

After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity

David A. Hollinger

The life of human beings today “is cast in a multicultural context,” wrote the great comparativist Wilfred Cantwell Smith in 1960. “Every community on earth is becoming a minority in a complexity of diverse groups,” he continued. In this “age of minorities,” no particular “we” can any longer credibly claim superiority to any “they.” The most defensible solidarity is now “humanity itself,” insisted Smith, who then identified Christians, capitalists, communists, and Muslims as prominent minorities slow to recognize their true status. It was especially important, he asserted, to get the truth across to white people and “Westerners” who “seem almost incapable of adjusting themselves to a new world” in which they, too, are minorities. For Smith, the recognition of the diversity of the human species and the diminution of inequalities within it were intimately bound up with one another.¹

These ideas resonate well with the multicultural initiatives of the 1990s and even more resoundingly with the whites-are-a-minority exclamations of the 2000s. That these observations were offered with such urgency in 1960 in the pages of *Christian Century* and by one of the period’s most respected ecumenical Protestants can flag for us the role that ecumenical Protestants played in diminishing Anglo-Protestant prejudice and embracing the varieties of humankind. Recognizing this role can lead us, in turn, to an understanding of the dialectical process by which ecumenical Protestants lost their numbers and their influence in public affairs while evangelical Protestants increased theirs. Politically and theologically conservative evangelicals flourished while continuing to espouse popular ideas about the nation and the world that were criticized and abandoned by liberalizing, diversity-accepting ecumenists. Appreciating the significance of this Protestant dialectic, within which the two great rivals for control of the symbolic capital of Christianity defined themselves in terms of each other, can yield a more comprehensive and accurate account of the place in modern American history of the so-called Protestant Establishment.² We now have an extensive and increasingly helpful

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¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Christianity’s Third Great Challenge,” *Christian Century*, April 27, 1960, p. 505. On Wilfred Cantwell Smith as a comparativist, see Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s ‘The Meaning and End of Religion,’” *History of Religions*, 40 (Feb. 2001), 205–22.

² On the concept of “Protestant Establishment,” see William R. Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900–1960* (New York, 1989).

literature on evangelical Protestantism in the twentieth century, but studies of ecumenical Protestantism remain fewer in number, narrower in scope, and lower in professional visibility.

I refer to *ecumenical* Protestantism because this label has proven to be the least confusing way to distinguish the family of Protestants of which I speak from the fundamentalist, Pentecostal, holiness, and other conservative persuasions within American Protestantism that came to be described collectively as *evangelical*, even though the latter term had earlier denoted a much greater range of Protestant orientations. This distinction between ecumenical and evangelical Protestants hardened during the 1940s and after as a result of the discomfort felt especially by fundamentalists with how far the “mainstream liberals” had pushed their program of cooperation across denominational lines and of alliances with non-Protestant, non-Christian, and eventually secular parties. Indeed, it was opposition to this program that most united the fundamentalists with other conservative Protestants, enabling all of them to form the commodious religious expanse known since the 1940s as “Evangelical Protestantism.”³ While the ecumenists increasingly defined themselves through a sympathetic exploration of wider worlds, the evangelicals consolidated “home truths” and sought to spread them throughout the globe.

The ecumenical Protestant encounter with diversity was built, in a fashion, on the ancient myth of Pentecost. Members of every tribe and nation addressed each other with “cloven tongues of fire,” according to the second chapter of Acts, hearing each other as if all were speaking in the hearer’s own language. “Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God,” as the testimony is recorded in the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible that was still widely used until the mid-twentieth century.⁴ For the particular subset of evangelicals called Pentecostals, with whom this scripture is the most identified, what mattered was the spiritual intensity of the moment, the re-creation of the immediate experience of unity among the varieties of humankind. Fellowship across various divisions was to be achieved though a charismatic engagement with the gospel in which everyone could share. For ecumenists, however, the big issue was what happens next.

After the cloven tongues of fire have shown the possibility for a species-wide solidarity, how can that solidarity be institutionalized? Beyond mystical moments, how can one diminish social divisions in the long run, in the course of earthly life day after day? The ecumenists were more institution builders than revivalists, more devoted to creating and maintaining communities than to facilitating a close emotional relationship with the divine, and more frankly concerned with social welfare than with the state of the individual soul. Evangelicals could be institution builders, too, but the solidarities that the evangelicals sought to institutionalize were more particularistic. The ecumenical Protestants of twentieth-century America were preoccupied with mobilizing massive constituencies to address social evils. They wanted

³ The best single book on fundamentalists in the 1930s and 1940s persuasively argues that leading veterans of the old fundamentalist movement of the 1910s and 1920s united and organized the new evangelical alliance. See Joel E. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of Fundamentalism* (New York, 1999). On the political mobilization of fundamentalists and other evangelicals from the 1920s to the present, see Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York, 2010).

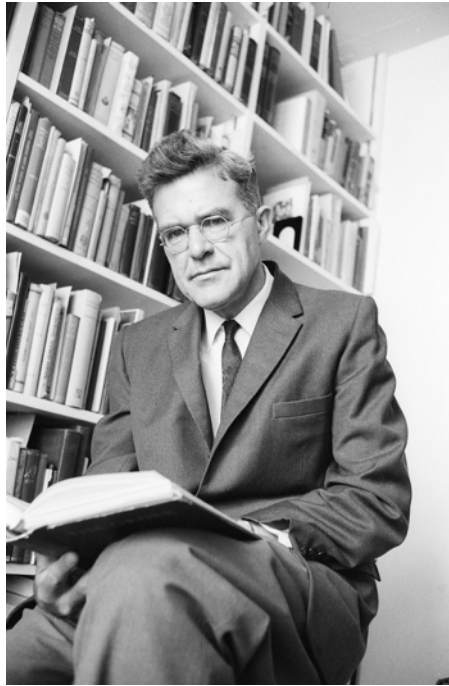
⁴ Acts 2:1–11. The universalist reading of this text characteristic of ecumenical Protestants of the middle decades of the twentieth century is exemplified by that era’s standard reference work on biblical interpretation. See George A. Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Bible* (12 vols., New York, 1954), IX, 38–39.

to reformulate the gospel of the New Testament in terms sufficiently broad to enable people of many cultures and social stations to appreciate its value, if not actually to embrace it. Among their favorite scriptural warrants was one from Paul the Apostle's letter to the Galatians: "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus," for in him "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female." They sought to overcome the curse of Babel not in fleeting moments of ecstasy but in the prosaic routines of daily life.⁵

Surely, we are now tempted to protest, the doings of all those white Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians could not have mattered that much. In response to this intuition, it helps to remember that ecumenical Protestantism was anything but marginal to American life during the decades of the mid-twentieth century. The population of the United States remained, after all, overwhelmingly white and Protestant. Membership numbers in the major, classical denominations were at an all-time high. Persons at least nominally affiliated with these denominations controlled all branches of the federal government and most of the business world, as well as the nation's chief cultural and educational institutions, and countless state and local institutions. If you were in charge of something big before 1960, chances are you grew up in a white Protestant milieu. Until the 1970s, moreover, the public face of Protestantism itself remained that of the politically and theologically liberal ecumenists of the National Council of Churches and its pre-1950 predecessor, the Federal Council of Churches (FCC). Only later did the more conservative Protestants of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)—an organization founded in 1942 in explicit opposition to the ecumenists—gain the public standing it enjoys today. The evangelicals gradually became the dominant public face of Protestantism, partly because these evangelicals continued for many decades to espouse a number of diversity-resisting perspectives that remained popular with the white public even as these perspectives were being renounced by self-interrogating ecumenist intellectuals such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

This mood of self-interrogation demands emphasis. One of the most neglected features of twentieth-century American history is the intensity and range of the self-critique carried out by the intellectual leadership of mainstream liberal Protestantism during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The critical revision of inherited traditions was no monopoly of such people, to be sure, but they made a great production of attacking the ethnocentrism and sectarianism they professed to find all around them, including in their own churches. While evangelical leaders were trying to foster collective pride and were protesting against the patronizing and dismissive remarks often made about evangelicals by elite religious and secular intellectuals, many ecumenical leaders were giving themselves hell. When historians treat the growth of evangelicalism in a religious vacuum—attending to social structural, political, and popular cultural conditions but neglecting the religious—they miss the historical process by which religious liberals abandoned a series of diversity-resisting ideas and practices that the liberals had concluded were mistaken, only to find

⁵ On the difference between evangelical and ecumenical approaches to diversity, see Grant Wacker, "Second Thoughts on the Great Commission: Liberal Protestants and Foreign Missions, 1890–1940," in *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880–1980*, ed. Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids, 1990), 281–300, esp. 297–300. Harold Ockenga explains the relation between the fundamentalist tradition and the broader evangelical persuasion that he was leading. Ockenga was the central figure in the creation of all three of the major evangelical institutions of the period: the National Association of Evangelicals, *Christianity Today*, and Fuller Theological Seminary. On the principles that informed institution building by American evangelicals of the mid-twentieth century, see Harold Ockenga, "Resurgent Evangelical Leadership," *Christianity Today*, Oct. 10, 1960, pp. 14–16. On Ockenga's career, see George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1995). Galatians 3:28.



The ecumenical theorist Wilfred Cantwell Smith of the Harvard Divinity School near the time of his 1960 call for the development of a genuinely “multicultural” Christianity. *Courtesy Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Mass. (UAV 605, box 28, frame 12a).*

these same ideas and practices serving as a vital foundation for the growth in the public standing of evangelicalism.

Among the most important of these popular diversity-resisting perspectives was the claim that Christians, especially Protestants, had a proprietary relationship to the American nation that could be easily exercised despite the constitutional separation of church and state. The notion of a “Christian America” remained popular in evangelical circles long after the ecumenical leadership put itself at risk by renouncing this crucial foundation for its own authority in public affairs. In 1947 and again in 1954 the National Association of Evangelicals actually mounted campaigns to amend the Constitution to include reference to Jesus of Nazareth and his God. “This nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Savior and Ruler of nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God,” began the text of this proposed constitutional amendment as the Republican senator Ralph E. Flanders introduced it in the Senate, where it died in committee, partly because most ecumenical Protestant leaders refused to support it.⁶

The self-interrogative mood of the ecumenists in relation to the disputed notion of a “Christian America” was well documented by one of the editors of *Christian Century* in 1961. Martin Marty asked that the inauguration of the Catholic John F. Kennedy as president be treated as “the end of Protestantism as a national religion and its advent as the distinctive

⁶ On the notion of a “Christian America,” see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). For an earlier study that shows a “Christian America” as a project to be achieved rather than a reality to be preserved, see Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York, 1971). “The Congress: Hunting Time,” *Time*, May 24, 1954, p. 23.

faith of a creative minority.” The acceptance of Catholics as full partners in the nation was in itself a striking step. The Protestant establishment had long been vocally, if not vehemently anti-Catholic. Indeed, the ecumenical movement was intensified in the 1940s and 1950s by fear that Protestant disunity and Catholic unity would lead to a Catholic takeover of the country. This suspicion was rendered credible by the slowness of the Catholic hierarchy to accept the wisdom of the pluralistic attitude toward religion that the ecumenists and their Jewish allies espoused and that was later put in place by Vatican II and by the great American Jesuit politician and theorist John Courtney Murray. At issue for Marty in 1961 was not only the long-awaited acceptance of Catholics into full and equal partnership as Americans. He also explicitly recognized “Jewish and secular” voices as genuinely constituent parts of the diversity of American life.⁷ The notion of a Protestant nation was being renounced, and so too was the notion of a Christian nation, and even of a religious nation.

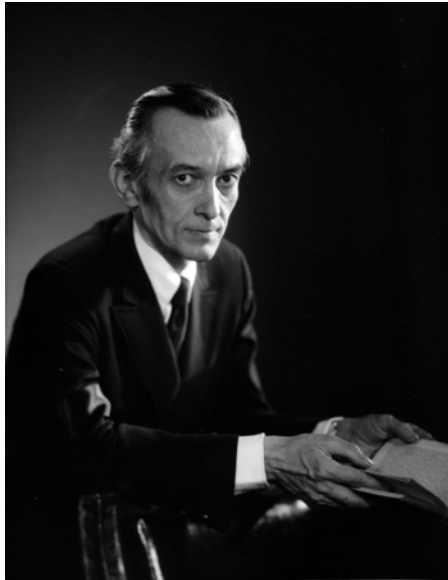
Marty’s outlook was far from that of evangelicals at the time. This point requires underscoring because in later decades evangelicals joined forces ecumenically with many Catholic and Jewish organizations in opposition to abortion, in support of Israel, and in other common causes. In the context of this recent history, the positions taken by evangelical leaders in the 1950s and 1960s are easily lost from view. Even after Kennedy had won over the bulk of the ecumenical leaders with his famous church-state separation speech before several hundred ministers in Houston in September 1960, the NAE expressed alarm that with the election of a Catholic, the United States “will no longer be recognized as a Protestant nation in the eyes of the world.” The NAE did not formally endorse Richard M. Nixon’s presidential candidacy, but there was no doubt where the organization stood. Its national office actually coordinated special election-targeted prayers in evangelical churches throughout the country to be offered on every Sunday prior to the November election. In the meantime one of the most popular Protestant clergymen in the country, the theologically liberal Norman Vincent Peale, registered his distance from the ecumenical leadership by refusing to join them in this crucial step away from the defense of Protestant nationhood and siding instead with evangelicals. For this Peale was vigorously attacked by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and other ecumenical leaders and was never forgiven by them.⁸

Disagreements between ecumenists and evangelicals about the place of Christianity in America paralleled disagreements about the relation of Christianity to human rights globally. While ecumenists were proud of having played a role in advancing a human rights agenda within the United Nations (UN) and had no trouble recognizing that the diversity of the UN’s constituencies made predicating human rights on a narrowly Christian foundation inappropriate, evangelicals castigated the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights because, in the words of the *Christianity Today* editor Carl F. H. Henry in 1957, the declaration “incorporates no references to a supernatural Creator, nor does it anywhere assert that God endows mankind with specific rights” and “duties.”⁹

⁷ Martin Marty, “Protestantism Enters Third Phase,” *Christian Century*, Jan. 18, 1961, p. 74. For a discerning study of the role of John Courtney Murray, see Patrick Allitt, “The Significance of John Courtney Murray,” in *Catholic Polity and American Politics*, ed. Mary Segers (New Haven, 1990), 53–67.

⁸ Shaun Casey, *The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy v. Nixon 1960* (New York, 2009), 184.

⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, “Human Rights in an Age of Tyranny,” *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 1957, pp. 20–22. Cited in William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York, 2008), 86. On the ecumenical presence in the deliberations leading up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, see John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Georgetown, 2004).



The radical Episcopalian layman William Stringfellow near the time he published his searing attack on his fellow white Protestants for their timid approach to racial injustice, *My People Is the Enemy* (1964). Photo by Robert Bachrach. Courtesy Robert Bachrach.

Marty speculated that withdrawal from the traditional idea of a Christian nation and from a picture of the entire human species as virtually Protestant might enable Protestants to find in their new modesty a measure of self-respect based on a confident and accurate understanding of their situation in the world. Marty worried, however, that the “orgies of public scourging and self-examination” had taken “the Protestant principle of self-criticism” to “almost masochistic extremes.”¹⁰ These spasms of self-flagellation were far from over, and they constitute a portentous episode in the history of Protestantism in the United States.

Collective self-criticism soon accelerated, became more strident, and spread across a greater expanse of issues. Two books of 1964 illustrate the intensity and direction of this episode and the centrality to it of the challenge of recognizing and accepting diversity. One is William Stringfellow’s *My People Is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic*. Stringfellow was an Episcopal layman who had spent seven years living amid poverty in Harlem while serving as a lawyer to indigent black people. His book excoriated American churches for not responding more aggressively to the evils of racism and for not accepting black people more fully. “The churches of white society in America have largely forfeited any claim to leadership” in diminishing these evils, Stringfellow complained, while offering page after page of searing testimony of how a truly Christian approach, as he understood it, would engage a color-defined population still not incorporated as fully American. Stringfellow, a close associate of the radical Catholic activist Daniel Berrigan, was a vivid and controversial presence in the 1960s. He attracted the attention of the great German theologian Karl Barth, who declared that Stringfellow was one of the most engaging of the Americans Barth had met during a visit to the United States in 1962.¹¹

¹⁰ Marty, “Protestantism Enters Third Phase,” 74.

¹¹ William Stringfellow, *My People Is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic* (New York, 1964), 133, 87.

The second book, *The Unpopular Missionary*, was written by Ralph E. Dodge, a senior Methodist missionary to Angola and Rhodesia. The book pushed with novel passion and urgency the long-standing complaint of liberal missionary theorists that missions had been too closely connected to colonialism and had tried to impose on indigenous peoples denominational distinctions that made no sense abroad. By failing to turn more control and resources over to the indigenous churches of Africa, India, and other mission fields, Dodge warned, American and European missionary projects were doomed to go the way of colonial governments: out for good, and for the same reasons. Those back home who continued to want the Baptist, Lutheran, and Methodist churches abroad to operate on the same traditional principles that applied in Pennsylvania and Indiana were projecting onto the larger, diverse world their own parochial sectarianism. The basic problem, Dodge explained, was that the missionary project was still too slow and tepid in accepting indigenous peoples as “human beings” and as “full brothers in Jesus Christ” on their own terms—not as copies of Christians in Memphis and Minneapolis. The church “must reject categorically all attitudes and practices of racial superiority.”¹²

Stringfellow’s exploration of domestic American racism and Dodge’s commentary on missionary colonialism sharpened themes in ecumenical Protestant self-critique that were already well established by the early 1960s. Other voices pushed that self-critique in directions that were more novel, that distinguished the ecumenical discourse yet more starkly from evangelical discourse, and that embraced even more omnivorously the diversity of the world beyond white Protestantism. Two additional books of the same historical moment can represent these more radical voices that questioned even the foundations that were left unchallenged by Stringfellow and Dodge.

Honest to God was written in England by the Anglican bishop John A. T. Robinson but gained enormous notoriety in the United States from the moment of its publication in 1963. The book attacked as hopelessly anachronistic the ideas about God and Jesus that were common among Christians, mocking the supernaturalism that “suggests that Jesus was really God almighty walking about on earth, dressed up as a man . . . taking part in a charade.” Although much of Robinson’s message was already incorporated into the discourse of liberal seminaries as a result of the calls for “demythologized” and “religionless” Christianity made somewhat cryptically by the German theologians Rudolph Bultman and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his breakaway best seller popularized as never before the strivings of a theological elite to update Christian teachings in relation to contemporary culture and modern notions of cognitive plausibility. For a prominent cleric to characterize as downright dishonest the sincere god talk to which the average churchgoer was accustomed served to expose as never before the gap between the people in the pew, on the one hand, and the increasingly cosmopolitan church leadership on the other.¹³

Robinson and his champions were quick to insist that the Christian faith was just as true as it ever was, once properly understood. Still, many of Robinson’s colleagues condemned the book as dangerously misleading because of its sensational vocabulary.

¹² Ralph E. Dodge, *The Unpopular Missionary* (Westwood, 1964), 30, 164. Emphasis in original. For another example of the struggle of ecumenical Protestants at this historical moment to reconfigure their missionary project, see Ronald K. Orchard, ed., *Witness in Six Continents: Records of the Meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches Held in Mexico City, December 8th to 19th, 1963* (Edinburgh, 1964).

¹³ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London, 1963), 66. For a selection of the earliest of critical responses to this book, see David L. Edwards, ed., *The Honest to God Debate: Some Reactions to the Book “Honest to God,” with a New Chapter by Its Author, John A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich* (Louisville, 1963).

This debate was ostensibly intramural to believers, but it undoubtedly diminished the credibility of the specific beliefs that Robinson attacked (for example, the notion of a God “out there”) more than it enhanced the credibility of the beliefs he defended (for example, God is our “ground of being”).¹⁴ Taking to a new extreme a classical impulse in ecumenical Protestantism to engage the world rather than to withdraw from it, Robinson dramatically legitimized the diverse world of contemporary culture as an arena for sympathetic engagement, no longer a domain to be held at a biblically warranted distance. Indeed, prior to writing *Honest to God*, Robinson was best known for having testified in court against the sexually repressive censorship of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928). Robinson made the generic ideal of honesty, rather than any specifically Christian doctrine, the touchstone for his testimony, and he blurred the line between what most people thought Christianity was and the rest of modern life.

A young Baptist minister, Harvey Cox, who was then at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary but would soon join the Harvard University Divinity School, blurred this line more purposively in 1965 in *The Secular City*. Cox’s manifesto proposed a politically engaged religion organized around human responsibility for the destiny of a world that many Christians wrongly assumed to be in God’s hands. The book soon sold more than one million copies. Cox celebrated “secularization” as a liberation from “all supernatural myths and sacred symbols.” While insisting that God was no less present throughout secular domains than within what traditionalists called “religion,” Cox concluded iconoclastically that the very name of God was so misleading that it might be well to stop mentioning God until our worldly experience gives us a new vocabulary. “Like Moses,” he wrote in the book’s concluding sentence, let us be “confident that we will be granted a new name by events of the future,” but for now “we must simply take up the work of liberating the captives.”¹⁵

Central to Cox’s contrast of religion and the new secular field for spiritual strivings was the inability of the provincial Christian to deal with the wider world that the theologians had come to master, and which they had an obligation to explain to the faithful. “Secularization” took place “only when the cosmopolitan confrontations of city living exposed the relativity of the myths and traditions” once thought to be “unquestionable.” Convinced of the virtues of “heterogeneity” and “the color and character lent by diversity,” Cox pressed the case for “pluralism and tolerance” throughout the world, but especially in the United States, where the recent “emancipation of Catholics, Jews, and others” from “an enforced Protestant cultural religion” bode well for further diversification. Cox himself soon gravitated toward “liberation theology” while countless symposia on *The Secular City* wondered just where else this book’s line of analysis might lead.¹⁶

Might it lead outside the faith, to a post-Protestant or post-Christian orientation, influenced by the Protestant tradition but defined by elements of the secular world? Ecumenical

¹⁴ The notion that God was a “ground of being” had been popularized by the liberal émigré theologian Paul Tillich and was a flash point in the Protestant disputation during the midcentury decades. See Paul Tillich, *Shaking the Foundations* (London, 1949).

¹⁵ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York, 1965), 2, 268.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1–3, 85, 99. For a compendium of the symposia and individual reviews published within a year of the book’s appearance, see Daniel Callahan, ed., *The Secular City Debate* (New York, 1966). It is a mark of how far *The Secular City* took Cox from the theological tradition out of which he came that his work, one of the most widely circulated and extensively debated books ever written by a seminary professor, does not even find a marginal place in Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950–2005* (Louisville, 2006).

leaders had been railing against secularism throughout the 1940s and 1950s, advancing a more genuinely ecumenical Christianity as the only viable alternative to an increasingly secular world. Cox created such a stir because he broke so decisively and bluntly with this deeply entrenched practice. Moreover, *The Secular City* appeared in 1965, right in the middle of the civil rights era, when vehicles other than the church presented themselves as more rapid and maneuverable means of advancing causes to which the ecumenical leadership was committed. In that same year the Mississippi Catholic writer Walker Percy lamented that it was not the Christian who most often did what needed to be done from the white side of the color line; this contribution was instead made most conspicuously by “the liberal humanist.” The people who actually “taught the ignorant, fed the hungry,” and “went to jail with the imprisoned,” observed Percy, were “more likely than not” to be “Sarah Lawrence sociology majors, agnostic Jewish social workers like Mickey Schwerner, campus existentialists” and others sent from “the Berkeley-Cambridge axis.”¹⁷

To be sure, the National Council of Churches had been among the sponsors of Freedom Summer in 1964, and there had been a small but steady stream of northern liberal clerics and laypersons in Martin Luther King Jr.’s demonstrations. Percy underestimated the role of ecumenical Protestants in the civil rights movement. But in the mid-1960s if one were looking for ways to “liberate the captives,” as Cox had called on Christians to do, and if one was now authorized to apply oneself to this task without any god talk, one could quickly find secular organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that were trying to do just that. The secular liberators of the Berkeley-Cambridge axis were not encumbered, moreover, as were the National Council of Churches and its denominational affiliates, by a reluctant rank and file who paid the bills and who sometimes listened to the complaints of increasingly vocal evangelicals to the effect that the ecumenical elite was selling out true religion for social activism.

The expanding gap between the leadership and the churchgoing laity of the mainstream denominations demands closer attention here because this gap, as it widened during the crisis of the 1960s, became the demographic and doctrinal matrix for two closely connected developments that reshaped American politics and culture from the 1960s through the 1990s: (1) the rise to political prominence of conservative-leaning evangelical Protestantism and (2) the loss by the old Protestant establishment to secular enterprises of some of the energies that had made it a formidable presence in American life. The center could not hold. That it could hold was a complacent assumption of ecumenical leaders that rendered them more comfortable with rigorous self-interrogation yet slow to see what now seem, in the perspective of history, to be the risks to their institutional standing this self-interrogation entailed.¹⁸

¹⁷ Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York, 1999), 329–30.

¹⁸ For an influential discussion of the gap between leadership and the churchgoing laity that emphasizes educational differences, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, 1988), 161–64. Although *The Restructuring of American Religion* is most often cited for its argument that denominational loyalties were largely replaced during the 1970s and 1980s by less organizationally specific loyalties to liberalism and conservatism, an underappreciated theme is Robert Wuthnow’s emphasis on the function of higher education in moving Americans toward theological and political liberalism. A revealing example of the complacent, triumphalist perspective of ecumenical Protestant leadership in the 1940s and 1950s is Henry P. Van Dusen, *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York, 1947). The president of Union Theological Seminary, Henry P. Van Dusen was a sufficiently major figure in the United States to be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on April 17, 1954, but his eclipse from history is now so complete that he does not even rate an entry in Wikipedia.

The gap was defined by the leadership's increasing engagement with national and international issues that were of less interest to rank-and-file churchgoers whose concerns were centered on their own congregations. The classic local-cosmopolitan tension between pulpit and pew, between seminary and congregation, had long been a standard feature of Protestant life. This tension had been displayed in the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s and in the foreign missions debates of the 1930s when liberals advocated social service in place of the older goal of religious conversion.¹⁹ By 1940, however, several generations of missionary activity had populated the governing boards of many denominations and of many interdenominational service organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) with internationally conscious men and women convinced that denominational distinctions were being rendered increasingly anachronistic by cross-cultural contact. Meeting the challenge of a culturally diverse world demanded greater unity and a focus on essentials. Hence an energetic but decidedly top-down movement pushed not only for greater cooperation between denominations at home but for a world organization that would unite American Protestants with those of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The establishment of a World Council of Churches, originally planned for the late 1930s, was delayed by World War II; but in 1948 the world council became a reality. It was dominated by Americans who then campaigned earnestly through publications, sermons, and study conferences to educate their own constituencies on the need to supplement a local perspective with a global one.

In the meantime, American entry into World War II generated a new and concentrated effort to outline what church leaders described as a Christian basis for a just, equitable, and peaceful future for the United States and the entire world. Inspired by the magnitude of transformations attendant upon World War II, including decolonization abroad and the domestic exposure of the contradiction between racial discrimination and war aims, the heirs of the Social Gospel agreed on a program of political action that focused on the United Nations and on the diminution of racial and economic inequalities within the United States.

This ambitious program was developed and adopted by "study conferences" of several hundred church leaders convened by the Federal Council of Churches in 1942 and 1945 with the support of nearly every prominent figure in the Protestant establishment of that era, including John Foster Dulles who was the chief mover behind both of these conclaves. Many of these leaders were, like the majority of churchgoers, Republicans. But the resolutions of these wartime conferences were substantially to the left of the standard Republican outlook of that period and even further to the left of the Jim Crow-sustaining bulwark of the Democrats. These resolutions called for the self-government of all colonized peoples, insisted that the United States could not play a productive role abroad until racial discrimination was ended within American borders, advocated experimentation with noncapitalist forms of economic organization, envisaged some form of "world government" as the only viable antidote to the evils of nationalism, and endorsed the

¹⁹ In many Protestant councils the debates over missions were more important than the disputes over evolution that have captured the interest of most historians who address the religious conflicts of the interwar decades. See William R. Hutchison, *Errand into the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago, 1987).

basic principles that President Franklin D. Roosevelt enunciated as an “economic bill of rights” during his 1944 State of the Union message.²⁰

These assembled bishops, seminary presidents, church officials, and famous preachers did not agree on everything. Some of them, most conspicuously Dulles, soon pulled away from the political orientation that was put in place at these 1940s conclaves. But the Federal Council of Churches and the officials of its affiliated denominational bodies, along with *Christian Century* (the house organ of the Protestant establishment), entered the postwar world publically committed to causes that were understood in contemporary American politics as liberal, if not radical. *Time* characterized the resolutions of the assembled church leaders at the 1942 conference as “sensational” in their degree of radicalism.²¹

Acting on the momentum of the two wartime conclaves, the FCC in 1946 officially declared racial segregation to be “a violation of the Gospel of love and human brotherhood,” and called on its affiliates to work toward “a non-segregated society” as well as “a non-segregated church.” In that same year the national YWCA implemented the desegregation of its local chapters. Those steps, while properly seen by historians as landmarks in the movement of churches toward a more actively antiracist posture that would be achieved by civil rights organizers in the coming years, did virtually nothing to integrate local congregations.²² Individual black clergy, including Benjamin E. Mays, Howard Thurman, and Channing H. Tobias became increasingly prominent in the national ecumenical leadership, but blacks were almost nonexistent in local mainstream churches throughout the United States.

Hence it would be a mistake to exaggerate what these ecumenical Protestants actually accomplished in diminishing white racism. Yet it would also be a mistake to ignore what they did. In the 1940s even modest gestures distinguished the FCC from most other groups of empowered white Americans. The huge study conferences of 1942 and 1945 were held in integrated Ohio cities only after council officials had tried and failed to get assurances from hotel owner associations in Detroit and other cities that their black delegates would not be obliged to stay in segregated hotels. Very few national organizations remotely similar in size to the FCC were then refusing to convene in cities where their black participants would be humiliated. This step was not taken at the Organization of American Historians—then known as the Mississippi Valley Historical Association—until 1951, when Merle Curti refused to deliver his presidential address at the 1952 annual meeting unless that meeting was moved out of New Orleans.²³

Moreover, the leadership of ecumenical Protestantism was sufficiently linked with civil rights advocacy to lead President Harry S. Truman to appoint one of its most vocal

²⁰ Among the other participants or supporters of study conferences were Reinhold Niebuhr, Harry Emerson Fosdick, A. J. Muste, John R. Mott, Van Dusen, G. Bromley Oxnam, Georgia Harkness, Kenneth Scott Latourette, and Harvey S. Firestone. For a detailed account of the conferences and their resolutions, see David A. Hollinger, “The Realist-Pacifist Summit Meeting of March 1942 and the Political Reorientation of Ecumenical Protestantism in the United States,” *Church History*, 79 (Sept. 2010), 654–77.

²¹ “American Malvern,” *Time*, March 16, 1942, pp. 44–45.

²² On the 1946 Federal Council of Churches pronouncement and its significance, see David W. Willis, “An Enduring Distance: Black Americans and the Establishment,” in *Between the Times*, ed. Hutchison, 172. On the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), see Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906–1946* (Urbana, 2009).

²³ Richard S. Kirkendall, “From the MVHA to the OAH, 1951–1981,” in *The Organization of American Historians: The Writing and Teaching of American History*, ed. Richard S. Kirkendall (New York, 2011), 33.

activists, Dorothy Tilly, to the commission that produced *To Secure These Rights* in 1948. Tilly was then serving as chair of the Women's Division of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church. She was one of only two women appointed to this presidential commission. In addition, some affiliated groups did engage in direct action. The ecumenically saturated Fellowship of Reconciliation joined with the Congress of Racial Equality in 1947 to place interracial groups of travelers on Greyhound and Trailways buses in the Atlantic South. This "Journey of Reconciliation" prefigured the freedom rides of 1961 and, in the words of the historian Joseph Kip Kosek, "marked a watershed in the development of a sophisticated form of Christian non-violence deployed on behalf of racial equality."²⁴

The integrationist agenda of the Protestant establishment in the 1940s was more talk than action, but some of the talk approached eloquence. Especially important in this respect were the essays and editorials in *Christian Century*, which was the most prominent national magazine to protest against the internment of Japanese Americans as a racist violation of American constitutional principles. Further, there issued from the Methodist and Congregationalist seminaries of the period a series of forceful, analytically ambitious antiracist treatises. Among these were Edmund D. Soper's *Racism: A World Issue* and Buell G. Gallagher's *Color and Conscience: The Irrepressible Conflict*, two of the most searching and extensively developed critiques of racism written by any institutionally prominent white American at any time prior to the 1960s. Gallagher was the chief organizer of an interracial church in Berkeley, California, and was an unsuccessful candidate for Congress in 1948. He came within one percentage point of winning and probably would have entered Congress had he not allowed the Progressive party presidential candidate Henry Wallace to speak at a rally in his support. Gallagher, anticipating a style later practiced more sharply by William Stringfellow, castigated his fellow churchmen for failing to develop measures to combat Jim Crow remotely as forceful as those implemented by the Communist party.²⁵

Gallagher's respectful reference to the communists can remind us that the ecumenists whose story I am telling in this essay were far from alone in engaging diversity and trying to diminish group-specific inequality. Prominent among the other agents of change were three that are extensively studied: the organized pursuit of civil rights by church-centered African Americans, the propagation of cultural relativism by social-scientific intellectuals, and the egalitarianism of the most radical of the labor unions, including those with strong Communist party leadership. Many of the relevant movements were decidedly secular in orientation and had a heavily Jewish demographic base. The significance of these well-recognized movements need not be diminished to register the role of ecumenical Protestantism. I am less concerned about measuring the relative influence of these movements than explaining the role that diversity issues played in American Protestantism and

²⁴ On Dorothy Tilly's career, see Andrew M. Manis, "'City Mothers': Dorothy Tilly, the Georgia Methodist Women, and Black Civil Rights," in *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Tuscaloosa, 2004), 116–43. The standard account of "the journey of reconciliation" is Raymond Arsenault, "'You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow': CORE and the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation," in *Before Brown*, ed. Feldman, 21–67. Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York, 2009), 204.

²⁵ On the movement to defend Japanese Americans against incarceration, see Robert Shafer, "Cracks in the Consensus: Defending the Rights of Japanese Americans during World War II," *Radical History Review*, 72 (Fall 1998), 84–120. Edmund D. Soper, *Racism: A World Issue* (New York, 1947); Buell G. Gallagher, *Color and Conscience: The Irrepressible Conflict* (New York, 1946), 188.

showing how the ecumenical leadership's willingness to take chances on these issues with its constituency created space for the eventual triumph of the religious Right in the public affairs of the United States.

Hence it is crucial to understand that the various initiatives of the ecumenists I have mentioned—all of which seem so mild from today's perspective—carried the ecumenical leadership quite far out in front of the average Methodist or Presbyterian. Just how far did not become evident until the 1960s, when social-scientific surveys as well as daily experience in the denominational trenches concerning civil rights, feminism, sex, and the Vietnam War made the gap impossible to miss. The crisis of the 1960s was more severe because church leaders did not see it coming. They underestimated the width and depth of the gap between themselves and their constituents.²⁶

Two conditions of the 1940s and 1950s had obscured the gap. One condition was the sheer increase in members. New sanctuaries and "Christian education" units were financed and built in suburbs all over the country. Churches of all kinds were popular community institutions among the parents of baby boomers, especially in an atmosphere when religion was widely praised in contrast to "godless communism." Whatever reservations the expanding population of the faithful had about the policies advanced by their preachers and administrators, these policies did not prevent the mainstream churches from flourishing. Yet the membership boom was deceptive. It did not quite keep up with the growth rate of the national population. It proved to be an anomaly in the long-term decline, visible in the 1920s and 1930s, of the relative place of mainstream churches in American society as whole. All religious organizations grew in the twenty years after World War II. The ecumenists failed to place their own prosperity in proper demographic perspective.

A second condition fostering complacency was the Protestant establishment's high standing in Washington, D.C., and in the national media. This status followed, in large part, from the strong class position of the segment of society found in the mainstream churches. Harry Emerson Fosdick's "National Radio Pulpit" dominated Sunday morning broadcasting because the Federal Communications Commission deferred to the Federal Council of Churches and later the National Council of Churches. *Time* and other national magazines paid close attention to officials of the Federal Council of Churches, and after 1950 to that organization's enlarged successor, the National Council of Churches. Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower showered ecumenical leaders with respect. Reinhold Niebuhr enjoyed close relations with the State Department during the decade following the end of World War II. The patriarch of Protestant missions and of the YMCA, John R. Mott, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. Ecumenical leaders were thrilled with their apparent impact on the formation of the United Nations. At the San Francisco organizing conference of 1945 they managed to get accepted four of the nine amendments they offered to the United Nations charter, including a historic one calling for a declaration of human rights.²⁷ "How much do we have to worry if the people

²⁶ On the radically different ideas about God, the Bible, the mission of churches, the role of the clergy, and race among the clergy and the laity in mainstream denominations, see Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches: A Sociologist Looks at the Widening Gap between Clergy and Laymen* (New York, 1969).

²⁷ A judicious assessment of the slowness of the ecumenical leadership to appreciate their actual circumstances and to develop more coherent positions on church-state relations and other issues of the 1940s and 1950s is William McGuire King, "The Reform Establishment and the Ambiguities of Influence," in *Between the Times*, ed. Hutchison, 122–40. On the interaction between Protestant leaders and government officials, see Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960*. On the ecumenical Protestant impact on the United Nations, see Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations*.

in the pew are a bit slow to catch up with us,” ecumenical leaders had some reason to say to themselves, “when all these signs of our success are visible?”

Yet from the late 1940s onward the Protestant establishment was subject to increasingly pointed and well-organized attacks from the political Right—especially from evangelicals. By the time the civil rights movement, feminism, the sexual revolution, and the crisis over the Vietnam War forced ecumenical leaders to confront the magnitude of the gap between them and their rank-and-file laity, evangelicals had created a formidable set of rival institutions and public postures that undercut the claims of the ecumenists to speak for American Protestantism and provided religious cover for Protestants who were unmoved by the call of religious liberals for greater attention to social justice. The 1947 and 1954 campaigns of the National Association of Evangelicals to put Jesus of Nazareth in the Constitution of the United States and that organization’s 1960 opposition to the very idea of a Catholic president were only small parts of this extensive evangelical mobilization. Evangelicals were not, contrary to a popular impression, politically quiescent until galvanized into political action by the legalization of abortion in 1973 by *Roe v. Wade*.²⁸

Evangelicals mobilized against the United Nations and were hostile toward ecumenicals for their support of the organization. When Congress was considering a 1947 resolution to strengthen the United Nations, the NAE demanded instead that Congress resolve to “support and strengthen missionary endeavors throughout the world.” A vibrant world Christianity, not compromise and accommodation with diversity, was the answer to the globe’s problems. Carl McIntire, a New Jersey radio preacher with a large national following, declared the National Council of Churches to be “an ally of Russia.” In 1953 McIntire distributed a pamphlet entitled *Bishop Oxnham, Prophet of Marx*, aimed at G. Bromley Oxnham, the president of both the National Council of Churches and of the World Council of Churches. As a result of such accusations, Oxnham testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee to defend himself against charges of having communist sympathies. Just prior to Oxnham’s hearing, the NAE, despite its ambivalence toward McIntire’s florid and demagogic style, passed a resolution supporting government investigations into the loyalty of church officials.²⁹

Even within the denominational bodies identified with ecumenical outlooks, programs of egalitarian outreach were subject to severe attacks. The Methodist Federation for Social Action, a national body led by Bishop Francis J. McConnell and Dean Walter J. Muelder of Boston University School of Theology was condemned in a widely circulated 1951 pamphlet, *Is There a Pink Fringe in the Methodist Church?*, produced by the Texas-based Committee for the Preservation of Methodism. The tract described the social action organization as claiming to be Christian but actually serving as “a propaganda vehicle for

²⁸ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S.113 (1973).

²⁹ Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960*, 57. On the condemnation of the Federal Council of Churches by the National Association of Evangelicals, see Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 19. On Oxnham’s difficulties with Carl McIntire and other evangelicals, see, for example, Mark Silk, “The Rise of the ‘New Evangelicalism’: Shock and Adjustment,” in *Between the Times*, ed. Hutchison, 280. On Oxnham’s difficulties with McIntire and on Oxnham’s willingness to support what he saw as more judicious and well-targeted anticommunist investigations, see Robert Moats Miller, *Bishop G. Bromley Oxnham: Paladin of Liberal Protestantism* (Nashville, 1990), 528–34. For a detailed account of Oxnham’s appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, see Ralph Lord Roy, *Communism and the Churches* (New York, 1960), 254–59. For a convincing defense of the claim that McIntire was a much more central figure in the political mobilization of evangelical Protestants than some historians have been willing to grant, see Markku Ruotsila, “Carl McIntire and the Anti-Communist Origins of the Religious Right,” paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Boston, Jan. 2011 (in David A. Hollinger’s possession).

spreading socialistic and communist ideas.” The pamphlet authors offered as evidence for this charge a list that showed the range of their complaints and of the centrality of diversity issues to those complaints. The allegedly nefarious activities of the social action Methodists included calls for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and for the diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China, a resolution asking for “a stronger Civil Rights section of the Department of Justice,” a statement favoring an end to “economic, political, and military support of colonial regimes,” and a declaration of commitment to “social-economic planning to develop a society without class or group discriminations and privileges.” The pamphlet listed dozens of Federation leaders by name and by local affiliation, including several bishops and prominent professors of theology.³⁰

Among the Presbyterians, the most prominent target was the Princeton Theological Seminary president John A. Mackay, perhaps the most influential Presbyterian in the world besides John Foster Dulles.³¹ Mackay’s early 1950s advocacy of the diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China considerably fattened his file as kept by the House Un-American Activities Committee, a copy of which was secretly passed to the fundamentalist firebrand L. Nelson Bell, who was eager for ammunition to use against Mackay.

Bell and his son-in-law Billy Graham were major forces behind the 1956 launching of *Christianity Today*, the magazine designed to counter *Christian Century*. The new magazine was financed by the Sun Oil Company magnate J. Howard Pew after the National Council of Churches repeatedly refused his demands that it repudiate its liberal political positions. *Christianity Today*’s founding editor, Carl F. H. Henry, proved to be a relentless scourge of the ecumenists. In 1959 he attributed “Communist affiliations” to 105 of the 237 clergy recently assembled by the National Council of Churches to address foreign policy issues. J. Edgar Hoover’s warnings about communist subversion appeared regularly in *Christianity Today*.³²

Bell was also representative of the large segment of white southern Protestantism that was ambivalent, if not hostile, toward the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Immediately after the decision, Bell publicly alluded to “those barriers of race which have been established by God” and declared his sympathy for individuals whom he described as among the finest Christians in the world who believed that it is “unchristian” to force these barriers away. To be sure, Bell and Graham fought against the most entrenched segregationists of their milieu. Graham insisted that his own rallies be racially integrated. But the voices of Bell and Graham, like those of so many other evangelicals, routinely condemned racism only in its capacity as an individual sin, not in any capacity as a civic evil to be overcome by the actions of governmental authority. Even as late as 1963 Graham himself refused to support Martin

³⁰ Committee for the Preservation of Methodism, *Is There a Pink Fringe in the Methodist Church?* (Houston, 1951), esp. unpaginated preface, pp. 4–7. This pamphlet apparently took its title from Stanley High, “Methodism’s Pink Fringe,” *Reader’s Digest*, 56 (Feb. 1950), 134–38.

³¹ On the evangelical Right’s assaults on John A. Mackay, see James H. Smylie, “Mackay and McCarthyism, 1953–1954,” *Journal of Church and State*, 6 (Aug. 1964), 352–65.

³² Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, 74, 82–83, 98; J. Edgar Hoover, “The Communist Menace: Red Goals and Christian Ideals,” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 10, 1960, pp. 3–5; J. Edgar Hoover, “Communist Propaganda and the Christian Pulpit,” *ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1960, p. 5; J. Edgar Hoover, “Soviet Rule or Christian Renewal?,” *ibid.*, Nov. 7, 1960, pp. 9–11.

Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington and declared civil rights demonstrations to be counterproductive.³³

The *Christian Century* returned the hostile favors of *Christianity Today*. The pages of both magazines display the mutual annoyance that marked this often-bitter rivalry between the two major Protestant parties. A widely noted and emblematic episode in this ecumenical-evangelical quarrel was the refusal of Reinhold Niebuhr to even meet with Billy Graham at the time of Graham's enormously successful crusade in New York City in 1957. Niebuhr accused Graham of holding "obscurantist" views of religious doctrine and of playing to the most childlike emotions of the faithful. In the pages of *Life* magazine he wrote of Graham's pathetic narrowness of view: Graham cannot speak to anyone "who is aware of the continuing possibilities of good and evil in every advance of civilization, every discipline of culture, and every religious convention." While some ecumenical leaders counseled accommodation and tact, many others, such as Niebuhr and his Union Theological Seminary colleague John C. Bennett, were certain that Graham and his kind were beneath them, and they were not afraid to say so. Evangelicals did not appreciate being treated as ignorant country bumpkins by elite ecumenists.³⁴

Yet the frequency and intensity of evangelical attacks on ecumenists for their liberal activism led the National Council of Churches to hold back. The most thorough historian of the civil rights activities of the council, James F. Findlay Jr., concludes that its leaders were intimidated throughout the 1950s and very early 1960s by these attacks. Only in 1963, the year *Christian Century* published King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," did ecumenical leaders return to the level of antiracist engagement displayed in the 1940s.³⁵

But 1963 proved to be late in the day. Shortly after the ecumenical leadership renewed and intensified its antiracist program, national conflicts over civil rights, feminism, sex, and the Vietnam War produced the crisis that ended the Protestant establishment, diminished the authority of all of its constituent denominational bodies, and paved the way for the triumph of the evangelicals. These escalating conflicts not only exposed the gap between the cosmopolitan leadership and the provincial churchgoers but also created a new challenge. While these church leaders were trying to bring the people in the pews up to speed, they were rapidly being left behind by the highly articulate minority who gravitated toward the Berkeley-Cambridge axis because they found churches too moderate and clunky in the task of "liberating the captives." The Protestant establishment was not going far enough.

³³ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). L. Nelson Bell, "Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced," *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, Aug. 17, 1955, p. 4. See also Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Southern White Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Phylon*, 40 (Jan.-April 1979), 334-41. On the asymmetry of Billy Graham's call to end prejudice and his slowness to support the dismantling of Jim Crow, see Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, 2009), 44. For an ambitious scholarly study of Graham that takes a more generous view, see Grant Wacker, "Billy Graham's America," *Church History*, 78 (Sept. 2009), 489-511.

³⁴ For an overview of the rivalry between *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century*, see Mark Toulouse, "Christianity Today and American Public Life: A Case Study," *Journal of Church and State*, 35 (Spring 1993), 241-84; and Mark Toulouse, "The *Christian Century* and American Public Life: The Crucial Years, 1956-1968," in *New Dimensions in American Religious History*, ed. Jay P. Dolan and James P. Wind (Grand Rapids, 1993), 44-82. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Differing Views on Billy Graham: A Theologian Says Evangelist Is Simplifying Views on Life," *Life*, July 1, 1957, p. 92. On the reaction of the ecumenical leadership to Graham, see Silk, "The Rise of the 'New Evangelicalism.'"

³⁵ James F. Findlay Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York, 1993), esp. 28; Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," *Christian Century*, June 12, 1963, pp. 769-75.

But for some Protestants, the establishment was going too far. Those white Protestants who were less concerned about liberating the captives were able to find religious sanction in the increased credibility of evangelical claims to speak for American Christianity. Two decades of concerted effort by increasingly media-savvy evangelicals had placed before the public a face of Christianity that was very different from that displayed by the National Council of Churches and *Christian Century*. In addition to establishing the National Association of Evangelicals and *Christianity Today*, the evangelicals created Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and developed an extensive network of radio and television ministries.³⁶ Upwardly mobile Seventh-day Adventist and Church of the Nazarene congregants who had joined the more respectable Methodists and Presbyterians a generation earlier now had better reason to stay put; they now saw the churches of their nativity recognized as real on television and radio and in national politics. And one could now be comfortably and confidently Christian without taking on the social obligations that ecumenical leaders insisted were incumbent on any authentic Christian witness in the circumstances of the times.

Since the mid-1960s all of the mainline denominations have experienced a precipitous drop in membership numbers. Part of this decline followed from the diminished migration from denominational fellowships with lower social standing, which for many decades had been a source of membership strength for the mainline churches. Even so, the decline was much too rapid and extensive to be explained by the drying of this membership source. The Methodists, having reached an all-time high of 11.1 million members in 1964, were down 9 percent eleven years later, and by the early twenty-first century the Methodist numbers were down 28 percent. Episcopalian membership peaked at 2.3 million in 1967 and only eight years later had declined by nearly 9 percent. The United Presbyterians declined by 19 percent between 1965 (their peak year, at 3.3 million) and a decade later.³⁷ These denominations had grown between 1945 and the mid-1960s, but after 1965 they actually lost members in absolute numbers.

Why a decline of this scale at this time? Not because masses of believers switched from the liberal churches to the conservative ones, although some people did just that. The migration to evangelical churches was not large and was actually smaller than the modest migration to Roman Catholicism. Nor can the decline of ecumenical numbers and the rise of evangelical numbers be attributed to the latter's outsider status and the former's close association with established American institutions, as has been repeatedly suggested. In fact, the ecumenists prospered most when they were closely linked with other major American institutions during the 1950s, and they lost numbers when their leaders took positions that distanced them from popular understandings of "the American way of life." Evangelicals gained members and public standing exactly as their espousal of such patriotism distinguished them more and more sharply from the ecumenists. Billy Graham—not the seminarians at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, and Yale Divinity School—was a regular at the White House

³⁶ On evangelical organizing in Southern California, see Daren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2011). Daren Dochuk provides vivid examples of the deep enmity with which some of the most energetic and influential evangelical preachers regarded ecumenical liberals and calls attention to the formidable link between the evangelical movement of Southern California and that of the states of the old Confederacy that produced so many westward migrants.

³⁷ Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, 1994), 2.

from the presidency of Richard M. Nixon through that of George W. Bush. By the 1980s it was the evangelicals rather than the ecumenists who so dominated the public space of the Air Force Academy as to generate litigation by nonevangelicals complaining of religious oppression. The part of the national order toward which the evangelicals can be properly called the most “oppositional” was the secular, heavily Jewish academic and literary intelligentsia that included voices sharply critical of what evangelicals saw as the traditional American way of life. Indeed, the ecumenists’ accommodation with modern philosophy, science, and art was something the evangelicals held against ecumenists.³⁸

What then, does explain the sudden and sharp decline in membership in the old mainstream churches? The central factor was the decision of the children of members not to become members themselves. Some of these young people adopted other religious affiliations, but the great majority of the departing youth did not affiliate religiously at all and in turn raised secular children who, like their 1960s-influenced parents, did not join any churches. The exodus of young people from the mainstream churches was the most massive in the early 1970s. This exodus did not persist at quite the same rate during the 1980s and after, but the significance of the nonretention of ecumenical children was heightened by another, more enduring condition: a differential birth rate. During the baby boom Presbyterian women produced only an average of 1.6 children, while evangelical women produced an average of 2.4—more even than Catholic women delivered during the same period. Women who were not members of any church produced even fewer children than the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and United Church of Christ women. Educational level was the strongest predictor of fertility. Some evangelical women were as well educated as their ecumenical and secular counterparts, but most were not. Ecumenical women bore fewer children and their churches contained fewer and fewer women of childbearing age. In 1957 only 36 percent of Lutherans were over the age of 50, yet by 1983 this figure had gone up to 45 percent. During those same twenty-six years, the percentage of Methodists over the age of 50 increased from 40 percent to 49 percent, and the percentage of Episcopalians over the age of 50 increased from 36 to 46. The evangelical triumph in the numbers game from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century was mostly a matter of birthrates coupled with the greater success of the more tightly boundaried, predominantly southern, evangelical communities in acculturating their children into ancestral religious practices. Evangelicals had more children and kept them.³⁹

This demographic dynamic had obvious cultural foundations. The rapidity and extent to which ecumenical women took advantage of birth control technologies is consistent

³⁸ On the decline of ecumenical numbers and the rise of evangelical numbers, see Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York, 1972); and Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, 1987), 20. Ray Suarez, *The Holy Vote: The Politics of Faith in America* (New York, 2006), 74–90. On the importance of Jews in the de-Christianization of the public life of the United States, see David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton, 1996); and David A. Hollinger, “Communitarian and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era,” *American Jewish History*, 95 (March 2009), 1–32.

³⁹ Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, 7; C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, “Growth and Decline in the Mainline,” in *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, and New Directions*, ed. Charles Lippy (Westport, 2006), 5; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, 73. Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 152, 161; Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative of Religious Change in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (Sept. 2001), 468–500.

with their greater recognition of a role for sex beyond procreation, just as the propensity of ecumenical youth to leave the church was facilitated by their greater exposure to a diverse world and by the greater encouragement their elders gave them to explore it. Had the ecumenists been as conservative, they might have produced more children and had more success in keeping them in the religious fold. They might even have won more converts from the evangelical churches that provided a secure shelter for Protestants who were dubious about diversity-accepting, captive-liberating projects. The heavily evangelical population that Robert Wuthnow calls “exclusivist Christians” feels threatened, Wuthnow writes, by “Christian groups that appear to have lost their moral compass and become too eager to embrace diversity.” The threat is often “cast in terms of homosexuality, promiscuous lifestyles, or relativistic values,” any of which “may be loosely associated in people’s minds with diversity.” The standard response to this threat is to go “back to basics,” which means “studying the Bible, returning to the supposed teachings of the early Christians or the Christian values of the nation’s founders,” and “finding security in the Ten Commandments.”⁴⁰

The political coordinates of the ecumenical-evangelical divide must be underscored in the context of the recent movement of several prominent evangelicals in more “progressive” directions on some economic and environmental issues. This highly publicized shift within evangelical Protestantism remains contested and is indeed a very recent phenomenon. During the pivotal 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—and even after—the liberal-conservative political divide mapped quite easily onto the ecumenical-evangelical divide. Rank-and-file evangelicals were less extreme than the leaders of their institutions, just as rank-and-file ecumenists were less extreme than the leaders of theirs. The two great parties within American Protestantism were never monolithic, and they are not now; it will not do to suppose that everyone on one side or the other thinks and behaves identically. The overall pattern is clear, however. One sociological study after another has established substantial differences in outlook between the mass constituencies of the two rival leadership groups. Relative to evangelicals, ecumenicals have been more accepting of religious pluralism, more comfortable with church-state separation, more sympathetic to antiracist legislation and judicial rulings, more skeptical of American foreign policy, more supportive of abortion rights, more favorable toward the equal rights amendment, more concerned with civil liberties issues, more tolerant of nonmarital cohabitation, and more accepting of same-sex relationships.⁴¹

One major quarrel about same-sex relationships is a poignant illustration of the dynamics of the ecumenists’ fateful crisis. This quarrel, involving the Methodist youth magazine *motive* can also remind us that membership statistics tell only part of the story: relevant,

⁴⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, 2005), 184.

⁴¹ An important progressive voice within the evangelical leadership was Richard Cizik, chief lobbyist for the National Association of Evangelicals, who was forced to resign in 2009 after he spoke too approvingly of same-sex relationships and President Barack Obama. For an account of this event written from within evangelical circles, with quotations from Richard Land, Charles Colson, and other evangelical leaders, see Sarah Pulliam, “Richard Cizik Resigns from the National Association of Evangelicals,” *Christianity Today*, Dec. 12, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/decemberweb-only/150-42.0.html>. On ecumenicals’ tolerance relative to evangelicals, see, for example, Lynn D. Nelson, “Disaffiliation, Desacralization, and Political Values,” in *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, 1988), 122–39; Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 186–228; and Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, 2010), 386.

too were the decisions of elites and activists, especially in the younger generation. An arts-and-culture periodical that never had a circulation beyond 40,000, *motive*—which displayed its avant-garde self-conception by refusing to capitalize the first letter of its name—became “the virtual national magazine of the entire American student Christian movement” of the ecumenical churches, observes one historian. Its readership included many college and seminary faculty. William Stringfellow and Harvey Cox published in its pages. When the magazine’s attacks on segregation annoyed Methodists in southern states, G. Bromley Oxnam himself stood down a group of southern ministers by slamming a stack of copies on a table and claiming to agree with every word in them. In 1965 *motive* was runner-up only to *Life* in the Columbia University School of Journalism’s Magazine of the Year competition, and in 1966 *Time* praised *motive* as the literary equivalent of a “miniskirt at a church social.”⁴² Yet in 1972 *motive* abruptly ceased its thirty-one years of publication with two provocative and defiant issues celebrating gay and lesbian sexuality. The context in which the editors did this is revealing.

Methodist leaders found themselves barraged with criticism generated by a *motive* issue of 1969 on “women’s liberation.” As with so many of the period’s efforts to liberate captives, *motive*’s radical feminist stance threatened to so alienate the churchgoing base of the ecumenical denominations that church officials, who like Oxnam had repeatedly expended their political credit to defend *motive* against conservative critics, felt obliged to call a halt. The Methodist leadership would continue to support *motive* only if its editors could find ways to cause less trouble for the church. The editors refused and proceeded in the diversity-affirming directions in which they were already headed, including serving as an unpublicized safe harbor for gay and lesbian Methodists. With what little money they had left after declaring their independence from the Methodists, the editors detonated their institutional suicide bomb.⁴³

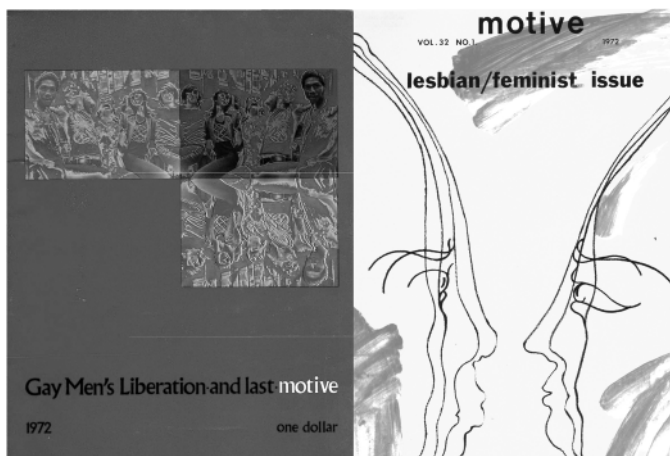
One of the central figures in this episode later described what the experience meant to her. “The more feminist I became . . . the more impatient I was with the phallogocentricity of Christianity,” wrote Charlotte Bunch, “and with the slowness of the institution to see how it oppressed women.” When Bunch “came out as a lesbian” simultaneously with the demise of *motive*, she also left the Methodist church because she was “simply not willing to be affiliated with an institution that labeled me a sinner or denied me the right to enter the highest callings.” The most influential and long-serving editor of *motive*, B. J. Stiles, remained an ordained Methodist minister but spent the rest of his career as a program officer and executive of secular nonprofit foundations, including those devoted to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) prevention.⁴⁴

While the editors of *motive* went their own postecclesiastical way, exemplifying the difficulties of the ecumenical leadership in holding on to its young, the National Council of Churches tried desperately to keep up with the times. The council was deeply shaken in 1969 when the black activist preacher James Forman interrupted a Sunday morning service in New York’s Riverside Church to read aloud his “Black Manifesto,” demanding 500 million dollars

⁴² Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Lexington, 1994), 83; “Methodists: A Jester for Wesleyans,” *Time*, Oct. 21, 1966, p. 69.

⁴³ Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge*, 165–66.

⁴⁴ Charlotte Bunch, “Charlotte Bunch,” in *Journeys That Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955–1975*, ed. Sara Evans (New Brunswick, 2003), 139; B. J. Stiles to David A. Hollinger, e-mail, July 2, 2010 (in David A. Hollinger’s possession).



The covers of the final two issues of the avant-garde Methodist youth magazine, *motive*, which ceased publication in 1972 with these celebrations of same-sex relationships. Courtesy B. J. Stiles.

in reparations from the National Council of Churches and its affiliates to support programs of black economic development.⁴⁵ Ecumenical leaders managed to reject that specific demand but tried to compensate by taking more and more radical positions on other issues. Between 1972 and 1975 the council, beyond its adamant opposition to the Vietnam conflict, supported Palestinian independence from Israel, endorsed the resumption of normal relations with Cuba, put money and legal resources behind the United Farm Workers Union, rallied to the support of the American Indian Movement during the siege at Wounded Knee, and took sides with Soviet-backed African insurgents against Portuguese colonial regimes.

These steps failed to stem the youth exodus and they further alienated the council's churchgoing base. In the dozen years after 1975, the budget of the National Council of Churches declined by 53 percent. Between the late 1960s and the late 1980s, the size of its staff declined by 68 percent. Local congregations and denominational boards became increasingly wary of the council's leadership. Here, more immediately than in the decline of membership numbers, we see the consequences of the leadership-laity gap. Efforts to retain the confidence of the council's own denominational constituencies were constantly undercut by attacks from the evangelical Right, to which the national press paid increasing attention. In 1983 *Reader's Digest* and CBS News's *60 Minutes* gave a sympathetic ear to critics who said the National Council of Churches was in the pockets of minority group lobbyists, had "substituted revolution for religion," and was financing "Marxist-Leninist projects" throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America with the money given by churchgoers who had no idea what the ecumenical elite was doing with their donations.⁴⁶ The problem for the politically active ecumenist leaders, often missed by scholars who focus only on membership statistics, was not just that their numbers were down but that many of the members they retained proved reluctant to support their programs.

⁴⁵ On the "Black Manifesto" incident, see Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 199–225; and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008), 435–40.

⁴⁶ Jill K. Gill, "The Politics of Ecumenical Disunity: The Troubled Marriage of Church World Service and the National Council of Churches," *Religion and American Culture*, 14 (July 2004), 189, 192.

In the meantime, the evangelicals continued to enact their part of the fateful dialectic by which the two major persuasions in American Protestantism pulled farther apart from each other. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the Nazarene leader James Dobson and others developed “family values” as a rallying cry for evangelicals who had previously been less engaged than the ecumenicals with debates over the nature of the ideal Christian family. But precisely at the time that the Christian Family Commissions of one ecumenical denomination after another pulled away from the old, uncritical assumption that the traditional, patriarchal, nuclear family was God’s will, the evangelicals latched onto this idea and ran with it. As the historian Margaret Bendroth has explained, “evangelicals became pro-family” largely as a way of asserting their claims to leadership of the society as a whole, determined no longer to be “cultural outsiders.” Just as the evangelicals took up the notion of a Christian America while it was being discarded by the ecumenicals and persisted in traditional missionary ideologies rejected as culturally imperialist by the ecumenicals, so too did the evangelicals exploit popular ideas about the family that ecumenical leaders found themselves unable any longer to defend.⁴⁷

Moreover, exactly at the time the ecumenicals were dealing anxiously with the consequences of the risks they had taken during the civil rights era, the evangelicals, by merely acquiescing as a *fait accompli* in the expansions of civil rights that many of them had opposed, were thus able to gain credibility as a force in national politics from the very beginning of the Ronald Reagan era. The National Association of Evangelicals and a host of megachurch televangelists went from strength to strength. Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority became a force in the Republican party. *Christianity Today* surpassed and rapidly outdistanced *Christian Century* in circulation. During his 1980 presidential campaign Reagan famously declared to a convention of evangelicals, “I endorse you,” playing cleverly on that body’s inability to endorse formally his candidacy while turning their applause into exactly such an endorsement. Three years later, as president, Reagan delivered his legendary “evil empire” speech to a meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals.⁴⁸

What happened to ecumenical Protestantism during the crisis of the 1960s and its aftermath can be instructively compared to what happened simultaneously to the Democratic party in national politics. “We have lost the South for a generation,” President Lyndon B. Johnson is widely quoted as having said on behalf of the Democratic party in 1964 when the Democrats aligned themselves with the cause of civil rights for African Americans. What ecumenical Protestant leaders did is not quite the same, but there is a parallel visible in the context of what historians of American religion often call Protestantism’s “two-party system”: a series of polarities going back to the seventeenth century, in which the modern split between the ecumenists and evangelicals is the most recent.⁴⁹

Ecumenists put at risk their hold on American Protestantism in a manner similar to that by which the Democrats risked their hold on the South, and with similar consequences.

⁴⁷ Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Growing Up Protestant: Parents, Children, and Mainline Churches* (New Brunswick, 2002), esp. 135.

⁴⁸ Ronald Reagan addressed the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, on March 8, 1983. See *Evil Empire Speech Memorial Foundation*, <http://www.evilempirespeech.org>. For a cogent analysis of the evangelical political mobilization that set the stage for the political triumphs of the Reagan era, see Paul Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 29–51.

⁴⁹ Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, 1970), 177–87. On the political struggles of the ecumenical leadership during the 1940s and 1950s, see Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 3: *Under God Indivisible, 1941–1960* (Chicago, 1996).

At issue in the control of American Protestantism was not only race—the crucial issue for the Democrats—but also imperialism, feminism, abortion, and sexuality, in addition to the critical perspectives on supernaturalism popularized by thinkers such as Harvey Cox and John A. T. Robinson. Ecumenical leaders were not as aware as President Johnson apparently was of the risks they were taking, nor were they as blunt in the moments when the truth dawned on them. But they, like he, believed that the time had come to redirect the institutions and populations they were trying to lead and they behaved accordingly. Hence they abandoned to opportunistic evangelicals both the classical foreign missionary project and the powerful claim of a proprietary relation to the American nation. In pursuit of causes they believed to be inspired by God, the ecumenical leaders encouraged secular alliances that blurred the boundaries of their faith community and risked the gradual loss of their children to secular communities. The ecumenical leaders accommodated perspectives on women and the family that diminished their capacity to reproduce themselves exactly at the same time that they took positions on empire, race, sex, abortion, and divinity that diminished their ability to recruit as new members those Protestants who had been reared in an evangelical milieu and might otherwise find it congenial to become an Episcopalian. Just as the Democrats had lost most of the South to the Republican party, the ecumenists yielded more and more of the space of Protestantism to the evangelicals.

Further, just as Lyndon Johnson and the national Democrats could not contain Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democrats in 1964, the ecumenical leaders could not contain the self-consciously progressive forces exemplified by the editors of *motive*. Even so, the domain of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats and their kind was ultimately the nation, not the South. Such radicals could return to their party after its need to placate white southerners was decisively diminished; indeed, they were obliged to do just that because in the absence of a new major party the only way for the Left to remain active in electoral politics was to make peace with the Democrats. But the captive-liberating and supernaturalism-rejecting projects of the editors of *motive* and their counterparts in all the mainstream denominations could be advanced without any kind of Protestantism whatsoever. The radical progeny of the ecumenists had less incentive to return to their party in the two-party system of Protestantism. So what if Protestantism fell increasingly into the hands of the other party, the evangelicals? That mattered only if one continued to believe that the Christian religion was ultimately the most viable foundation for the kind of society that ecumenical Protestant leaders had come to advocate by the 1960s.

That belief in the indispensability of Christianity, while regarded as a conceit by secular thinkers and adherents of other religions, had long sustained even the most liberal of ecumenical Protestants in their worldly activities and helps explain their complacency. Reinhold Niebuhr never tired of accusing secularists of failing to appreciate the special capacity of Christianity to interpret the world and to inform human conduct. Even Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for all his accommodation with diversity, held firmly to the faith that the Christian minority was still the best hope for humankind if only that uniquely endowed minority would reconstitute itself on the basis of modern experience. Harvey Cox's embrace of the secular world in the name of Christianity was enabled by his conviction that the entirety of the universe was peculiarly responsive to the same divine power that Cox believed had guided the ancient Hebrews and had provided, in Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet of unparalleled authority.

But this belief in the unique contribution of Christianity to the world lost its hold on many followers of Niebuhr, Smith, and Cox who allied themselves intimately with secular agencies. Christianity became one of a number of useful vehicles for values that transcended that ancestral faith. For such people, Christianity of any variety became a strategic and personal option rather than a presumed imperative. To be sure, many Americans continued to believe in the unique ability of Christianity to speak to those needs. But just as a substantial portion of the missionaries found that the Hindus and Buddhists they encountered abroad were not quite so much in need of Christian conversion as once assumed, thousands of children of the old Protestant establishment found that Christianity was not so indispensable to the advancement of the values most energetically taught to them by their Methodist and Congregationalist tutors.⁵⁰

But secular alliances were not new for ecumenical Protestants. The drift to post-Protestantism was more pronounced in the 1960s and after because the ethnoreligious demography of that era was so different from that of earlier episodes during which ecumenical Protestants allied themselves with secular forces. Catholics and Jews were much more visible in American civic life in the 1960s and after than they had been in the Progressive Era, when Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* authorized in God's name support for many of the most radically egalitarian of that period's initiatives, or even than in the 1930s, when Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* encouraged Christians to support violent measures as needed in class struggle. The leading secular intellectuals of the 1960s were less grounded in a Christian past than their predecessors. Jewish intellectuals were very heavily represented in the cultural leadership of the United States by the 1960s. Prominent examples included Daniel Bell, Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, Betty Friedan, Stanley Cavell, Noam Chomsky, Lionel Trilling, Erik Erikson, Susan Sontag, Thomas Kuhn, Ayn Rand, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Nathan Glazer, Alfred Kazin, Paul Goodman, Milton Friedman, Richard Hofstadter, and Walter Kaufmann. Kaufmann was unusual because he explicitly criticized ecumenical Protestant thinking. In a 1958 book that was very popular on college campuses, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, Kaufmann went after Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry Emerson Fosdick by name for their mush-headed lack of logic and modern learning. Kaufmann found the ideas of evangelicals not even worth refutation, but many collegiate sons and daughters of mainstream Methodists and Presbyterians were part of the era's undergraduate engagement with Kaufmann that was propelled by his anthology of 1956, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. This collection was one of the blockbuster campus books of the era. It summarily dismissed the religiously oriented existentialists—in contrast to the forthright atheists on whom Kaufmann focused respectful attention—as altogether marginal to the new and exciting existentialist movement.⁵¹

⁵⁰ On the ways ecumenical Protestantism served as an incubator for feminist and other radical and liberal careers beyond and within churches, see the sixteen memoirs collected in Evans, ed., *Journeys That Opened Up the World*. On the transformation to a post-Protestant culture, see Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York, 2001), 6. On a Protestant deposit in the geological layering of secular American life, see Marty, *Righteous Empire*, 264.

⁵¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York, 1907). Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932). On Niebuhr and *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, 1996), 136–41, 161–66. Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York, 1958), 287–303; Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York, 1956), 50. Walter Kaufmann's centrality to the existentialist vogue of the postwar decades is documented in George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, 2003), 147.

Neither during the Progressive Era nor in the 1930s did Protestants confront a cultural environment remotely as heavily populated with non-Christians as did their successors of the 1960s and after. The greatest secular philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century, John Dewey, had been, after all, a lapsed Congregationalist, and had actually engaged religious issues rather than ignored them as irrelevant to serious intellectual inquiry. Even the flaming freethinker H. L. Mencken had spoken casually of being part of “Christendom,” a term that had become a quaint anachronism by the time analytic philosophy had swept Protestant-inflected metaphysics out the academic window and *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* had become central venues for the intelligentsia. And in the world beyond the North Atlantic West that the ecumenists engaged, non-Christians were much more empowered in the 1960s than they had been before and were in charge of many nation-states in Asia and Africa. The end of the European empires and the diminution of the missionary project shattered the Christian lenses through which even the most liberal of American Protestants had been looking at the non-European world.⁵²

In this setting, countless individuals who inherited the tradition of ecumenical Protestantism put their energies into an imposing collection of secular agencies, including the human rights organizations that flourished during the 1970s and after. These post-Protestant endeavors are a major feature of modern American life, yet our recognition of them has been obscured by a survivalist bias, by which I mean a preference for if not a commitment to the survival of Christianity in general and of the institutions of ecumenical Protestantism in particular. From a survivalist point of view, the key questions about ecumenical Protestantism are, first, whether it has been able to perpetuate itself on its own terms, and second, whether it has advanced the Christian project effectively or contributed to the actual weakening of that project. These questions dominate the scholarly and popular literature and reflect the religion-protecting outlook of the Lilly Endowment, which has funded most of the scholarship on the destiny of ecumenical Protestantism. The ecumenical leadership’s “tolerance of diversity and openness,” write Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, “tended to erode loyalty” to the inherited religious order and ultimately “spawned” many secularists among its own progeny. Mainline Protestantism’s “emphasis on inclusiveness and diversity” made it function rather like a “sieve,” as Roof and another of his collaborators put it.⁵³

This figure of speech is typical of commentators who treat the decline of ecumenical Protestantism’s standing as something to be lamented and who suggest that if only ecumenists had more vigorously acculturated their youth and maintained tighter organizational discipline things might have turned out more favorably for the churches. This survivalist perspective misses a reality to which this essay draws attention: the historic function of self-interrogating ecumenical Protestantism as an environment in which many Americans found themselves able to engage sympathetically a panorama of ethnoracial, sexual, religious, and cultural varieties of humankind. These varieties potentially threatened to destabilize inherited practices and beliefs, but ecumenical Protestantism

⁵² H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices* (3 vols., New York, 1922), III, 159.

⁵³ For observations on the Lilly Endowment’s protective approach to religion and its place in American life, see David A. Hollinger, “Enough Already: American Universities Do Not Need More Christianity,” in *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects*, ed. Andrea Sterk (Notre Dame, 2002), 40–49. Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 61–62, 242; Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age* (Louisville, 1993), 352.

provided a community and an orientation that facilitated these engagements for people who might otherwise have avoided them. The leadership of ecumenical Protestantism, as it engaged the diversity of the modern world, enabled its community of faith to serve, among its other roles, as a commodious halfway house to what for lack of a better term we can call post-Protestant secularism.

To recognize the historic function of ecumenical Protestantism as a halfway house, if not actually a slippery slope to secularism, is in no way invidious unless one approaches history as a Christian survivalist. Religious affiliations, like other solidarities, are contingent entities, generated, sustained, transformed, diminished, and destroyed by the changing circumstances of history. Those circumstances still render ecumenical Protestantism a vibrant and vital home for many persons. A genuinely historicist approach to the history of religion will not teleologically imply that those committed to that faith today are headed for history's dustbin. On the contrary, historicism demands that we address every human phenomenon in its local and global contexts, and be as respectful as we can of the honest decisions people make in those settings and refrain from thinking we know the future.

Once this historic function of ecumenical Protestantism is noninvidiously recognized, however, it becomes possible to see that ecumenical Protestantism actually advanced some of its central goals even while its organizational hegemony disappeared. The diversity-preoccupied aspects of public American life today look much more like what the editors of *Christian Century* in 1960 hoped it would look like than what the editors of *Christianity Today* were then projecting as an ideal future. Ecumenical leaders may have lost American Protestantism, argues N. J. Demerath III, but they won the United States. The ecumenists campaigned for "individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry," observes Demerath, exactly the liberal values that gained rather than lost ground in the public culture of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ These values were not peculiar to ecumenical Protestants, but the latter's emphatic espousal of these values enacted ecumenical Protestantism's accommodation with secular liberalism. These values served as key justifications for many of the transformations of the 1960s, and have been invoked since that time in countless specific contexts as the United States has confronted massive immigration from non-European lands and has sought to find ways to do justice to the descendants of its enslaved and conquered peoples.

What Demerath calls "the cultural victory" of ecumenical Protestantism is easily exaggerated, but so, too, is that of the Democrats: American politics as a whole is massively influenced even today by the conservative Republicans of the states of the old Confederacy. Despite the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008—a development consistent with what the ecumenists of old hoped to see—it takes little scrutiny to identify features of American life in the 2010s that bear no resemblance to the vision articulated in the study conferences of the World War II years or in the 1960s pronouncements of the National Council of Churches. Certainly, the great authority exercised today by politically conservative evangelical Protestants in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives

⁵⁴ N. J. Demerath III, "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (March 1995), 458–69, esp. 458–60. See also Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, 1999), 309.

bespeaks no victory for Reinhold Niebuhr and G. Bromley Oxnam. Yet one domain in which Demerath's hyperbole has impressive credibility is religion itself.

Two sociologists report that young adults of virtually all varieties of faith now talk "like classical liberal Protestants." Included in this company, insist Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, are religious Jews, Catholics, mainstream Protestants, African American Protestants, and white evangelicals. Smith and Snell declare that "Harry Emerson Fosdick would be proud" to hear today's religious chatter because even the white evangelicals—grandchildren of the people who so resented Fosdick's dominance of the airwaves of the 1940s—were now "paraphrasing passages from the classical liberal Protestant theologians, of whom they have no doubt actually never heard." Smith and Snell invoke H. Richard Niebuhr's famous 1937 parody of the antidoctrinal drift of the ecumenicals as producing a "God without wrath," men and women "without sin," a kingdom "without judgment," and a "Christ without a cross," but they observe that the bulk of today's religiously affiliated Americans appear to be quite happy with the faith that Reinhold Niebuhr's less well-known brother had mocked as vacant and bland. The liberal ideas developed by seminary theologians at Andover-Newton, Union, and Harvard have trickled down at last.⁵⁵

Not all of those ideas, however. The commitment to diminish inequality that mattered so much to Wilfred Cantwell Smith and so many other ecumenists of old is not so abundant in the cheerful tolerance and diversity talk discovered almost everywhere by today's sociologists. If younger rank-and-file evangelicals have adopted many of the ecumenists' perspectives on religion as such, why are liberal political opinions still so decidedly a minority in evangelical circles? Our era's most distinguished political sociologist, Robert Putnam, and his collaborator, David Campbell, believe they have the answer to this question. They argue that political opinions are exercising more and more control over decisions about religious affiliation. There are fewer and fewer political liberals in any church and fewer and fewer political conservatives outside the churches. The popular association of religion with right-wing politics as consolidated during the Reagan era by evangelical entrepreneurs was highly successful but appears to have diminished the appeal of religion for anyone who is not comfortable with such a politics.⁵⁶ Religion has always had a political matrix, but in the twenty-first-century United States it may be in the process of becoming more epiphenomenal. As religious pluralism reigns and as doctrinally based distinctions between Protestant persuasions diminish, political distinctions become more powerful determinants of religious affiliation rather than demonstrable results of such affiliations. Is this secularization by stealth? Is the most ostensibly religious society in the industrialized North Atlantic West becoming more functionally secular even as the vast majority of its inhabitants declare themselves to be religious?

However we assess the contemporary scene and however we may speculate about the future, certain historical realities ought to be clear. The evangelicals gained the upper hand in the struggle for control of Protestantism just as the Republicans gained the upper hand in the struggle for the political control of the South. In both cases, the triumph was facilitated by the decisions and actions of the rival party. This analogy, like any, can be carried too far, but just as the nation got something in return for the loss of the South to the Republican party, so, too, did the nation obtain something in return for the loss of

⁵⁵ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York, 2009), 288.

⁵⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 91–133, 370–71, 401.

Protestantism to the evangelicals: the United States got a more widely dispersed and institutionally enacted acceptance of ethnoracial, sexual, religious, and cultural diversity. This sympathetic engagement with diversity that has become so visible and celebrated a feature of the public life of the United States is the product of many agencies, but prominent among them are the egalitarian impulses and the capacities for self-interrogation that ecumenical Protestants brought to the great American encounter with diversity during the middle and late decades of the twentieth century. Those impulses and capacities generated a cascade of liberalizing consequences extending well beyond the diminishing domain of the mainstream churches, running through the lives and careers of countless post-Protestant Americans distributed across a wide expanse of secular space. Our narrative of modern American religious history will be deficient so long as we suppose that ecumenical Protestantism declined because it had less to offer the United States than did its evangelical rival. Much of what ecumenical Protestantism offered now lies beyond the churches, and hence we have been slow to see it.

A compelling emblem for this ongoing process is a decision made by the YMCA in 2010. In view of “the vibrancy and diversity of the organization,” it dropped the word “Christian” from its label. Henceforth, it was to be known simply as “The Y.” To be sure, in small print, the organization’s materials declare that its “mission is to put Christian principles into practice,” but here an organization that began in the nineteenth century as fervently evangelical and then in the twentieth century became increasingly ecumenical and egalitarian has, in the twenty-first century, proclaimed itself to be virtually secular and in the name of diversity.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ For the Young Men’s Christian Association’s announcement of this change, see its news release of July 10, 2010 at YMCA Web site, <http://www.ymca.net/news-releases/20100712-brand-new-day.html>. For the resulting representation, see <http://www.ymca.net/>.