

## Preface and Acknowledgements

Many, if not most, in the contemporary United States understand themselves to live in a “Christian” country. Some appreciate and want to retain or strengthen this Christian identity. Others take the Christian underpinnings of American culture and politics to prove that we have not yet fully embraced the establishment clause of the American Constitution or what Thomas Jefferson called the “separation of church and state.” Surprisingly, some committed Christians also critique this assumed Christian identity of American culture, and do so on Christian grounds. According to them, the infusion of Christianity into mainstream culture and political discourse not only endangers the rights of people of other religions or of no religion; it also imperils the integrity and meaning of Christianity itself. Along with being widely accepted and pervasive, Christianity also becomes compromised or accommodated, according to these Christian critics. At best, a so-called Christian country will promote a compromised “Christian” faith. At worst, the assumed normality and popularity of Christianity may just undercut the relevance and distinctiveness of Christianity itself.

In this book, I join others in arguing against the easy blending of Christian discipleship and mainstream American values. Like other critics arguing on Christian grounds, I believe that Christian capitulations to mainstream North American politics and culture pose particular problems for Christian formation and discipleship. If a person is understood to partake of Christianity by cultural osmosis or

by the good luck of having being born in a “Christian” country, what more is to be gained by striving to become deeply and distinctively Christian?

Assuming that Christian discipleship entails standing out—at least to some degree—from what the New Testament calls “the world,” what is one to do when that world (or what others refer to as our dominant culture) so readily reabsorbs and repackages Christian distinctiveness, making it more normal, marketable, and mainstream? Put positively, what essential components of Christian discipleship would be better understood and practiced if we considered the faith to be a subculture or even a counterculture that is *within* American culture—but never *of* it? Can Christians once again learn how to “not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2)?

While I join other Christian critics of the cultural and political sway of Christianity by asking such difficult questions, I depart from many of them in my description of the particular challenges and opportunities related to Christian faith here and now. Broadly referring to the cultural influence or political power of Christianity as *Christendom*, many Christians now describe North Americans as living in a “post-Christendom” age. By doing so, they suggest that we finally live in a time when Christianity has lost or is quickly losing its political power, its cultural normativity, and its social status. This is good news for these Christian critics insofar as Christians now can more easily practice their faith without the risk of compromising it.

I share with “post-Christendom” writers the hope that would-be Christians will learn to embody their faith without the kickbacks and trappings of accommodated and acculturated Christianity. As the title of this book suggests, however, I believe that we “still” live squarely in Christendom—that is, in a dominant culture that presumes to be Christian or where Christianity remains the cultural norm. We therefore “still” live with the difficult task of learning to become Christian *in* (not after) Christendom. In fact, the challenge of “becoming a Christian in Christendom”—as the religious writer Søren Kierkegaard put it almost 200 years ago—is one that each generation

of Christians must work through according to its particular circumstances.

This book addresses the problem of how to live out the Christian faith within a culture that idealizes and privileges that tradition *while also* relativizing it, rendering it redundant and innocuous. By frequently using the phrase “acculturated and accommodated Christianity,” I will highlight both processes and the connection between them. When Christian communities become acculturated, gaining sociocultural power, they typically risk becoming accommodating as well—giving up something of their distinctive shape in the effort to increase or retain their wider “relevance.” Beyond diagnosing these dangers, the book also lifts up the witness of ordinary people who do manage to live faithfully in the countercultural tradition called Christianity. I do not write as someone who has become fully Christian, retrospectively rehearsing the path from an acculturated Christianity to more authentic forms. Indeed, I doubt whether that kind of book would be terribly helpful to those looking from the other side. Rather, I write as someone groping my way toward Christianity, able to name particular difficulties and imagine next steps.

I would like to thank a number of people and communities that made this book possible and helped me along the way. Isaac Villegas, pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, listened to early ideas for the book and pointed me to helpful resources. I consider him both pastor and friend, as I do with Becca Stelle, Director of Becoming Church in Washington DC, who also oriented me wisely at the start. Ronald Thiemann became a mentor in Lutheran scholarship before he passed away in 2012. He made a number of helpful suggestions while I participated in the Lutheran Academy of Scholars Seminar at Harvard University in 2011; I do wish our friendship would have had time to develop. Stanley Hauerwas also responded to initial ideas and has encouraged me along the way; many will see his influence of what I have written here, and I am thankful for it. Lisa Seiwart read portions of the manuscript and shared her

Master of Sacred Theology thesis on Christian privilege with me at an opportune time.

Paul Martens and David Kramer offered constructive criticisms of my work in bringing Kierkegaard and Yoder together; Lori Brandt Hale did the same for my work with Bonhoeffer, and Carl Hughes with Kierkegaard on Christendom. Dan Morris, my colleague in the Religion Department of Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, read the entire book in early draft form and responded in incredibly helpful ways over craft beer at Bent River Brewery (not all in one sitting). David Cunningham of Hope College read the manuscript in what I thought was its almost final form. He recommended ways for me to better say what I wanted to say but hadn't yet said well. This book is much clearer and more compelling because of David's care and wisdom. Finally, Kaity Lindgren spent many hours (and her Starbucks gift cards) doing a final proofread; I thank her for her careful corrections and perceptive suggestions.

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Finally, writing this book has been the excuse that I needed to hang out with and learn from members of Christian communities who take their faith formation and shared practices seriously—but also know how to laugh. While they don’t always make it into the footnotes, I’ve learned as much from members of the following communities

as from the writings of professional theologians: New Hope Catholic Worker Farm (LaMotte, Iowa), Rutba House (Durham, North Carolina), The Simple Way (Philadelphia), The Mennonite Worker (Minneapolis), Becoming Church (Washington DC), Christ Community Church (DesMoines, Iowa), Mustard Seed Community Farm (Ames, Iowa), Reba Place Fellowship (Chicago), Micah House (Rock Island, Illinois), and Holden Village (Chelan, Washington).

I dedicate this book to my two sons, Asa and Gabriel, who make me incredible proud to be a father, and to my own father, William D. Mahn (1943–2015) who was baptized as a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ in his childhood home in the spring of 1943.