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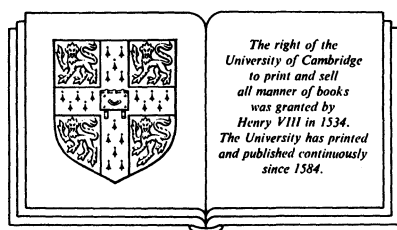
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The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900–1960

Edited by
WILLIAM R. HUTCHISON
Harvard University



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For Robert Wood Lynn:
“Guide, philosopher, and friend”

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Preface: From Protestant to Pluralist America

The phrase “between the times” has sometimes been used (as it was among European theologians in the 1920s) to convey a sense of alienation and despair. It may denote an acute societal “crisis of authority” or an anxious waiting for the Second Coming. But these words can also refer more neutrally, as they do in the title of this book, to a gradual and somewhat painful adjustment from one social reality to another.

American Protestantism underwent that sort of adjustment during the first six decades of the twentieth century. The so-called mainline denominations were compelled during those years to relinquish the comforts of an earlier taken-for-granted hegemony within American society. They were forced to confront a religious diversity that had been real, yet blithely or stubbornly unacknowledged, since at least the middle years of the nineteenth century.

By way of response, the churches strove to maintain their historic status and perform what they confidently believed were God-given responsibilities. One sees in retrospect, however, that they were also negotiating an epochal and quite fundamental transition, a transition from Protestant America to pluralist America.

The problem was not a loss of adherents. Proportional losses in relation to Catholics or non-Christians, particularly in urban centers, were among the facts of life that demanded recognition. But that phenomenon was not new, or even accelerated, in this era; far more startling changes in the statistics had occurred many years earlier, between the Revolution and the Civil War. Religious and other entities in a society, moreover, are not automatically in decline simply because others grow faster than they do. The more important question is what happens to the influence of a historically dominant religious body (or city or university or social class) as a result of such fundamental and material changes.

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This was the distinctive issue, in the earlier twentieth century, for mainline Protestantism. Few besides radical nativists – those who wished to terminate immigration – thought much could be done about the changing numbers. What was at stake, for most Protestant leaders, was an established status that they were sure could and must be maintained despite the numbers. In short, the issue was hegemony. Seen from that perspective, the remarkable characteristic of the Protestant establishment, up to the 1960s and perhaps afterward as well, was not decline but persistence.

From the churches' own point of view, the issue was responsibility or, to put it precisely, custodianship. It requires only a bit of poetic license to say that the Protestant churches felt responsible for America: for its moral structure, for the religious content of national ideals, for the educative and welfare functions that governments would not (or, it was thought, should not) carry out. The agents of the Protestant establishment went on to ask, implicitly or otherwise, Who will do these things if we do not? Who else can run America?

Jews, Catholics, and others who considered themselves thoroughly accredited as custodians of American ideals found that stance at best disingenuous, at worst self-serving and outrageous; and today most mainline Protestants, along with nearly all secular commentators, would probably agree. Even the more fervid pleas, in recent years, for a restored public religion have commonly acknowledged that Protestant Christians can no longer presume to set the moral or public-policy agenda.

One can easily, and with justification, criticize mainline Protestantism for not recognizing such realities earlier, for having lingered between the times instead of seizing a new time – for having taken so long to discover America. Yet only the more facile or contemptuous of their critics would dismiss entirely what these churches attempted, or what they achieved, during an era of bewildering transformations.

Our purpose in this book is to initiate serious analysis of those attempts and achievements. We have tried to launch a close examination of the Protestant establishment's agenda for American society and the ways in which "others" related to it.

Although one might hastily assume that denominational Protestantism has long since undergone this sort of scrutiny, we did not find that to be true. In recent years, especially, historians have paid far more attention to dissenters and other outsiders than to the more massive mainline religion they rejected, or from which they were excluded. Denominational history has not ranked high among our priorities. Some

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transdenominational movements, such as revivalism, have been studied extensively; others, such as the ecumenical movement, have remained relatively neglected.¹

This is not because most interpreters have doubted the existence of something called mainline religion, or doubted its cultural significance. Far from it. One of the presenting problems, in fact, for projects like the one initiated with this volume is the constant, but usually vague and very general, allusion to such an entity in historical or sociological studies and in the media. More specifically, investigators and pundits have been reacting with pleasure or alarm to an allegedly sudden waning of old-line Protestant influence since the 1960s, but have been doing so without benefit of much serious analysis of the aims and status of Protestantism in the preceding decades.

To what extent did the major denominations and their leaders, before the much-discussed “watershed” of the sixties, actually call the tune for American Protestantism at large? for American religion? for the culture? The answers one finds imbedded in contemporary analyses or advocacies rest, as often as not, on inherited, relatively untested assumptions not entirely free of nostalgia.

If anyone needed to be blamed for this situation, it would not be the journalists or sociologists but, as already hinted, the historians of American religion. If excuses were then entertained, ours would be that we have been occupied with more pressing business; and we would add that mainline religion has, after all, enjoyed outrageously disproportionate attention in the past.

Both explanations may have merit. But we have mistakenly allowed ourselves to suppose, not only that our continuing analysis of outsiders can flourish while that of mainstream religion languishes, but also that the history of denominational Protestantism has been “done” – that we (both scholars and public) know all we really need to know. The resulting rationale for avoiding mainline history resembles that of a famous sports figure, Yogi Berra, who declined to take his friends to a certain restaurant: “Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.”

We have also, however, been unsure that if we did go there we would enjoy the company and conversation. The story of large standard Protestant denominations, we figure, is bound to be dull in comparison with that of, say, nineteenth-century Mormonism or present-day televangelism. The dullness, however, may be in ourselves if we have been failing to ask questions – quite different, perhaps, from those of traditional church history – that would lead to better understanding of what old-line Protestantism was and what it did or failed to do within American society.

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One important deterrent to the framing of such questions has been a persistent lack of clarity about what one intends in using terms like “mainline,” “old-line,” “mainstream,” or “central tradition.” Are these terms meant to be merely descriptive, or somehow normative? If we speak of the mainstream religion of a particular time, or seem to assume the existence of such a thing, are we talking primarily about religious and cultural authority – about hegemony – or do we mean that this is where the vital juices were running? Are we discussing who was in charge, or offering assertions about the location, at a given time, of the “real” religion of Americans?

Because that important distinction has nearly always been blurred, any historian’s perception that the larger white denominations were dominant has easily been misunderstood as some kind of assertion that they deserved to be dominant, and that those who stood at (or beyond) the periphery of power were peripheral, or of lesser significance, in other respects as well. Historians who assume the centrality or hegemony of denominational Protestantism have frequently been suspected of persisting in a discredited tradition of Protestant triumphalism. This has been true even when, like the late Sydney Ahlstrom in his *Religious History of the American People*, an author has expressed an almost virulent anti-triumphalist bias and given unprecedented coverage to nonmainline religion.²

Since terms like “mainstream” have been responsible for some of the confusion and avoidance, we have chosen in this project to emphasize such concepts as hegemony, power structure, and establishment – especially in designating the starting points for our inquiry. Those words and phrases, which are also imperfect, require working definitions, and the Introduction (Part I) attempts to provide them. For the moment, it is enough to say that our subject is the group of churches and network of leaders that appear, *prima facie*, to have dominated American Protestantism in the earlier twentieth century, and to have enjoyed considerable religious and cultural authority in the enviroing society.

When the authors do use necessary alternative terms such as “mainstream,” they are employing those terms in the same sense – that is, as carrying no built-in assumption that the mainstream of power or of cultural authority was the main channel of dynamic historical development, or of faithfulness to religious and civic ideals. What would usually be called normative assessments of the establishment’s aims and performance do of course arise within these essays. But language denoting centrality does not, so far as we intend or can tell, rest on prejudgments about who best represented “American religion.”

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The most intriguing issues are those that come into view when (and only when) one has distinguished between centers of power and centers of religious or social vitality. What need to be explored, in other words, are the relations between an establishment and its competitors (both religious competitors and “secular” ones), and the changes in these relations that occurred over time. So far as one can identify a mainstream of vital religious or theological development, to what extent was the establishment congruent with it? at what points alienated from it? If we are willing also to talk about a cultural mainstream or, more simply, about the apparent course of American history in a given era, in what ways was the Protestant establishment harmonious with that? in what ways out of touch with it or prophetically juxtaposed to it? In the now-current “Gramscian” terminology, an inquiry like the present one is working toward some understanding of the ways in which a dominant group exercised and refurbished its inherited authority, and the extent to which (if at all) a true “crisis of authority” occurred in the years under scrutiny.³

To suggest that in this volume we are even “working toward” such heady results may be foolhardy. As the authors met for conferences and consultations during the earlier years of this project, it became clear that we could attempt only a kind of reconnoitering in the broad forests and wetlands of Protestant “cultural authority.” The most we could do, we concluded, was to gain some understanding of the establishment’s program for American society, together with an initial grasp of the way that program was perceived, the challenges it faced, and some of the changes in direction that resulted. We have therefore concentrated on what we call the “Protestant Agenda,” principally as articulated by the establishment itself (Parts II and III), but also as viewed and experienced by those who were total or partial outsiders (Part IV). Finally (in Part V), we have probed some ways in which the establishment was challenged by secularization, by religious pluralism, and – toward the end of this era – by “outside” forms of conservative evangelicalism.

Several alternative ways of gaining leverage on these concerns have struck us as promising and perhaps essential even though they were beyond our present capacities. (Most of these are being pursued in continuing studies of mainline Protestant history, under Lilly Endowment sponsorship, at Harvard and elsewhere.) One of the most important of these alternative approaches involves the establishment’s complicated relationship to religious liberalism. Another – perhaps the most enticing of our neglected subjects – embraces the personal, local, and international dimensions of the Protestant establishment: a national leadership net-

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work that needs to be probed with the instruments of individual and group biography; local or regional establishments that so far have barely been touched upon in the sociological literature; overseas extensions or effects of the establishment that relate significantly to American foreign relations and the American impact abroad.

We are also quite aware, however, that we have scanted or telescoped the treatment of some subjects that do fall within our chosen areas of emphasis. At the conference that helped generate this volume, the educational arm of the establishment accounted for three papers – one each on the colleges and universities, the theological seminaries, and religious education; yet for the present publication we found it necessary to conflate those three subjects into one. In the same interest, that of limiting ourselves to a manageable number of chapters, we have here approached Catholic and Jewish relationships to mainline Protestantism through a study of one movement, the Goodwill Movement of the 1920s, in which both were involved. In general, the large and necessarily varied field of inquiry concerning “outsiders” – individual, denominational, or regional – is one to which, although we have ventured into it, we can hope at most to have opened gates and pointed directions.⁴

Some additional remarks are in order, finally, about our concentration upon the earlier part of the twentieth century.

To claim definitive status for the dates 1900 to 1960 would be unnecessary and would in fact mislead readers on a fundamental point. Although one may be able, for working purposes, to define “nineteenth-century America” and, at the other end of our period, a different society called “post-sixties America,” the various forms of Protestant expression and influence did not follow the same schedule in moving from the first of those environments to the second; thus a fully logical scheme of periodization would have to vary with each subtopic we consider. Even then, one would need to comment on earlier and later happenings, since most significant change in any of these areas was gradual and evolutionary rather than cataclysmic. In asking the mainline Protestantism of 1900–60 to hold still long enough for historians to have a careful look, we are imitating the cinematographer who offers a freeze frame in the midst of an unfolding story.

Once this has been firmly acknowledged, however, it is possible to see the earlier twentieth century as an era in which, more than any other, the quest for cultural authority had become a matter of conscious intent and of programmed institutional expression. To be sure, the churches in the nineteenth century had pursued some explicitly “ecumenical” ventures

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embodying such aims; but these had been sporadic and relatively unsuccessful, largely because they had seemed unnecessary. The larger denominations had then been able to rely upon deep and truly vast reserves of inherited authority. They were central institutions in a society that before the 1830s had been overwhelmingly Protestant Christian, and that for all its vaunted diversities had been deeply grounded in English-speaking and Calvinistically derived traditions.

Not only had the challenges mounted and accelerated by the end of the nineteenth century; it seemed that the inherited capital, after so many decades of drawing against the account, had become less adequate for dealing with them. Yet the Protestant leadership and constituency were far from ready to relinquish control; and the American society, on the whole, was not yet demanding that they do so. Instead, the church leadership became quite explicit about the need both for aggressive denominational structures (already largely in place by the 1890s) and for the kind of joint effort represented in early twentieth-century moves toward federation.

Similarly, at the latter end of our era one can identify a complex and gradual, but still quite discernible, shift into a new mode – in this case a mode of greatly increased acceptance of diversity. Until about the 1950s, one rarely finds either insiders or outsiders using phrases like “triple melting pot,” “post-Protestant America,” or “third force” Christianity. Up to that time, the older churches, while recognizing unprecedented challenges to their authority and their power to do good in the society, had given virtually no thought to the notion that they must now do their work within a fundamentally altered – which is to say a truly pluralistic – framework.

These churches, in the era we consider, could not rebuild the populational and other foundations that had been gradually eroding. And they could not demand – on the whole could not even contemplate – the kind of constitutional recognition relied upon by many of their European counterparts. But they could, and did, work to shore up other parts of the superstructure of mainline Protestant dominance.

Our project was first formulated in the planning for a three-day meeting, in June of 1985, that involved some forty past and current members of the Harvard Colloquium in American Religious History (a fortnightly seminar, begun in 1972, principally for doctoral students and visiting scholars from several Harvard programs). From the thirteen papers presented at that conference, an editorial committee selected eight essays that in revised form would be appropriate for this first, defini-

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tional, volume; and we commissioned four additional articles on topics for which investigators were not to be found among the original conferees.

For any director and editor of collaborative work, the one nearly impossible task among many pleasant ones is that of ensuring that contributors discuss the same themes while retaining substantial freedom to discuss those themes in their own ways and to come to their own conclusions. The particular origins and procedures of this project may have enhanced the chances of producing a coherent volume, but they of course increased the risk that a party line would somehow be insinuated. Although only four of the authors (Voskuil, Schneider, King, and Wacker) were “my” doctoral students, most were longtime members of the Harvard Colloquium, and nearly all conferred repeatedly as the project unfolded.

The authors were, however, examining parts of the establishment phenomenon that simply *did* develop differently, and they reached disparate conclusions even as they strove to address common questions. One result is that, although my own introductory, concluding, and connective essays do seek to generalize about our findings, or about those of a given set of authors, those passages inevitably are infected with my own interpretation of what “we” have discovered. Any of my colleagues, it is safe to say, would have written them differently. All have had to be forbearing as I or some group of their coauthors have suggested new essay titles, or have otherwise presumed to tell them what their findings really mean. Wherever my summaries and extrapolations have not done justice to those findings, I hope the authors – and the reader – will practice forbearance just once more.

From the outset, the Protestant establishment project has enjoyed financial and other forms of support from the Lilly Endowment, which is also sponsoring the further investigations to which I have alluded; we owe special thanks to Robert W. Lynn, the Endowment’s Vice President for Religion. Among the many others who have helped us, I must single out Marie Cantlon, who carried broad editorial responsibilities; David Emblidge, and later Emily Loose, at Cambridge University Press, who encouraged and guided us; Richard Seager, who managed most of the conferences and other meetings; Kay Shanahan, who provided clerical and many other kinds of support; and Erick Schenkel, who searched out musty volumes and distant archives for the book’s illustrations.

I must also acknowledge a large debt to all those who, along with eight of the present authors, participated in our “Craigville Conference” of June 1985. Dorothy Bass, Grant Wacker, and John F. Wilson served with

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me on an executive committee that helped plan subsequent meetings and the volume itself. At an advanced stage in the book's development, Robin Lovin, Martin Marty, and other directors of the Chicago project on Religion and American Public Life offered further sponsorship, criticism, and assistance.

William R. Hutchison

NOTES

- 1 The exceptions have been tough-minded examinations of Protestant aspirations that deal to some degree with the twentieth century. See especially the books by Albanese, Handy, and Marty that are listed at the end of Chapter 1.
- 2 Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), preface, introduction, and passim.
- 3 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12, 210–11.
- 4 Benny Kraut, even as he gallantly accepted responsibility for the dual assignment on Catholic and Jewish relationships to the Protestant establishment, urged an additional chapter on Roman Catholicism. I now agree with him, not because of any deficiency in Kraut's presentation but because of my own heightened sense of Catholicism's importance to this entire story. In the case of regional establishments, we did hope and attempt to include an illustrative essay focused on the experience of Southern Baptists as outsiders to the establishment in the twentieth century. We were forced to postpone that task.

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William McGuire King has produced a dozen articles on American and European history, dealing primarily with religion in relation to social reform. His most recent contribution is "An Enthusiasm for Humanity: The Social Emphasis in Religion and Its Accommodation in Protestant Theology" (in M. J. Lacey, ed., *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life*, 1989). King is Associate Professor of Religion at Albright College.

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David W. Wills, who received his Ph.D. in Religion and Society from Harvard University, has written or edited a number of important works on black religion and the black churches in the United States, and is coeditor of a forthcoming documentary history of Afro-American religion. He is Professor of Religion at Amherst College.