I

Introduction

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Protestantism as Establishment

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Historians of American religion have generally taken for granted the existence of a Protestant establishment. Sydney Ahlstrom's *Religious History of the American People* used that terminology repeatedly. Robert T. Handy's arguments concerning an alleged "second disestablishment" of Protestantism after about 1920 (the first having occurred soon after the American Revolution) have been well received. Richard Neuhaus in the 1980s attributed the decline of religious influence in the civic order to, among other things, a "final disestablishment of mainline Protestantism." And E. Digby Baltzell, with a sociological more than religious definition in mind, used the term to identify certain breeding-grounds for anti-Semitism.[1]

Possibly such authors have alluded to something that, even if real, is not at all definable. Richard Rovere, who helped to give the term "establishment" the currency it enjoyed in this country after 1960, acknowledged that experts will always disagree about what a given establishment is and how it works, but he added that experts have also disagreed about the nature and operation of the Kingdom of God without on that account denying its existence. Leonard Silk and Mark Silk, in their volume of 1980, *The American Establishment,* acknowledged that the entity to which they had devoted their days and nights might be "a spirit, a ghost borne on the wind"; yet they remained convinced it was a reality.[2]

The Denominational Matrix

Plausible working definitions do, in any case, seem attainable with respect to religion. This is especially true if one begins, as we do in this volume, with the modest proposition that in the earlier years of this century an establishment, identifiable both as a group of denominations

and as a network of leaders in general connected with them, existed *within* American Protestantism. This intra-Protestant entity, if fuzzy at the edges and changeable over time, was not much more so than, say, the Republican Party or the American Federation of Labor (which as a federation provides a pretty good analogy). It was, at any rate, stable and definable enough to present one with an initial object of research, a starting point or base for inquiries into the dynamics of American religious and cultural history.

Let me be more specific. When historians, in their analyses of nineteenth-century religion, have used terms like establishment or mainline in a more-than-regional sense, they almost always have meant Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and the white divisions of the Baptist and Methodist families. For the decades since 1900, the Disciples of Christ and the United Lutherans usually have been added, while the vast southern segment of the Baptists (unlike Southern Methodists or Presbyterians) has been seen as increasingly and intentionally removing itself from such a category.

These seven denominations represented well over half the constituency of the Federal and National Councils of Churches, supplied an overwhelming amount of their leadership, and to an amazing degree dominated the various enterprises ancillary to the main conciliar organizations. When "American Protestantism" dispatched delegates to the twelve-hundred-member World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, all these groups except the Lutherans sent from 20 to 123 representatives. (American Methodists alone accounted for over 10 percent of the delegates at a gathering touted as broadly representative of world Christianity.)[3]

When the International Sunday School Council in 1922 formed an American subcommittee, these denominations provided at least 90 of the 109 members, and all of the fourteen officers. When American denominations in 1924 joined in establishing a National Council for the YMCA, it was these bodies (along with the Dutch and German Reformed churches and the Society of Friends) that made up the council. When John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and others in 1930 set in motion a "laymen's inquiry" into foreign missions, the same churches (minus the Lutherans) provided the ecclesiastical sponsorship. All of these churches (excluding the Disciples but including three different groups of Presbyterians) ranked among the top ten suppliers of Protestant missionary personnel; and all including the Disciples ranked in a top ten with respect to missionary budgets.[4]

The ability of the largest Protestant bodies to flood mission fields and international gatherings with their personnel, and to supply a huge pro-

portion of the leadership, in some ways gave a distorted image of their position in American religious life. To speak only of numbers, their dominance among Protestants at home amounted to something like 60 percent, not 90 percent. But the resulting misperceptions, for example among European co-workers and observers, could in themselves work to strengthen the establishment's real authority, both at home and abroad. Exaggerated estimates, in other words, were to some extent self-fulfilling.

One can illustrate that phenomenon by reference to the period just after the First World War, when many people had come to think of "American Protestantism" as the principal creative and executive force in European reconstruction. In those years the Federal Council of Churches, which in its first decade (1908–18) had experienced only mixed success in unifying the American churches and directing their social outreach, gained enormously in international visibility, prestige, and prophetic standing. Europeans who admired "American religion" idealized the Federal Council both as a reliable representation of that larger entity, and as the leading model for structures of worldwide Christian unity and reconciliation. But even those who habitually distrusted American activism – and they were many – applauded the Council's insistent lobbying against the isolationist or recriminatory actions of Allied governments. Such American bodies and their leaders were viewed askance for undue paternalism and efficiency-mindedness, yet still admired extravagantly as religious America's rebuke to the United States Senate. These perceptions in turn helped produce the larger-than-life status that American "liberal" Protestantism was to enjoy in international settings for at least the next three decades.[5]

If the unity and effectiveness of the establishment could be exaggerated, especially from distant perspectives, so of course could that of any given denominational family within it. As an earlier allusion to three Presbyterian bodies indicated, several of these families – the Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists as well as the Presbyterians – were exceedingly diverse. The number of ecclesiastical organizations "denominated" by the same name varied, as of 1920, from ten among the Presbyterians to twenty-two among the Baptists; and, except for an increase in Baptist groups, those numbers remained much the same in 1960. But any close look at relative numbers and resources within each denominational family will reinforce the conclusion that control was concentrated in a very few large bodies.[6]

One finds represented on the boards of the establishment organizations both those "family members" (United Presbyterian, Methodist Protestant) that eventually would merge with a more powerful sibling, and

other Protestant bodies that were destined to maintain a separate identity (black Baptists, the Reformed churches, Quakers, Moravians). Yet the small scale of such representation, for example in the case of black churches with huge constituencies, again underscores the establishment's dominance. Blacks, along with Mennonites, Free Methodists, and Seventh-Day Adventists, were represented at the Edinburgh meeting of 1910. But delegation size had been determined by the size of mission budgets, and these churches had been allotted only one to three delegates each.[7]

Not all the pieces in the mosaic of American institutional religion contribute in that way to the clarity of a central pattern. The establishment, though massive and seemingly very much in control, was not a monolith. Some American denominations that took no part in establishment enterprises – usually because they chose not to – could nonetheless boast competitive membership statistics, or a large degree of regional authority, or both. (The leading examples of "both" were the Southern Baptist Convention, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the Mormons.)[8] In any given area of activity, moreover, one or more "outsider" groups were likely to rank among a top ten or top twelve.

In foreign missions, the mainline churches shared prominence with outsider groups that specialized in such activity – especially with the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Seventh-Day Adventists. In domestic social activism (judging from a longitudinal study, made in the 1950s, of the denominations' welfare enterprises), all except the Disciples ranked at the top; but the mainline churches were joined there by such specialists in city mission work as the Salvation Army and the Volunteers of America. When it came to concern for higher education (as reflected in official sponsorship of colleges and universities), this set of churches, minus the Episcopalians, again dominated the statistics, with the seven leading groups, at any given time, supporting over half of the Protestant institutions; but in this area they shared leadership with the Roman Catholics.[9]

The Establishment as a Personal Network

If these "Seven Sisters" continue, after careful nuancing of the description, to look like an established church operating without parliamentary sanction, that is partly because the American establishment was a personal network as well as a congeries of institutions. The historian James A. Field in the 1970s called attention to the familial, social, and old-school-tie relationships, in many areas of the world, not only among missionaries, but between the missionaries on one hand and entrepreneurs, educators, philanthropists, and diplomats on the other. Such interrelationships had been visible in an earlier period when the

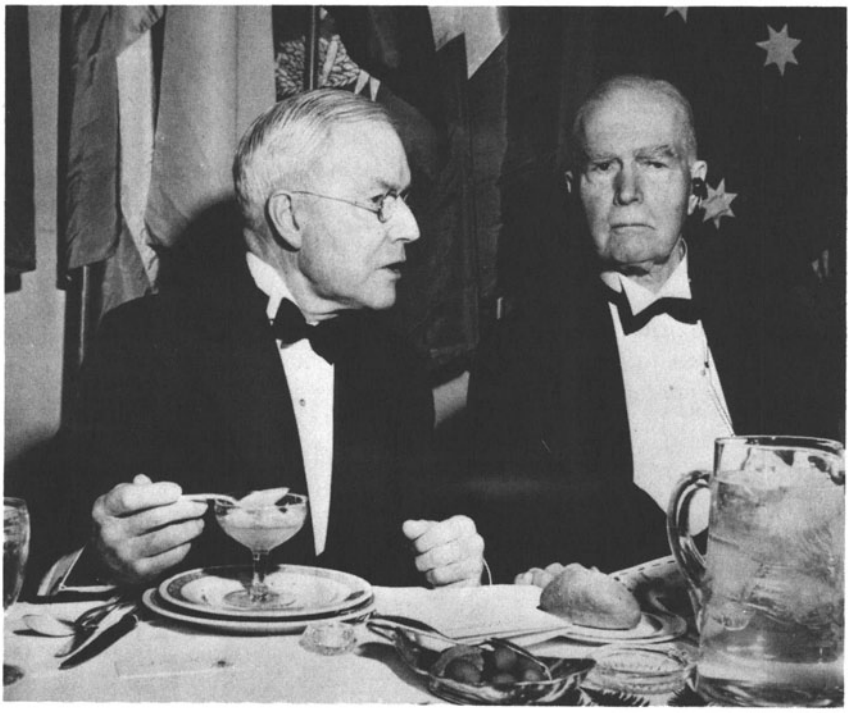
medical missionary Peter Parker, whose wife was a Webster, held a series of diplomatic posts including, in the 1850s, that of American minister to China. By the twentieth century, partly because of what Field (a former naval officer) called "lack of intertheater transfer," mission-family dynasties had grown up in several areas of the world: Gulicks in Hawaii and Japan, Scudders in India, Underwoods in Korea, and many others.[10]

Field suggested that the situation in the Mediterranean world, where the "web of interconnected influence" had been established earlier than elsewhere, was an especially graphic single-theater epitome of more far-reaching networks extending across familial, occupational, and also national boundaries. And the overseas-based networks resembled, or actually extended, others that seem to have operated only on the national scene. The prospect therefore is that, just as historians of American foreign relations have had to take account of the interconnected influence of the Dodge, Stokes, Phelps, and Bliss families (with special attention to Woodrow Wilson's lifelong friend and adviser Cleveland Dodge),[11] so the aims and operations of the Protestant leadership at home probably will not be adequately understood until we have worked through the relationships, official and personal, of those who managed or supported the Protestant enterprise.

That word "work" should be emphasized. Historical name dropping, however intriguing and usefully suggestive, will tell us little about how the personal network operated – for example, about who influenced whom. We know already, however, that friendships like those linking the Fosdicks (Harry Emerson and his brother Raymond) with the Rockefellers, or the ecumenical executive John R. Mott with Woodrow Wilson, or Reinhold Niebuhr with leaders of the academic and foreign-policy establishment, figure in the stories both of mainline Protestantism and of its attempted cultural outreach and control. Mott's most exhaustive biographer, C. Howard Hopkins, scattered through his book references to Mott's interviews and other contacts with nine presidents of the United States. On one red-letter day in 1923, this particular lion of the religious establishment "began with William Howard Taft at 9:30, lunched with President Coolidge, and visited with his old friend Woodrow Wilson at 3:30."[12]

Similarly, biographers of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr have documented his extensive and intimate involvement in secular branches of the establishment. Richard Fox, recounting Niebuhr's participation in a State Department consultation of 1949, surmises that

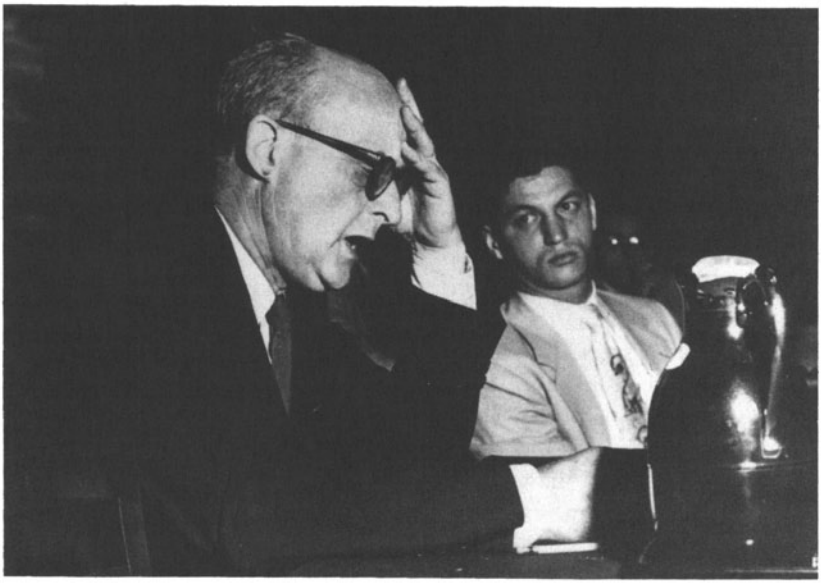
> both he and the assembled foreign-service officers and department specialists learned something of value from one another. No doubt too he and the State Department officials lent one



John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (*left*), and John R. Mott (*right*) at a testimonial dinner for Mott, 1946. Religious News Service photo.

another a certain amount of prestige: he basked in the aura of high affairs of state, they lingered briefly in the presence of a celebrity intellectual. They helped augment his standing as a significant Establishment figure, he helped elevate their own image as intellectually vigorous officials, not narrow-minded technicians. If Niebuhr did not influence government policy, he did participate in a system of influence in which some individuals and agencies established themselves as authoritative voices.

Two weeks later, according to Fox, Niebuhr learned that he was being seriously considered for a post "at the very summit of the Establishment," the presidency of Yale University. His sponsors included Jonathan Bingham, the lawyer and later New York congressman, Chester Bowles, who was then governor of Connecticut, and the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.[13]



Reinhold Niebuhr testifying before a Senate committee on ethics in government, 1951. Religious News Service photo.

Such information – the kind that relates to well-known personages and is likely to be mentioned in printed sources – would be merely the tip of a vast iceberg. The personal network in question also operated through less official contacts, both among the preeminent lay and clerical figures and among the rank and file. To cite one example: If we are to understand more fully the tensions in mainline Protestantism before and during the fundamentalist–modernist controversy (c. 1910–30), we should learn not only how the various participants carried out their official duties, or what they said at conferences, but also how they spent their leisure time, and with whom.

The Presbyterian and ecumenical leader Robert E. Speer (a man often thought to have *had* no leisure time) spent part of most summers from 1901 to 1925 at Camp Diamond in northern New Hampshire, fishing and otherwise consorting with a number of persons whose names are well known to historians of missions or of Presbyterianism – with Robert Wilder, Charles Erdman, Henry Frost, the Hudson and Howard Taylors, and a great many others. As those same historians would know, Speer's fellow fishermen, and the organizations to which they were linked (the Student Volunteer Movement, Princeton Seminary, the China Inland Mission), played important and at some points sharply

opposed roles in Speer's public career. The story of Speer's involvement in such a community could throw light on his willingness to be a contributor, along with Erdman and Frost, to the series of pamphlets that helped launch the fundamentalist movement. The circumstances, or just the fact, of his quitting Camp Diamond in 1925 (along with the Erdmans and the Wilders; the Frosts and Taylors stayed on) would at the least add dimension to what we know of the epochal falling-out, in the mid-twenties, between the fundamentalists on one hand, Speer and the Princeton Seminary moderates on the other.[14]

If such communities (the better known would include, for example, Silver Bay and Chautauqua in New York State, and Estes Park in Colorado) have their stories to tell of the religious establishment's less guarded moments, the more numerous "Pequod Islands," where members of *different* elites met and mingled, could tell us about its relations to the business, educational, and other secular worlds. The novelist John P. Marquand may well have based his evocation of Pequod Island, the beloved summer home of George Apley and his friends, on such real locations as Mount Desert Island, off the Maine coast. On Mount Desert, year after year, Browns and Peabodys of the religious establishment vacationed with Eliots, Rockefellers, and Peppers – that is, with educational, business, and political leadership. Although it was common in the languid, cheery recollections of these bucolic seasons to stress one's democratic or even egalitarian credentials (most memoirs include tributes to the sturdy locals and their ancestral wisdom), George Apley's poignant rumination is also apt: "Sometimes here on Pequod Island and back again on Beacon Street, I have the most curious delusion that our world may be a little narrow." A good many summer colonies were playgrounds, and to some extent workplaces, for a tight and well-defined social organization in which the leaders of mainline Protestantism were fixtures.[15]

Professor William Adams Brown, of Union Seminary in New York, devoted a section of his autobiography to "Forty Years of Mount Desert." Brown, a leading liberal theologian who during the First World War had been Speer's deputy in directing the War-Time Commission of the Churches, was prominent in both the intra-Protestant and the more general power structure. As a distant cousin to the Adamses of presidential lineage and a descendant of leading merchant bankers (Brown Brothers), he was a veritable embodiment of the network in its historical dimension; and his beloved summer place represented its contemporary form.

Brown's memoir mentions only the Mount Desert "names" that might be household words among the educated, rich, and famous – again, tips of an iceberg. But these are enough to make the point: univer-