necessitates the retreat of the former. With this assumption comes a fairly robust optimism that—by *the very momentum of Western political and cultural history*—Christianity is or soon will be freed from the dangerous politico-cultural entrapments. Whatever other sensibilities these authors might share with Kierkegaard,¹⁰ he strongly resisted the notion that anything related to the Christian faith happens simply “as a matter of course.”¹¹ In fact, as noted in the Introduction, he saw the presumed *ease* of becoming a (nominal) Christian to be part and parcel of the *problem* of Christendom—a problem that makes it so difficult to become a Christian in something more than name. In this sense, the claim that secularism has displaced Christendom turns out to be

10. Kyle A Roberts, *Emerging Prophet: Kierkegaard and the Postmodern People of God* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013).

11. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1:46–49, 129–88, 610–16.

something of a Trojan horse. What appears to be an act of liberation turns out to be a way of reinforcing our captivity—and perhaps, even helping us to like it. In Rodney Clapp’s terms, Weber’s “iron cage” may have mutated into a “liberal cage,” where our own freedom of choice is actually what keeps us locked up.¹² This may, in fact, constitute the newest, most ironic form Christendom.

If the difficult and needed task is “to become a Christian in Christendom” (as Kierkegaard would put it), then we ought not make that task “easier” (and so, ironically, increasingly difficult) by presupposing that Christianity now carries little social or political power. Kierkegaard’s humorous attempt to cut through the irony was to claim to be helpful by making things more difficult—precisely because other writers already have a corner on the market of making things easier! In fact, he wants to put a positive cast on the very *difficulty* of becoming an authentic Christian in an inauthentic Christian culture. Such a setting, he believes, is the opportune setting for true Christian discipleship. This is its “very ironic advantage.”¹³

Clearly, frequent allusions to our so-called “post-Christendom” or even “post-Christian” age can inadvertently obscure both the difficulty and the possibility of becoming Christian. As Ron Adams and Isaac Villegas argue, “to proclaim Christendom’s death prematurely only serves to mask all the ways we benefit from the institutional prominence of cultural Christianity as it shapes our society.” For these authors, the issue is not *how Christian* our society remains, but whether, in assuming that we live in a post-Christendom culture, we are helping or hurting the cause of Christian mission and discipleship. Claims about the demise of Christian culture may not only be premature; they may actually mask the institutional prominence of a form of Christianity that has been accommodated to every other aspect of culture, thus making it all too easy to “pass” as a Christian.¹⁴ Put

12. Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 67. Compare Stanley Hauerwas, “The Democratic Policing of Christianity,” in *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 91–106.

13. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 186, 606.

14. Ron Adams and Isaac Villegas, “Post-Christendom or neo-Christendom?,” *The Mennonite*, accessed August 10, 2015, <https://themennonite.org/feature/post-christendom-neo-christendom/>. See

positively, these authors insist that our culture still regards itself as “Christian” in order to force us to face the problem of acculturated and accommodated Christianity. Only through this process, they believe, can we truly hear the calling to renewed discipleship and community.

Can Secularism Save?

As I have suggested, many authors see things differently. They welcome the upsurge of secular culture, with its emphasis on individual mobility, authenticity, and freedom of choice—not only because it seems inevitable, but because they believe it promises sure antidote to the problems of Christendom. Once the churches have been thoroughly disestablished, and once individuals have been thoroughly liberated from clerical-ritualistic-cultural traditions—so the argument goes—then we can all freely choose the traditions to which we want to “belong.” When this happens (and many so-called emergent or emerging church spokespersons assume the time is near), then Christians will find themselves without cultural-political power, but also, without the ideological temptations of “the establishment.” The tradeoff seems propitious.

Consider a few representative examples from the authors to whom I refer. In her recent book, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, Diana Butler Bass describes the colossal shift in American religious life since the 1960s away from older forms of institutional power, unreflective ritualism, and by-the-book belief. The growing alternative is a spirit-lead and experientially-varied revival of religiosity.¹⁵ Unlike an earlier generation that bemoaned this shift toward “individual spiritual questing” as entailing the tragic loss of community and civic togetherness,¹⁶ Bass seems to

also Isaac S. Villegas, “Christendom Isn’t Dead,” *Mennonite World Review*, June 11, 2012, accessed August 10, 2015, <http://www.mennoworld.org/archived/2012/6/11/christendom-isnt-dead/>. The Post-Christendom language that Adams and Villegas critique is from Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 71–91.

15. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012). See also Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009); and Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010).

16. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

celebrate it. She honors those who call themselves “Christian, but not religious” and celebrates their place in a choice-based, privatized, and secularized society, which is “driven by preference and desire instead of custom and obligation.”¹⁷ In Bass’s reading, religion-as-institution should happily give way to the more interpersonal (and often virtual) togetherness that has been forged by each individual’s uncharted spiritual path.

Similarly, for Phyllis Tickle, the Western world’s new way of being Christian and being Church emerges primarily over and against “established churches and their governing bodies”—or, again, against those “inherited” churches filled with members who cling to traditional religious forms. Such traditionalists are, she says, “like those who have fallen heir to Grandpa’s old home place and who still like things just the way he had them”; they see no need to “change the furniture.”¹⁸ Far from simply rearranging rooms, however, the “great emergence” as described by Tickle amounts to a giant rummage sale, in which the church cleans out its attic, basement, and much of the rest of the house. She sees this process as something that needs to happen in roughly 500-year intervals; previous housecleanings are associated with the Great Reformation, the Great Schism, Gregory the Great, and the great emergence of Christianity itself.¹⁹ Tickle’s metaphor is telling: the church that now requires such a thoroughgoing purge is not a group of real people, but an impersonal structure—a house with cluttered attic and all. In contrast, her candidates for the most promising new forms of Christian identity decidedly resist becoming institutionalized, ritualized, uniform, authoritarian, or otherwise too “churchy.” The choice appears to be between buoying individual freedom and creativity, on the one hand, and clinging to impersonal wooden social conventions, on the other. On those terms, who wouldn’t choose as she does?

Bass’s and Tickle’s appeals also welcome the advent of secularism—again, with an institutionalized Christendom as its

17. Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 40–41.

18. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 135–40.

19. *Ibid.*, 19–31.

negative foil. In fact, they and other proponents of emerging/emergent Christianity carry forward the vision first announced in 1965 with Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. Cox unambiguously described the baggage of Christendom and secular society as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. More surprisingly, he explicitly *celebrated* secularity as authentic Christianity's first and truest form. Cox assumed that the inevitable currents of secularism were flowing in his direction. He awaited in America the liberation that he believed had already been secured in Europe:

Increasingly, the process of secularization in Europe has alleviated Kierkegaard's problem [that is, of becoming a Christian in Christendom]. Marxism of various kinds, existentialism in its different forms, the passionate humanism of Camus, and a kind of "what-the-hellism" associated with *la dolce vita* ["the sweet life"] have increasingly presented Europeans with genuine, live options to Christian faith. More and more, "being a Christian" is a conscious choice rather than a matter of birth and inertia. The change can hardly be viewed as unfortunate.²⁰

As with Bass and Tickle, individual choice for Cox confers authenticity on faith and practice. As opposed to a previous era, in which a Christian culture provided the church with the power to acculturate and indoctrinate, we are now freed for genuine, responsible faith by a "secular" culture.

Cox anticipates the newer forms of "emergent" Christianity in other ways as well. Both he and Bass link Christendom to idolatry, which they understand as the confinement of God to a parochial place—usually the nation-state, but also, including the institutional church. Cox thus describes the process in which God is liberated from confinement to a particular space—beginning with the Jewish recognition that Yahweh could not be "localized," even in the Ark of the Covenant. This movement was renewed by Jesus's promise to destroy the Temple, and so, resist the temptation to confine God to that particular location. And now, in our own age of mobility, God is fully revealed as a universal, spiritual, hyper-mobilizing event, above and beyond all borders. By

20. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 91.

comparison, the institutional church can only appear restricting—in Cox’s words, a “patriarchal, agricultural, prescientific relic.”²¹ Bass and Tickle are similarly captivated by virtual spaces, notions of “liquid church,” and networks of “performativity”—all of which are seen as preventing God from idolatrously being boxed in to any particular location.

These writers are not alone in assuming that the problem of Christian culture is a problem of structure and of sealed borders, or that the solution is to let in some air (or clean out the attic) by welcoming the inevitable secularization of society. For example, the premier Canadian contextual theologian, Douglas John Hall, considers Christendom’s erosion to be no less inevitable than does Bass or Cox. Strangely, however—given that assumed inevitability—he also calls on Christian churches to disestablish themselves. Finally, he too assumes that “cultural” Christianity tends to confine God to one’s own understanding, church, culture, or nation. At the same time, Hall is more nuanced in his descriptions of the “Christendom” that he and others want us to get past. A closer look at his complex work will help us better understand the issues surrounding the current conversation.

In his short book, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Hall asks a simple question that congregations must consider, but—for the most part—have avoided: “What are churches for?”²² The question seems important in our current historical circumstances, described by one author as the “awkwardly intermediate stage” between a past Christian culture (in which mainline churches had considerable influence) and a less-established church of the future.²³ Hall describes how an earlier model of Christendom had a clear but pernicious mission—namely, to increase its influence by converting individuals and controlling more territory. Overtly imperialistic forms of this mission enjoyed a close relationship with political conquest, first

21. *Ibid.*, 56–59, 220.

22. Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997), 23.

23. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 134, as cited in Hall, *The End of Christendom*, 53.

through the northern expansion of the Holy Roman Empire,²⁴ and later, through the European colonization of India, the Americas, and much of Africa. The violence that accompanied these campaigns was sometimes curtailed by the Christian missions that went before and after them; however, those same activities also legitimated the conquests.

Today, according to Hall, we face another form of Christian imperialism—one that is yet more pernicious because more subtle. Mainline churchgoers declared that the twentieth century would become “The Christian Century” (a popular journal still bears that name). The social order was to be “Christianized” by engendering social support systems or by subsuming them under the label of Christianity. Even though such a “conquest” might well be seen as preferable to the earlier imperial version, it is no less triumphalistic or utopian. In both cases, the goal was “to turn the whole world, if possible, into church.”²⁵ Church has seemed to exist for spreading itself—either outward, into new territories, or down into the soul of society.²⁶

Hall’s account thus focuses both on the issues of indoctrination and institutionalization (Weber’s “iron cage”) and on Christianity’s capitulation to our modern-day preferences, needs, and freedoms (Clapp’s “liberal cage”). But for all the complexity and nuance of this diagnosis, his proposed solution sometimes seems inadequate by comparison. Focusing almost exclusively on how institutional churches should respond to these circumstances, he calls on them to “disestablish themselves” (often followed by an exclamation mark).²⁷

24. See James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 171, 177, 191–94.

25. Hall, *The End of Christendom*, 17. That Hall sees (neo-)Christendom in both forms puts him ahead of Cornel West, whose otherwise compelling portrayal of “Constantinian” versus “Prophet” Christianity unfortunately praises prophetic/social gospel versions of Christianity as being entirely part of the solution—never complicit in the problem—of hegemonic Christianity. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 146–55.

26. These directions of Christian expansionism might be put in temporal terms as well, as conservative Christians wax nostalgic over some privileged Christian past (the Middle Ages, the religion of the American founders, or pre-1960s’ America), while liberal or progressive Christians sometimes look to a future civilization as the triumph of Christianity. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 745.

27. Besides *The End of Christendom*, Hall calls for disestablishment in *The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1975); *Has the Church a Future?*

Rather than cling to models of Christian culture that are inevitably fading away, churches should *willingly* embrace the processes of disestablishment and secularization. Hence, his solution largely parallels that of Cox, Bass, and Tickle: Christians should embrace the cultural move toward secularism as providing an opportunity for real witness, individual choice, and deep commitment. But given the complex entanglements that Hall so clearly describes, can the problem really be solved by simply swimming along with the secular tide? Can one *choose* one's way out of Christendom? What if individual, unencumbered choice entails the very thing that the newest form of Christendom holds sacrosanct?

Borders of Belonging

Previous versions of Christendom were focused on geographical space—both in a literal sense (expansionist military and missionary movements), and as a controlling metaphor for the church's cultural power. In contrast, the language of Christianity's "redundancy" (as suggested by Kierkegaard) is more interested in the atmosphere within the space that it occupies. The problem is not that Christian culture is too "big" (geographically or otherwise), but that its presence is thin and dissipated. It is all-encompassing everywhere, but so sparse and vacuous as to be irrelevant. Thus, rather than being concerned (as is Hall) about Christianity's attempt to push its borders outward in order to gain more territory or downward to capture more souls, Kierkegaard worries about the loss of borders altogether.²⁸ In a culture that believes itself to be Christian, it can be difficult for any given person to see what "being a Christian" might look like. The distinctiveness of the faith

(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1980); *Confessing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 201–340; *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 157–78; and *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 83–86.

28. This may help us understand why some Christian thinkers have called for the reassertion of the "borders of baptism." Michael Budde, *The Borders of Baptism: Identities, Allegiances, and the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). It should be noted that such borders are transnational, truly catholic, and so distinguish particular practices and allegiances from those of mainstream society. They are a different sort of border than those that all too handily distinguish groups of people according to their national citizenship, class, race, or gender.

has been “captured” by the surrounding culture, making any effort at true discipleship redundant, and diluting the faith into something that everyone can accept (i.e., the “moralistic therapeutic deism” of which Smith and his colleagues speak).²⁹

In this light, Hall’s proposals for churches to disestablish themselves and “rediscover the possibilities of littleness”³⁰ inadvertently perpetuate the all-too-popular assumption that the best form of Christianity is that with the least impact. It resembles the description offered in the Introduction, to the effect that we want to be seen as “religious, but not *that* religious”; we want our faith to innocuous and small-to-mid-sized, as though we were comparing responsible ownership of a Honda Accord to those who hog the road with SUVs.³¹ Ironically, however, our current “Christian” culture is underwritten by our tendencies in this very direction. We are expected to don Christianity lightly, to be privately spiritual (and not too publicly religious), to be nice to one another. This is the borderless and “thin” version of Christianity that marks our culture. It has little use for more robust accounts of a God made flesh, or for those who want to live out that belief in ways that will be noticed.

In chapter 5, I will turn to the work of Stanley Hauerwas and others influenced by Anabaptist or Mennonite accounts of the church as important resources for addressing these questions by pointing us toward different starting points. Like Hall, Hauerwas believes that contemporary Christians are living in an “awkwardly intermediate stage” between a definitively Christian culture and a future era in which churches are completely disestablished.³² For Hauerwas,

29. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118–71.

30. Hall, *The End of Christendom*, 66.

31. Kierkegaard describes human sagacity in terms of understanding “moderation, the middle way, the medium size, this is the truth.” Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination. Judge For Yourself*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 161. Many today also assume that any religion with determinate content should be suspect of “fanaticism,” just as charges of “sectarianism” have been used from the late nineteenth century to dismiss religions that are ill-fitted for cultural assimilation. See Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 356.

32. Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon 1991). According to Hauerwas in *God, Medicine and Suffering*

however, this transition is necessarily marked by various ironic reversals. One of his books on this topic is titled *After Christendom?* (note the question mark); there, he notes that proposals to reduce the church's "establishment" influence tend to presume its continued social and cultural power. In other words, "You do not need an established church when you think everyone more or less believes what you believe." This is similar to Kierkegaard's claim about the redundancy and "thinness" of Christianity in our culture; it sweeps almost everything under a nominally Christian canopy, which means that the church has no distinctive social shape or discernible set of visible practices to give it an identity. Thus, the *withdrawal* of Christianity into the private sphere and into individual beliefs is precisely what allows it to remain in a culturally powerful position. Or *vice versa*: the only way that a nominally Christian culture can continue its past program of *expansionism* is by *quarantining* Christian belief, making it a matter of private concern to certain individuals.

Admittedly, Hauerwas welcomes secularism in ways that parallel (other) post-Christendom writers. While addressing the relationship between church and academy, he notes that "secular universities may be more hospitable to Christian knowledges than many universities that are allegedly Christian."³³ Similarly, Hauerwas begins his recent *War and the America Difference* by asserting that, as a Christian, he would prefer that the nation were more secular and that its Christianity were less "American." "In short," writes Hauerwas, "the great difficulty is how to keep America, in the proper sense, secular."³⁴

But for all these similarities with Bass, Tickle, Cox, or Hall, Hauerwas also refuses to allow new forms of Christendom to make use of their own leading tactic—forwarding the cause of secularism by celebrating individual religious preferences and choices. It would be better, he thinks, to live under something like the parish system in the Church

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 76n40, he planned for the subtitle of *After Christendom* to be: "Christians Living in Awkward Times."

33. Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Malden: MA: Blackwell, 2007), 8.

34. Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 6–7.