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JESUS MATTERS IN THE USA

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Eugene McCarraher, *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000)

D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002)

William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003)

John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003)

Jesus of Nazareth divides the intellectual history of the United States from that of modern Europe in ways that are rarely articulated and explained. It is not simply that colonial-era Puritans and their descendants institutionalized a Protestant framework for doing philosophy, social theory, and political argumentation that survived, as altered by many accommodations with the Enlightenment and with Darwinism, through the end of the nineteenth century. That story is well understood. What remains insufficiently confronted is a condition that came into being after much of the nation's intellectual leadership had been liberated from that Protestant framework while the general public resisted the secularizing trend seen in the publics of nearly all European nations. *Twentieth-century American intellectuals, unlike their counterparts in most European nations, operated in a society the overwhelming majority of which declared Christianity to be much more than a nominal affiliation inherited from a distant past.*

This was true in the 1920s and 1930s, and it was true in the 1970s and 1980s. A credible survey of 1990 found that 86 percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians.[1] The role of religion in public affairs is apparent to the most casual observer of the rhetoric and behavior of leading politicians. In 2000 about 90 percent of Americans polled declared their willingness to vote for a member of even the most stigmatized groups defined by race, ethnicity, or

1 Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (New York, 1993), 1–4.

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gender, while only 49 percent said they could vote for an atheist.[2] Just why Christianity flourishes with greater intensity in the United States than elsewhere in the industrialized North Atlantic West deserves more investigation than it has received. It becomes a more compelling question the longer this anomaly persists and the more pronounced it becomes.[3] But however we may account for this condition, we need also to attend to its consequences.

How has this condition made the intellectual history of the United States in the last century different from that of comparable societies?

In relation to some thinkers, including some whose contributions are the most highly visible abroad, not much. John Rawls? Edmund Wilson? Thomas Kuhn? Lionel Trilling? Richard Hofstadter? Some intellectuals have been touched by this condition only subtly, sometimes in its capacity as an irritant. For some, the United States is primarily a site for the pursuit of agendas established and sustained in a larger arena. Yet the United States, like Russia, France, Germany, and other producers of transnational intellectuals, is not simply a neutral site, but the culturally thick foundation for a national discourse. Most intellectuals participate simultaneously in national and transnational debates. How the local affects the global is not always apparent until one looks closely.

Christianity has figured large in the national debates of the United States, especially down through the 1950s, when Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr functioned as something of a national sage. Substantial cadres of religiously committed intellectuals could be found even in the last third of the century, and flourish today. The gap between the bulk of the intelligentsia and the public is real, but any picture of American intellectual life that fails to include the religiously affirming intellectuals who believe they bridge this gap, even at the risk of losing the respect of their most adamantly secular co-workers, will make the United States look more like Europe than it really is.[4]

But there is more to it. The heavily Christian backdrop has affected the character of justifications for specific popular movements: the more Christian one's potential constituency, the more a theorist has to work within, or work

2 Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Religion in the 2000 Election," *The Public Interest* (Spring 2001), 25, summarizing a study carried out by the Ethics and Public Policy Center. The point is not that this accurately predicted voter behavior, but that so many Americans still felt comfortable saying about atheists things that they did not feel comfortable saying about black people or other traditionally stigmatized categories of people.

3 I have argued for the importance of this question in "Why is There So Much Christianity in the United States?", *Church History* (December 2002).

4 For a recent example of the vigorous assertion of the relevance of Christianity on the part of a prominent American writer, see James Carroll, "Why Religion Still Matters," *Daedalus* 132 (Summer 2003), 9–13.

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to neutralize, the attendant doctrinal and emotional atmosphere.[5] Beyond the demands of movement mobilization, this condition has influenced the allocation of theoretical resources to certain issues and not others. The relations of church to state, for example, and of religion to politics more generally, are debated much more extensively than in Europe—until recently, when new European Muslim populations have generated fresh engagements in this domain of theory. The "relations between science and religion," too, continue to inspire the expenditure of enormous intellectual energies. Yet another consequence is the centrality of the process of "secularization." The vast sanctuaries built by the Methodists and Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the center of almost all American cities and towns are rarely full, and many have been sold to other organizations. But the people who left those huge downtown churches did not just disappear. How are the post-Protestants affected by their Protestant past? Why did they leave, and others stay? If the vast majority of even college-educated Americans remain Christians, what accounts for those who do not, and in what specific theoretical terms do those on either side of the religious–secular line understand themselves?

These features of American intellectual history are all the more dynamic on account of a suspicion of intellectual elitism that is, in itself, a distinguishing aspect of American culture. Aloofness from the cultural expectations of the public is difficult to defend, even for many professional academics, who ritualistically call for more "public intellectuals." Yet such aloofness was promoted in the first half of the twentieth century by the accelerating professionalization and specialization of American intellectual life, making scholars more responsive to their peers and less obligated to deal with the tastes of the rest of the population. In the second half of the century a remarkable transformation in the ethno-religious demography of the academic and literary intelligentsia, facilitated by the success of the professionalizing projects of earlier decades, sharpened this sense of distance. Jews were absorbed into the leadership of this intelligentsia after the collapse of Christian-inspired restrictions on Jewish faculty and students in leading colleges and universities. This meant that people who had no Christian background at all—not even the lapsed Protestantism of early twentieth-century secularists like John Dewey and Joseph Wood Krutch—were now helping to design undergraduate curricula and to define the terms on which philosophy, the novel, history, law, poetry, literary scholarship, sociology, political science, and other culturally sensitive callings were being practiced. Jews interacting with liberal Protestants and lapsed Protestants greatly advanced the integration of American intellectual life with that of the secularized elites of Europe, and in the

5 Consider the liberal law professors and their allies trying to muster support for a progressive tax policy in the state of Alabama: Adam Cohen, "What Would Jesus Do? Sock it to Alabama's Corporate Landholders," *New York Times*, June 10, 2003, A26.

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process they helped distinguish "the intellectuals" from everyone else. The less Christian the intelligentsia, the greater the gap between it and the public.

These very dynamics may help account for the relative slowness of historians to articulate and explain the ways in which Jesus divides modern American from modern European intellectual history. Some appear reluctant to dwell on the ethno-religious context of the gap between the public and intellectuals for fear of giving indirect support to the anti-Jewish attitudes long sustained by Christian cultures. Others welcome the relative isolation of the predominantly secular intelligentsia as an excuse to concentrate on that intelligentsia's transatlantic connections, and to treat the Christianity of the public and of the public's learned fellow travelers as an irrelevant anachronism. Still others, more sympathetic to Christianity, appear reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which the learned men and women of Europe have left Christianity behind, because an emphasis on this historic development can imply a secularist teleology according to which Christians are on their way to a justified extinction.

But it is to the professional culture of academic historians in general, beyond the narrower ranks of intellectual historians, that we must look to find the most formidable and salient inertia. Religion is simply not prominent on the agenda of the social, political, and cultural historians who study the broader American public in the early twenty-first century. Many of the historians who lead the Organization of American Historians and the *Journal of American History* find it hard to admit how vibrant Christianity remains in the United States.[6] These scholars often associate recent American Christianity largely with right-wing political movements. Might treating Christianity more seriously as a historical reality serve to reinforce its hold on the society? Are there not dangers in emphasizing that the United States is, after all, a largely Christian society? These fears are ironically confirmed, up to a point, by a historiographical reality: a great many of the most accomplished students of American religious history are themselves avowedly Christian. Some others are non-believers, or are inconspicuous about their own religious orientation, but just as students of the history of feminism, of the civil rights movement, and of anti-imperialist initiatives often display sympathy toward their subjects, so, too, do students of Christianity. The overall result is that most historians who are not committed to Christianity say relatively little about its recent manifestations, and circle ambivalently around one of the most important and distinguishing features of

6 For a revealing indicator of the assumptions and dispositions of specialists in the history of the United States today, including some hints that the importance of religious history is coming to be more widely recognized, see the on-line conversation of nine historians moderated by the editors of the *Journal of American History* and published in that journal's September 2003 issue.

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the United States. The culture of the profession in which intellectual historians are embedded does not encourage candid, probing explorations of how Jesus matters.

That Jesus does matter is fully understood, although in varying terms, by four historians whose recent books are the occasion for this essay. Disparate as are the specific topics of these books, all instruct us about the Christian matrix of substantial portions of American intellectual life. All illuminate the tension between national and religious identity. And all lead us, by different routes, to the distinctly liberal Protestantism that built those empty-pew or sold-to-the-Pentecostals churches that still dominate the architecture of many American cities and towns. What we might make of that uniquely central strand of the history of Christianity in the United States is a question to which I shall turn at the end.

Liberal Protestants and liberal Catholics are among the main actors in the story told by Eugene McCarraher's *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought*. McCarraher analyzes a sequence of episodes in which intellectuals wanting to provide a theoretical basis for social improvement have done so through theology. Paul Tillich, John Courtney Murray, Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Reinhold Niebuhr are among McCarraher's most well-known subjects, but he also devotes extensive attention to Niebuhr's brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, and to Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, A. J. Muste, John A. Ryan, Daniel Berrigan, Jacques Maritain, Mary Daly, and Harvey Cox. McCarraher hopes "to establish the existence in twentieth century America of a critical, progressive lineage rooted firmly in Christian theology and to locate it in relation to the broader history of progressive intellectuals" (p. 3). He asserts that theology, in the hands of his subjects, "became neither a hoary liberal art nor a recondite conviction, but rather a mode of critical attention to political economy, social relations, cultural life, work, and technology" (pp. 1–2). These intellectuals, unlike their secular counterparts who have received more attention from historians sympathetic to the left, "believed that social and cultural revolution would come not from the dialectic of class struggle or the ingenuity of social engineers but from the therapeutic political practice of Christianity" (p. 2).

McCarraher is most effective in a series of capsule accounts of just where his cast of characters resisted or accommodated with what he calls the "professional–managerial class," the chief function of which he believes to be the facilitating of the triumph of an increasingly consumer-oriented capitalism. His sympathies are openly with the neo-orthodox H. Richard Niebuhr, the pacifist Muste, and the mystic Merton, and others who he credits with resisting this direction of modern society. He provides thoughtful and informative overviews of several rarely discussed figures, including the black theologian Howard Thurman. But much of the book is given over to explaining just where the most famous of his

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subjects, especially Reinhold Niebuhr, Tillich, the Jesuit Murray, and the social gospel Protestants accommodated with the prevailing order. Each figure is judged by McCarraher's demanding standard for deploying the resources of Christianity in a sufficiently oppositional mode.

Readers who are less sure than McCarraher of the right and wrong of things can still learn from his serial interrogations. McCarraher reveals, for example, how suspicious Murray was of popular, democratic politics, and how eager he was for "a corps of cultural professionals setting and patrolling the perimeters of public discussion" (p. 108). He offers a probing analysis of the dead ends and evasions of the Catholic Worker movement of the 1930s. At the center of *Christian Critics* is a lively and informative chapter on the personal and public life of Tillich, but his final judgment on the author of *The Courage to Be* is severe: Tillich was "an artifact of the consuming vision, an embryonic stage of the 'commodity spirituality' that denotes one of the purest therapeutic forms in the culture of late capitalism" (p. 146).

The scope of McCarraher's analysis is strangely limited in several respects. While he explores the relation between many of his subjects and the secular reformers of their milieu, pointing, for example, to the quietistic Merton's engagement with the work of Marxist Herbert Marcuse, McCarraher pays very little attention to Christians who were more accepting of the standing order, or defenders of it. Yet the "critical" tradition he traces achieved much of its shape in dialogue with these other Christians, who often proved more influential than McCarraher's subjects. "Fundamentalism" is not listed in the index, nor is Father Charles Coughlin. From McCarraher one gets little sense that Christianity is a highly contested charter for society and politics, rather than a prophetic if elusive set of truths that some people grasp better than others.

Nor does McCarraher deal with the important question of what place his subjects had in mind for non-Christians in a United States to be reformed on the basis of a distinctly Christian worldview. Many of the radicals pursuing the class-centered and science-centered strategies McCarraher scorns were of course Jews, a category of Americans also absent from McCarraher's index. Except when discussing Daly and other feminist theologians of the 1970s, McCarraher rarely explores the possible implications for gender equality of a "critical" Christianity, especially as espoused by Catholic thinkers devoted to "family." Even when praising the intellectuals he most admires for their "fidelity first to principles and historical communities," McCarraher dances around the sexual conservatism of these communities, acknowledging in passing that even his heroes are "sometimes chained to militantly (and ahistorically) anti-liberal stances (especially on sexual matters)" (p. 188). He laments Daly's eventual repudiation of Christianity in favor of a gender-defined religious outlook, but, looking willfully away from the masculinist biases in the Christian tradition to which Daly's extreme apostasy

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responded, McCarraher discredits Daly's concerns by treating her as another lackey of capitalist elites: her celebration of "individuality and diversity" offered "keywords soon to be siren sweet to the ears of (mostly male) corporate leaders" (p. 177).

The tradition McCarraher addresses is more interesting than *Christian Critics* makes it. Preoccupied with finding a past more usable to him as an adamant anti-capitalist than the one he actually found, McCarraher ironically underestimates the historical significance of the tradition to which his book rightly directs us. Although a useful corrective to the histories of the left that leave out Christians altogether, McCarraher is as sectarian as the secular left historians at their notorious worst. *Christian Critics* ends not with a summary of what his subjects achieved, nor even with a frank admission of how badly they let him down, but with a hortatory and threadbare affirmation of his own religious vision to the complacent exclusion of all others: "Christianity remains the motherlode of the moral imagination essential for deliverance from the glittering imperium of American capitalism," setting "faith," "hope," and "charity" against "the hubris of secular skepticism" (p. 190). But hubris, as McCarraher's own poorly concealed portion of it testifies, is not limited to secular skeptics.

How different are both the authorial voice and the material addressed in D. G. Hart's *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*. While McCarraher and most of his subjects are determined to incorporate America itself into their Christian witness, Hart and his subjects are more interested in being left alone to practice Christianity on their own. Hart's subjects are the church-centered, creed-affirming, ritual-appreciating denominations—especially the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, and the most conservative of the Presbyterians—that resisted revivalism in the nineteenth century and remained distant from revivalism's two twentieth-century descendants, the "evangelicals" and the "liberals." Hart calls this historiographically neglected minority "Confessional Protestants" in recognition of their emphasis on embedding individuals in institutions and ritualized practices, and their inclination to downplay the religious significance of public affairs, including those of the United States. Both the liberals and their rival evangelicals "dismissed church creeds, structures, and ceremonies as merely formal or external," tested faith by its ability to transform individuals, and expected these transformed individuals to display their transformation in "all walks of life." The confessionals are very different: they situate "the things of greatest religious meaning" not in worldly social and political engagements, but in "the sacred sphere of the church and its ministry" (p. xxiii).

Clarifying the role of Confessional Protestants in American Protestant history is only one of Hart's major goals. He also wants to vindicate confessionalism as a superior kind of Christianity. This aspect of the book will be of interest chiefly to Christians involved in disputes specific to that community of faith, but I deal

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with it here because Hart's history and his religious argumentation are closely connected. Hart argues that the liberals and the evangelicals alike "abandoned large pieces of their Christian heritage by working so hard to make their faith practical and relevant to everything from the personal lives of ordinary citizens to the affairs of the most powerful nations in modern history" (p. xviii). By departing from the good sense of the other-worldly saints of the early Reformation, the mainline evangelicals and liberals, Hart continues, are largely to blame "for the self-righteousness and moralism that has characterized American culture." Mainline Protestantism "looks for evidence of genuine religion more in the everyday affairs of citizens and national officials than in the religious observances of believers gathered as the body of Christ" (p. xxx).

Historians of almost any religious orientation can profit from Hart's detailed account of several major moments in the development of confessionalism. He has the most to say about three specific cases: eighteenth-century Presbyterians, nineteenth-century Lutherans, and twentieth-century Missouri Synod Lutherans, along with those Presbyterian and Reformed groups that held to the old ways when other Presbyterian and Reformed organizations assimilated into either the evangelical or liberal camps. His most provocative sections detail the differences between the confessionals and other conservative Protestants in the twentieth century.

Confessionalism's strongest modern theorist, Hart believes, was J. Gresham Machen, the Presbyterian theologian of the 1920s and 1930s often characterized as a "fundamentalist" and given some visibility by Walter Lippmann's respectful account of his ideas in *A Preface to Morals* (1929). Hart builds upon his own previous book on Machen to explain that Machen was not so much a fundamentalist or even an evangelical as he was a confessional. Machen cared little for social reform. Hart contrasts Machen to William Jennings Bryan and other noted fundamentalists of the 1920s who campaigned against alcohol and the teaching of evolution in public school, and also to Carl Henry and other fundamentalist and evangelical theorists of the 1940s and later who shared with liberals a determination to change the world but attacked the liberals for insufficient attention to Christ. Machen was known for his strict standards for who was and was not Christian. These standards were indeed sectarian and intolerant, Hart explains, but they took on their meaning in the context of a sharp public–private distinction that placed churches decisively outside the realm of public affairs. Hart's account of the varieties of conservative Protestant doctrine will challenge readers who assume that the distinction between liberals and evangelicals is the only one you need in order to adequately understand Protestant thought in the twentieth century.

Hart draws too sharply the distinction between the confessionals and all other Protestants in regard to the role of the institutional church. A genuine and abiding

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concern with the community of believers as nurtured by the church is a more robust component of Methodist, Congregational, and Baptist theory and practice than Hart acknowledges. Hart's sectarianism gets the better of his history when he repeatedly leaves the impression that his confessionalism is a unified and clearly bounded persuasion rather than a space into which reach the extreme ends of several neighboring spectra (one concerning ritual, another concerning church polity, and another concerning the character of the ministry).

Yet for all his absorption with the destiny of other-worldly communities, Hart engages earnestly with American political theory at the very end of *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*. The quasi-separatism of confessional churches can be justified, he suggests, in largely the same terms that are widely accepted for the quasi-separatism of American ethnic communities, especially now that the degree of an individual's identification with these communities is coming to be understood as more voluntary than ascribed. Hart concludes that Confessional Protestantism is "a religious form of multiculturalism," and one that reduces rather than intensifies "the strains that Protestants have historically put on American society." The reduction is achieved "by making the church, not the nation, the locus of religious energy and norms," thus freeing arguments about the nation from the obligation to meet strict religious imperatives. Hart interprets the ecumenical movement of the liberals, as institutionalized in the National Council of Churches during the second half of the twentieth century, as an excessively assimilationist "smoothing over" of distinctive traditions in order to preserve for Christianity "a more prominent public presence" (p. 182).

Hart's relative humility about religion and nation might well have found a biblical emblem in Amos's warning that in God's eyes, all are *goyim* ("Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel?").[7] But this emblem is offered instead for a book that concentrates sympathetically on the story of Protestantism's liberalization, and ends up, remarkably, at a place almost identical with Hart's embrace of religious multiculturalism. William R. Hutchison's *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* shows how the reality of diversity within and beyond Protestantism prompted conflicting efforts to include and exclude, yielding, by the end of the twentieth century, a greater acceptance in relation to religious groups of a pluralist principle long since established in relation to political groups: that many different persuasions could co-exist rather than try to incorporate or expel each other. This is the most ambitious book yet from the dean of historians of religion in the United States: a wonderfully discerning exploration of how Americans have variously confronted and tried to evade the challenge of religious diversity.

7 Amos 9:7.

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Hutchison organizes his history around three different senses of religious pluralism that have prevailed at different times. It was once considered highly generous simply to *tolerate* faiths outside the early republic's heavily Anglo-Protestant center of religious gravity (90 percent of white Americans at the time of the Revolution were not only Anglo-Protestants, but came out of the Calvinist rather than the Lutheran side of the Reformation). Later, to *include* Catholics, Mormons, and other persuasions distant from the Anglo-Protestant center generally meant that "the newly included" were formally allowed to share in the exercise of cultural authority in the society, but that they "sat at the back of the bus" (p. 6). In the 1920s it would have been outrageous to suggest that the "seventeen million Catholics should perhaps have as much influence on American public policy as was enjoyed by three-quarters of a million Congregationalists" (p. 138). Only in the second half of the twentieth century did pluralism understood as a liberty to fully *participate* take hold, entailing the assumption that Jews as well as Catholics were equally part of the American nation along with Protestants of all varieties.

Animating Hutchison's narrative is a dialectic between (a) demographic diversification resulting largely from immigration, and (b) theological liberalization within the old Anglo-Protestant mainstream resulting from deeper engagements with science and the Enlightenment as well as from a need for a generic version of Protestantism capable of providing a unifying canopy for the proliferating denominations. As the warrants for particularistic versions of the faith lost their hold in the light of worldly experience, the liberals concentrated on the "essentials" of Christianity, and made overtures even to non-Christians in the great "World's Parliament of Religions" organized in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Again and again, the establishment liberals made invidious distinctions—other faiths would eventually "evolve" to become more like American liberal Protestantism—yet were caught up in a logic that led them gradually to more complete acceptance of the value of at least the "great" religions of humankind, if not the pretenders and the freaks. From the 1910s through the 1940s the liberals' social gospel program put them in close contact with urban non-Protestants who deprovincialized the liberal Protestants in vital respects, and their foreign mission experience made denominational particularism seem all the more parochial. How to persuade a Chinese peasant that it was really important to become a Northern Baptist, rather than a Southern Baptist, or to join the Dutch Reformed as opposed to the German Reformed Church?

By the middle of the century, Hutchison shows, liberal theory and the experience of diversity at home and abroad had driven the ecumenical impulse to an unprecedented extreme. The welcoming of Catholics and Jews into the newly celebrated "Judeo-Christian tradition" uniting religious believers against communist and other forms of secularism followed this logic. From the 1960s

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to the end of the century the debates about pluralism were both complicated and sharpened by the immigration of Muslims and Hindus, by the rise to public prominence of politically active evangelicals who had little patience for liberal theory, and by the sudden shift from religious to ethno-racial categories in the national conversation about cultural diversity.

And it is in this last setting that Hutchison finds his way to the same debates about the management of diversity that engage Hart. It seemed imperative by the 1990s to recognize the need of people for closely knit, culturally particular communities based on religious affiliation or shared history, yet at the same time to encourage members of these communities to participate in the larger solidarity of the nation without trying to impose their own particularism upon it. Styles of multiculturalism that promote this balance, Hutchison concludes, have recently pushed the old debate about religious pluralism to a new stage in which pluralism is embraced as a positive value, rather than accepted as a practical necessity. Hence Amos: various groups may think of themselves as "the chosen," but they might be better advised to see themselves as just "a people among peoples" (p. 237).

Religious Pluralism in America sometimes slights the reasons democratic egalitarians had for resisting the full participation of some groups. The most striking case is Hutchison's discussion of Paul Blanshard's book of 1949, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*. He treats Blanshard as a sign that "anti-Catholicism in its venerable anti-Vatican shape had not evaporated" (p. 206), and he accepts uncritically the denunciations of Blanshard as a bigot offered at the time by Murray and other Catholics. But Catholic behavior for the previous 15 years had given the multitudes of politically liberal intellectuals who praised Blanshard substantial reasons to regard Catholicism as more of a threat to pluralist ideals than a potential means of fulfilling them. Catholics had offered extensive support for the Vichy government in France and for fascist regimes in Italy and Spain, had successfully promoted the censorship of Hollywood motion pictures, had mobilized in several states to prevent the dissemination of basic information about contraception, and had repeatedly refused cooperative endeavors with Protestants and Jews on the grounds that such cooperation implied the equal validity of the different religions.

By 1960, when the Catholic John F. Kennedy was elected President, the political face of American Catholicism had changed decisively. The Cold War created opportunities during the 1950s for Catholics to ally with others against "godless communism," while liberal priests labored to change the church's character from within. Hence the greater integration of Catholics into American life under the aegis of pluralism took place not so much because a by-then-embarrassing anti-Catholic prejudice declined, but because Catholicism by the early 1960s no longer presented itself politically in the way it had when Blanshard wrote his famous polemic. Blanshard himself acknowledged that by the time of

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Vatican II, Catholicism was no longer what he had said it was only a few years earlier.

These bits of evidence for the character of Catholic political initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s are found in John T. McGreevy's *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History*, the title of which is an obvious play on Blanshard. McGreevy quotes the eminent Catholic historian Carleton J. H. Hayes, writing to Murray privately in 1943 wishing that the too-conservative bishops would "frankly accept the *fact* of cultural pluralism among us" (p. 205). McGreevy details richly the arguments within the Catholic community about just how the Catholic Church should orient itself to the pluralist ideal. The church eventually adopted Murray's position on church–state separation—that it was just fine, subject to interpretation and litigation—and has long since honored Murray as the great theorist and political negotiator of the accommodation of Catholicism with American democracy, the key advisor to Kennedy in 1960, and a quiet tornado driving Vatican II. But it was a real fight: as late as 1955 Murray's Jesuit superiors gave him the "order" to "stop writing on church–state issues" (p. 208).

No fan of Blanshard's, McGreevy nevertheless enables us to see more clearly than ever before that Murray's achievement was to transform the political demeanor of American Catholicism so that it came close to meeting the standard of democracy that Blanshard had set for it. The freethinking Blanshard could say things about Catholicism that no priest could. McGreevy's account of Catholic history from the 1930s through the early 1960s liberates the Blanshard controversy from the bigot-or-not idiom and places it, instead, in the tense struggle of Catholics themselves to understand their own faith and practice as historically embedded, and to convince non-Catholics that Catholics could accept pluralism.

McGreevy approaches these pivotal mid-twentieth-century events in the context of the entire sweep of Catholic experience in America. *Catholicism and American Freedom* begins with a spectacular case of Protestant prejudice. The official of a Boston school publicly whipped a ten-year-old Catholic boy for refusing to recite the King James Version of the Ten Commandments, instead of doing what Catholic children had generally done, to "mutter a different version" (p. 7) approved by priests as a way of complying with the Massachusetts statute requiring the recitation at the start of each school day. The Boston school officials were scarcely endorsing "pluralism" here, and McGreevy delivers a vivid and convincing account of the dilemmas of Catholics when surrounded by an overbearingly Protestant public culture. McGreevy is also a good guide to the career of the progressive priest John A. Ryan, and other leading characters in the story of Catholicism's engagement with American politics.

McGreevy too often stops short of pulling together the analysis that his formidable research might support. He is at his best when little interpretation is invited, as when we see an innocent and courageous schoolboy whipped,

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or when the evidence is before us of the profound American influence behind Vatican II's promulgation in 1965 of the "Declaration of Religious Freedom." In a strong chapter on the debates over contraception, featuring the theoretical work of John T. Noonan, McGreevy demonstrates that it was exactly while changing the church's stance on birth control that Catholic intellectuals succeeded in gaining more widespread recognition for the still-radical idea that Catholicism was a historically developing presence in the world that changed its collective mind from time to time. Yet when McGreevy turns to abortion, he becomes tentative and elliptical. He quotes at length from various partisans during the 1970s, before and after *Roe* v. *Wade*, but says almost nothing about the discussion since 1980. Instead, he rushes from 1980 to the present moment in a slap-dash concluding chapter pivoting on the sexual abuse scandals of the early twenty-first century.

About those scandals and what they may reveal about the political culture of Catholicism even long after Vatican II, McGreevy has surprisingly little to say. He is willing to cite the case of the Boston Catholic mother who slapped her son when he tried to confide in her about sexual abuse by a priest. But rather than explain what incidents like this, and the behavior of the child-abusing priests and the bishops who protected them, might mean, McGreevy shies away from the interpretive consummation his generally excellent book leads his readers to anticipate. This final chapter might well have been called "Blanshard's Revenge" in recognition of the measure of vindication the recent scandals provide for the charges of the old "bigot" that the Catholic Church's perspective on sexuality was deeply problematic. Or, if that is not what McGreevy thinks, he should tell his readers what he does think. By setting up his book antiphonally to Blanshard's, McGreevy takes upon himself an interpretive obligation that he does not complete.[8]

Liberal Protestants dot McGreevy's account of how Murray and his contemporaries renegotiated the terms of Catholicism's relationship with American politics. Reinhold Niebuhr and other leaders of the liberal Protestant establishment attended closely to American Catholicism's internal changes and gradually effected alliances with the Catholic Church that were generally avoided by the evangelicals. Liberal Protestantism figures importantly also in the stories told by McCarraher and Hart, where it is the context out of which so many of the "Christian Critics" arise and the foil against which the "Confessional Protestants" largely define themselves. And liberal Protestants are the chief movers of the story told by Hutchison.

8 McGreevy's title is taken word-for-word from a book of 1951 written explicitly as a refutation of Blanshard: James M. O'Neill, *Catholicism and American Freedom* (New York, 1952). I owe my own awareness of this book to Healan Gaston.

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All four books, taken together, point to the unique centrality of liberal Protestantism. This centrality has been somewhat obscured by the decline in numbers experienced by the old, "mainline" denominations during the 1960s, and by two other much-discussed developments: the subsequent rise in numbers and political engagement by right-wing evangelicals, and the integration into American public affairs and cultural conversation of members of the nation's largest religious organization, the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, one reason why liberal Protestantism is now so little studied is that its historical significance is too often wrongly measured by its success in maintaining its numbers.

This yardstick is an artifact of the Christian survivalist bias common to popular and scholarly discussions of religion in recent and contemporary America. How has a given initiative or behavior advanced or retarded the cause of Christianity itself? From this perspective, the story of the evangelicals is generally counted a resounding success, the story of the liberals a failure, and one that is often said to confirm the notion that liberalism is a slippery slope to secularism.

But if we emancipate ourselves from a preoccupation with what is good for Christianity, we can analyze the liberal and evangelical strains in twentieth-century American Christianity in other terms. That liberal Protestantism smoothed the way for consumer capitalism in the twentieth century is no doubt true, and has been widely remarked upon in what scholarly literature we do have on liberal Protestantism. But if that were its chief role, its huge old churches might have grown rather than declined as that capitalism went from triumph to triumph in the last third of the twentieth century. Liberal Protestantism was also a means by which countless persons of Protestant origin negotiated challenges that they, given their social and psychological circumstances, were simply not prepared to confront in a secular context. A historical function of liberal Protestantism has been to serve as a crucial intellectual and emotional space for exploring the diversity and contingency of a modern world kept at a greater, more suspicious distance by evangelicals.

Evangelicals have often maintained the integrity of their tradition by closing themselves off from experiences that the liberals, at risk to their faith, have engaged. Two critical and closely related examples are the study of non-Christian religions and the calibration of missionary endeavors to populations where Hinduism, Islam, or other religions are firmly entrenched. The liberals eventually decided that seeking conversion of the peoples abroad to whom they ministered was highly problematic, and moved first toward educational, medical, and other service-centered missionary activities and then, after the 1960s, phased out most of what had once been a vast missionary project. Simultaneously, the liberals promoted and carried out rigorous scholarship on world religions, entailing a large measure of empathic identification. The evangelicals, in the meantime, eschewed the sympathetic study of other religions, and with enormous energy

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took up the missionary enterprise where the liberals had abandoned it. "It is indisputable," observes Grant Wacker, "that evangelicals have not yet proved that they are able to hold their hand against the hot flame of sustained, disciplined study of world religions—and keep their evangelical convictions."[9] The liberals held their hand to that flame of broadened historical experience, and decided either that Jesus mattered differently than they had thought before, or that he did not matter so much after all. The idea of liberal Protestantism as a halfway house, as a stepping stone to modernity, even as a slippery slope out of Christianity, is problematic only if one looks at twentieth-century history as a Christian survivalist.

To recognize liberal Protestantism's historic function as a set of mechanisms for critically engaging exactly those parts of modernity that most challenge a provincial faith is not to imply that liberal Protestantism is simply and exclusively a pathway to something else. The liberal Protestant denominations retain a greater constituency today, and are more intimately allied with liberal Catholics, than is often recognized when Christianity's media face is likely to be a blur of the countenances of a corrupt Catholic bishop avoiding jail and a son of Billy Graham calling for the conversion of Iraqi Muslims to Christianity. Religious communities have long served as vital mediating devices between the individual and the nation in a society where the church–state separation frees religious groups to play a more important civil society role than in societies where religion has been incorporated into the state. In this American context, liberal religions are likely to maintain themselves, and may even experience some growth, as conservative religions become more and more identified with reactionary political programs of limited appeal to millions of Americans. Liberal Christianity may yet have a long future. We do not know. But one does not have to declare religion dead in order to analyze accurately aspects of its history that flow to the outside of the perimeter of faith, making Jesus matter less.

9 Grant Wacker, "Second Thoughts on the Great Commission: Liberal Protestants and Foreign Missions," in Joel A. Carpenter and Wilber R. Shenk, eds., *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880–1980* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1990), 300.

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