

## Preface

“IN THE WORLD BUT not of the world.” It is a complex expression. Does it imply Christians ought not to enjoy the physical nature of being created and should instead wait out their time on earth until they are whisked away to some celestial realm? At certain times, it has been interpreted as such in the Christian tradition. As a Lutheran, however, I hold it to be a freeing message that tradition can occasionally be wrong; that God is greater than the church is able to comprehend.

There is, namely, another way to interpret it. Not as an expression of skepticism towards the physical nature of creation but rather as a statement in regard to the world-order. It can be construed as an assertion that Christians belong to a community, in which the story of this world is interpreted differently; a community that does not view the basic relationship between human beings as that of competition. Rather, Christians are in this world order, but do not have to play by its rules. Not because Christians think themselves too pure or too good to play along. But simply because if just a fraction of that story about God’s son coming into this world, dying and becoming alive again, really happens to be true, then all the fighting and competing, characteristic of late-capitalist societies, really does appear quite foolish.<sup>1</sup>

That is one way of interpreting what it means to be in the world but not of the world. In a Western society, where the church is again slowly moving away from the center of society and has to understand itself as one community among many others, questions pertaining to the role of the church in society are becoming more pressing. With the publication of the much debated *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian*

1. For the biblical passages that have provided scriptural basis for the expression “in the world but not of the world,” see Rom 12:2 and John 17:14–16. It is interesting to note how Paul uses αἶών while John uses κόσμος. The first being closer to meaning “world order,” the second closer to “creation.”

*Nation* in 2017 these questions were, once again, on the minds of many in the church, especially in the United States. That said, it is not the first time the church has had to find its place in an ever-changing context. The discussion surrounding how the church should understand its role in relation to the society it finds itself in, has been going on for a long time. As with many other theological conversations, this is one that takes place across borders and across centuries.

By focusing on the specific question of how to interpret the Constantinian shift, this book identifies the theological assumptions, which come to determine how the role of the church in the world is perceived. Attention to these theological assumptions qualifies and provides nuances to the current debate. This book does not provide the answer to the question “how should we think about the role of the church in contemporary Western society?” However, by examining how the question has been answered at three junctures in the history of the church, hopefully it will provide a lay of the land; a map of the territory to be navigated.

The first edition of this text was written as a so-called “prize-essay” at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. As has been the norm in Lutheran Scandinavia, Denmark still has an established church, there is a secretary for ecclesial affairs and the queen is the head of the church. However, while writing this paper I was located in the United States, with its sprawling multitude of unregulated Christian churches. Thus, the very birth of this book took place at a point of tension between different views on the church in the world. Such a conflicted birth has not led, at first, to a strong opinion on how things are to be. Instead, it has led to an initial inquiry and a reflection on the many different situations the church has found and still finds itself in.

Such a position of questioning is vulnerable. A position of vulnerability can only be sustained if there are people around, who are willing to help and listen; when one asks questions about what it is to be a human being and what it is to be a Christian. Here, churches, family, teachers, advisers, and good friends have all played an important role. Thank you.

Furthermore, in particular situations, unlikely communities arise. I had the privilege of using the well-equipped Duke Divinity School Library throughout the greater part of the writing process. Here, a bond formed for a little while between three people: Arthurine, who was studying for her medical school examinations, Doron, who was finishing his PhD, and me. In the daily work of reading, writing, and eating together, a special

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community arose, of people from all over the world with different backgrounds and very different projects. It is in extreme situations, when we find ourselves in foreign lands, that a way out of no way is opened up.

The Black Diamond, Copenhagen, July 2018.

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