



Religious Trends in Twentieth-Century America

WALTER SUNDBERG

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

OVER THE LAST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, THREE IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS have shaped American religious life. The first is the double-sided trend of the decline of mainline churches and the growth of evangelical churches. The second is the divisive effect of political activism on the communal life of denominations. The third is the reduction of the role of religion in public life through the enforcement of the Supreme Court's legal doctrine of separation of church and state.

I. THE DECLINE OF MAINLINE CHURCHES AND THE GROWTH OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

"Mainline" originally referred to a commuter train route running from downtown Philadelphia to the wealthy suburbs, home of that city's high society. The term has become a sociological metaphor used to identify Protestant denomi-

WALTER SUNDBERG is professor of church history.

Mainline church membership is in decline, while conservative churches are growing. Political activism seriously divides mainline churches. A radicalized separation of church and state contributes to the secularization of American society. At the turn of the century, these three developments continue to shape religion in America.

nations that are largely white, affluent, and open to the secular influences of modern culture—in short, the Protestant “establishment.” Eight denominations are commonly cited as belonging to the mainline: American Baptist Churches in the USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. Except for John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton, all United States Presidents who declared themselves Christian came from mainline denominations. Nearly fifty percent of all Supreme Court justices have been either Episcopalians or Presbyterians. In the House and the Senate, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists regularly make up a plurality of the membership.¹

Despite their impressive role in society, mainline denominations have suffered loss of members since 1965. The figures for the period from 1965 to 1994 are:

American Baptist Churches in the USA	-3.3%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	-51.1%
Episcopal Church	-27.0%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	-8.5%
Presbyterian Church (USA)	-13.1%
Reformed Church in America	-19.8%
United Church of Christ	-27.5%
United Methodist Church	-22.4%

Some of these numbers are quite dramatic, others less so.² But it must be remembered that during this same period, the population of the United States grew by nearly thirty percent. Proportionate to population, membership decline in all these churches is alarming. Mainline denominations are steadily becoming marginalized in American religious life.

Mainline theologians and church officials rationalize membership loss by ascribing it to the effects of modern secularization. They assert that the decline of the church is inevitable because we live in a “post-Christian” era in which fewer people are attracted to organized religion. The trouble with this mainline scenario is that it does not fit the facts of religious life in America. While mainline denominations are in decline, a significant number of evangelical denominations have experienced impressive rates of growth. I define evangelical denominations as those churches that teach that the normal beginning of genuine Christian life is spiritual transfor-

¹Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 1-2.

²Membership figures for mainline and evangelical churches (below) are taken from *Christianity Today*, 11 August 1997, 11.

mation and that combine this teaching with a conservative stance on theological, moral, and political issues. The chief examples of evangelical denominations that have enjoyed membership growth in the period from 1965 to 1994 are:

Assemblies of God	+306%
Church of God (Cleveland, TN)	+252%
Church of God in Christ	+1,232%
Church of the Nazarene	+74%
Southern Baptist Convention	+45%

This growth is not an isolated phenomenon in American religious life. The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant church in America. Pentecostalist denominations like the Assemblies of God represent the fastest growing Christian movement in the history of the church. The impact of evangelical denominations is global. Worldwide, Pentecostalism has gone from 8.5 million adherents in 1958 to over 400 million today.³ In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, this movement represents nothing less than the future of Protestantism.

The first to recognize the disparity between mainline churches and evangelical churches was Dean M. Kelley in *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. Since its publication in 1972 (Harper), this book has become a classic. *Christian Century* numbered it among the books of the decade. Kelley argues that mainline denominations lack impetus because they deliver a confused message based on a strategy of accommodation. This strategy asserts that the Christian proclamation must be made as compatible as possible with the intellectual presuppositions of contemporary society. Churches must resymbolize their historic faiths in light of prevailing cultural imperatives taken from the natural and social sciences. Otherwise the Christian message will fall on deaf ears. The primary means of accommodation are historical-critical method in biblical scholarship, the politicization of theological concepts and denominational activities for the purpose of social reform, the redefinition of Christian anthropology using therapeutic categories derived from psychology, and the toleration of religious diversity in ecclesial life. According to Kelley, this strategy is confusing because it allows the world to determine the word. The church fails to create a distinctive profile as a social institution over against secular society. By contrast, evangelical churches offer a clear message. Dogmatic in belief, strict in their demands on behavior, refusing to accommodate intellectual trends, affirming the infallibility of scripture, these churches successfully carry out the indispensable function of religion: to explain the meaning of life unambiguously to adherents.

The Scottish sociologist Steve Bruce is among those who have confirmed Kel-

³Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997) 5.

ley's thesis. He analyzes the predicament of what he calls "liberal" churches, a category that includes not only mainline denominations in America but Protestant territorial churches in Europe. Bruce defines liberal churches by their tendency to regard "human reason as paramount" and to theologize from the agenda of the secular world.⁴ Basic to their belief is the acceptance of modern pluralism. If pluralism is an accepted value, how do liberal churches define their core beliefs and the boundaries of membership? They cannot. This inability is a serious flaw for any social organization, but especially damaging for a religious group, because it goes against the fundamental nature of religion, which "is concerned with certainty. It is about discovering the Archimedean point which allows us to escape the ambiguity and confusion of the mundane world."⁵ The profile of liberal churches is seriously out of sync with the "product" they offer. One cannot sell certainty with uncertainty.

The inability to market their product hampers liberal churches from recruiting active supporters, whether by evangelization or socialization of the young. Why should adults commit themselves to something vague and dissatisfying? How can children understand the beliefs of a group that lacks conviction? Bruce is especially effective in describing the social effect on the Christian education of the young of the liberal interpretation of the Bible as opposed to conservative exegesis:

The socialization of young children necessarily involves bowdlerizing and simplifying. The virtue of conservative Protestantism is that it survives such treatment better. Children can understand and believe in a God with the white beard who actually did make the world in six days and who dictated the Bible to faithful stenographers. Apart from anything else, conservative Protestantism has the advantage that its treatment of the Bible, as containing true stories of miraculous occurrences, makes for appealing presentation to children. Because conservative Protestantism is realistic and dogmatic, what is left after it has been reduced to the level of the comic book is still consistent with the mature product. When it suffers the same translation, liberalism appears either empty or uncertain and ambiguous.⁶

If liberal churches are unable to convert adults and if they have a hard time retaining their young, how do they replenish their ranks? Bruce asserts that besides living off the residue of members who belong by inheritance, liberal churches depend on the large flock of active believers that evangelicals provide. When these sheep stray, liberal churches pick them up. This leads Bruce to speak of parasitism: "Although no value judgment is implied, it seems accurate to describe liberalism as being parasitic on evangelicalism. No large popular movement has converted non-believers to a liberal Protestantism." The appeal of liberal religion to lapsed evangelicals is that it releases them from the "conservative strait jacket" of sectarian

⁴Steve Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestantism, Schism, and Secularization* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 102.

⁵*Ibid.*, 123.

⁶*Ibid.*, 139.

faith.⁷ This appeal is more negative than positive. Lapsed evangelicals are no more successful in passing faith on to their children than Christians raised in mainline churches.

In the last forty years, mainline denominations have also sought to replenish themselves through the ecumenical movement. Ecclesiastical officials and theologians have put an enormous amount of time, money, and energy in an effort to unify denominations through bilateral and multilateral dialogues and agreements. This has been done in the belief that a united church can witness more effectively to a secular world. To many observers, however, this effort has more to do with what J. Edward Carothers calls the “diminishing vitality” of denominational organizations than with a theological vision. In mainline ecumenism, declining churches are, for the most part, attracted to other declining churches. By contrast, “Robust, thriving churches fend off unification efforts.”⁸

Since Kelley’s pioneering work, religious sociology has built up an impressive body of literature that paints a sad picture of mainline Christianity as a static, even impotent phenomenon.⁹ This literature is convincing to at least some major theologians. “To the degree that this form of Christianity has assimilated itself to the dominant ethos,” writes the Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, “reasons for anyone joining it are harder to come by.”¹⁰ According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Protestant mainline churches are in acute danger of disappearing. I expect they will disappear if they continue neither to resist the spirit of a progressively secularist culture nor try to transform it.”¹¹

This pessimistic assessment applies to mainline churches, not to Christianity as a whole. While mainline churches are declining, evangelical churches are growing and overall church attendance is on the rise.¹² The trend I am describing is indeed double-sided. The success of evangelicals—a success based on the characteristics so effectively defined by Kelley—has led Donald E. Miller of the University of Southern California, religious sociologist and mainline church member (Episcopal), to speak of the emergence of a “new paradigm” for American Protestantism. In his study of the Calvary, Vineyard, and Hope Chapel movements in California, Miller sees a new style of Christian corporate life which, he believes, may come to dominate the American religious landscape to bring about revival: “[T]hese churches are creating a new genre of worship music; they are restructuring the organiza-

⁷Ibid., 109-110.

⁸J. Edward Carothers, *The Paralysis of Mainstream Protestant Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 59.

⁹See especially: Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992); Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Reeves, *Empty Church*; Miller, *Reinventing Protestantism*.

¹⁰Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) 64.

¹¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Uncertainty of the Christian West,” *First Things* 48 (December 1994) 23.

¹²On the steady increase of religious attendance and church membership in American history, see Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 1-21.

tional character of institutional religion; and they are democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers.”¹³

II. THE DIVISIVE EFFECT OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The second religious trend that bears examination is the divisive effect of political activism on the communal life of the church. At first glance, it would appear that there is nothing particularly distinctive in this trend. Political matters have always divided the church. In the nineteenth century, the abolitionist and secessionist movements split Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and a host of other churches between north and south. These splits were not healed until the twentieth century. The political fights over temperance, labor unions, socialism, and America’s participation in foreign wars—all have had their impact on the organizational life and spiritual health of denominations. These conflicts have not only been common; they have been necessary. There are political issues that the church must engage, even if such engagement is costly. The fight over slavery that led to the Civil War is a prime example. While the “prophetic” mantle may never have sat comfortably upon the shoulders of the institutional church, the church has nevertheless needed prophets to call it to repentance and change. From the time of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Holt, 1929), we have known that organized church bodies reflect more of class structure and economic status than confessional commitment in the values they hold and the political choices they make. This is wrong. The prophet brings the church back to confession.

While political conflict in the church may be common and necessary, something is going on today, especially in mainline denominations, which is, in my opinion, unprecedented. It is what I would call *the institutionalization of the prophetic office*. Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, ecclesiastical leaders have sought not only to appeal to the consciences of individual members, but also to make denominational organizations the official agents of political and social change. They have asked members to vote on specific resolutions of action in synod meetings and conventions, set up government lobbying offices, and even attempted to enforce conformity to particular policies by pastors and congregations.

For a denomination to become involved in direct action may be effective when there is widespread support in the constituency for such action. Historic African-American churches in America and numerous Jewish organizations have a history of being effective because they have such uniform support. The Roman Catholic Church, with its immense numbers and hierarchical organization, can muster the support of literally millions of people on political matters it deems important. Even mainline denominations have had their day in the sun. In the civil rights movement, especially in the period between the famous march on Washing-

¹³Miller, *Reinventing Protestantism*, 1.

ton in August 1963 and the passing of the Voting Rights Act by Congress in 1965, mainline denominations enjoyed a significant level of unity, especially among the clergy. One survey of clergy taken in California in 1968 showed that nearly 25% had participated in civil rights demonstrations and marches.¹⁴

Over the last thirty years, mainline denominational leaders have attempted to duplicate their political success in the civil rights movement. Under the rationale of prophetic witness, they have tried to extend the paradigm of direct political action to a succession of issues: Vietnam, black power, feminism, abortion, Marxist revolution in Latin America, and homosexuality. The results have been mixed, sometimes disastrous, because the constituency in mainline churches is divided. In 1984, George Gallup did a national study that attempted to chart the differences between religious liberals and conservatives. The study allowed people to define themselves: "Are you liberal or conservative?" "43 percent of those surveyed identified themselves as religious liberals (19 percent as very liberal); 41 percent identified themselves as religious conservatives (18 percent as very conservative); and only 16 percent found it impossible to identify with one or the other of these labels."¹⁵ This is a split right down the middle. It has led to ferocious battles within denominations that threaten to undermine their effectiveness as organizations and, perhaps, their future viability.

Robert Wuthnow, professor of sociology at Princeton University, sees these battles as leading to "the restructuring of American religion." Christians are dividing politically rather than doctrinally. Thus, for example, liberal Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians find more agreement with each other than they do with conservatives of their own confessions. Conversely, conservative Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians make common cause against liberals in their respective churches. James Davison Hunter, professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, echoes Wuthnow when he speaks of a "cultural realignment" among American religious groups over political issues. This realignment takes the form of "pragmatic alliances...across faith traditions" of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.¹⁶ On the one side are the "orthodox" of faith traditions, who hold to an unchanging, objective standard of divine truth. On the other side are the "progressives" of these same traditions, who wish to adapt historic notions of divine truth to changing social circumstances.

Will this divisive trend lead to denominational breakup? Will churches such as the ELCA or the Presbyterian Church (USA) find the strain of political conflict so difficult that they will begin splitting up into smaller organizational units as they did in the nineteenth century because of the Civil War and other issues? A lot depends on whether or not the institutionalization of the prophetic office will con-

¹⁴Cited in Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1988) 146.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁶James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 47.

tinue to hold sway. When ecclesiastical leaders believe that they are doing God's will by using denominational funds to support a specific political stance, it is very difficult to get them to change course or consider another point of view. Even if such a stance adversely affects the communal life of the denomination, these leaders often dig in and will not compromise.

I do not deny the need for the prophet to speak in the church from time to time. I also acknowledge that denominations and religious organizations can be effective politically if they have the support of their constituencies. African-American churches are, as I have already stated, a prime example of such effectiveness. But when a church does not have the clear support of its members, it cannot be effective in the political realm. Who cares what the "Lutheran Church" says on a given policy if it cannot deliver the votes in support of that policy? Besides, a lot depends on the issues at stake. Who is to say, with regard to controversial matters such as feminism, abortion, homosexuality, and political "liberation," what the "prophetic" stance of the church should be? There are many issues over which Christians may legitimately disagree. The problem is that ecclesiastical leaders tend to forget this. Some are tempted to demonize their opposition and demand conformity at all costs. When religion tries to control political thought and action in this way, it can be a very dangerous thing.

III. THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

If there is a secular institution in American society that fears religion as a dangerous thing in politics, and has the power to do something about it, it is the Supreme Court. Since 1947, the Court has operated under the legal doctrine of the separation of church and state, enunciated by Justice Hugo Black in *Everson v. Board of Education*, to reduce the public role of religion in American life. The doctrine has been extended to "released-time" programs in schools, school prayer, the involvement of states with parochial schools, the public display of religious symbols, and many other issues. It is impossible in a brief essay to cover all of these cases. Perhaps the case that is the most representative and shows clearly the impact of the doctrine of separation on religious institutions is *Illinois ex re. McCollum v. Board of Education* (1948). The circumstances of the case were as follows. The city of Champaign, Illinois, established a voluntary released-time program of religious education in which local leaders representing all faiths came into classrooms at a specified time period to provide religious instruction. The program was instituted to combat a rise in juvenile delinquency and had widespread support in the community. Mrs. Vashti McCollum, who described herself variously as an "atheist" or "humanist," brought suit on behalf of her son James Terry, demanding not only that the released-time program end but that every form of teaching recognizing the existence of God be banned from the school. The Board of Education defended itself on First Amendment grounds. Released-time, it said, is not an "establishment of religion." The Board believed that it had acted properly in setting up the pro-

gram by being neutral with regard to various sects. That the program encouraged religion was not unusual. The dependence upon religion for the moral training of the young is a time-honored tradition in American governmental practice, both on the state and federal level.

By a decision of eight to one the Court held that the released-time program violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. This clause, said Justice Black, drawing on his opinion in the *Everson* case from the year before, must be understood to build “a wall of separation between church and state.”¹⁷ This famous phrase does not appear in the First Amendment, but was coined by Thomas Jefferson in a letter written in 1802 when he was President of the United States. Black asserted, and the majority of the Court agreed, that absolute separation between church and state is the intention of the First Amendment and that it applies to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing equal protection of the laws to all citizens. The doctrine of separation entailed by the First and Fourteenth Amendments has, said Justice Felix Frankfurter in a concurring opinion, “a secular reach far more penetrating in the conduct of Government than merely to forbid an ‘established church.’”¹⁸

Did the decision in *McCollum* sustain the plaintiff in her demand that all teaching about religion be banned? This appears to be the case, although the issue is not entirely clear even to this day. In a concurring opinion, Justice Robert H. Jackson worried that “the sweep and detail of these complaints is a danger signal.” Can one be rightly educated apart from exposure to religion? “Music without sacred music, architecture minus the cathedral, or painting without the scriptural themes would be eccentric and incomplete, even from a secular point of view.”¹⁹ In his lone dissent, Justice Stanley E. Reed noted rightly that “the history of American education is against such an interpretation of the First Amendment.” In support he cited a regulation of the University of Virginia, proposed in 1824 by Thomas Jefferson, a founder of the university, and approved by, among others, James Madison, a trustee. This regulation set aside time in the morning during which students were encouraged and expected to worship “at the establishment of their respective sects.”²⁰ The decision of the Court in *McCollum* was the imposition of an abstract legal doctrine on the religious practice of the American people. How far, asked Reed, was the Court willing to extend its will? Congress has a chaplain for each House. The armed forces have commissioned chaplains. Both West Point and Annapolis support a variety of religious activities. Did the Court propose to ban these practices?

In a public statement dated 17 June 1948, a number of prominent religious

¹⁷Terry Eastland, ed., *Religious Liberty in the Supreme Court: The Cases That Define the Debate over Church and State* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993) 65.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 92.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 94-95.

leaders responded to the *McCollum* decision. They decried “this development of the conception of the separation of church and state” as “unwarranted by the language of the First Amendment.” They called “Jefferson’s oft-quoted words, ‘wall of separation’...a misleading metaphor.” If allowed to stand, the legal doctrine would hasten “the secularization of our culture.” Among the signatories were: John Coleman Bennett, Robert L. Calhoun, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Douglas Horton, Benjamin E. Mays, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Reinhold Niebuhr. The complete list is virtually a who’s who of the Christian intellectual elite at the time.²¹

The “secularization” of American culture in the public realm has continued apace during the last fifty years. This has not happened without protest. The Roman Catholic Church has fought against abortion and in support of parochial schools. The Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition have sought to enact their varied agendas with varied degrees of success. The Moral Majority is defunct. The Christian Coalition appears to have peaked in the 1994 election. But the secularization of public institutions in the United States continues, aided and abetted by the Supreme Court and, for the most part, accepted by ecclesiastical leaders in mainline churches. Ironically, at the very time when many mainline leaders want the church to be politically active, they do so in a political climate that is hostile to religious participation even at the most elementary level of educating the young in the broad religious heritage of the Republic.

In saying this, I do not want to be misunderstood. I would fear as much as anyone the granting of legal privilege to any particular sect or religion. No one is more suspicious than I of political activism engaged in by ecclesiastical leaders when consensus among church members is lacking. But I think the legal doctrine of the separation of church and state has gone too far. “[T]he effort to banish religion for politics’ sake has led us astray,” says Stephen L. Carter of Yale Law School. “In our sensible zeal to keep religion from dominating our politics, we have created a political and legal culture that presses the religiously faithful to be other than themselves, to act publicly, and sometimes privately as well, as though faith does not matter to them.”²²

The double-sided trend of the decline of mainline churches and the growth of evangelical churches, the divisive effect of political activism in denominations, and the pervasive influence of the legal doctrine of separation of church and state are three important developments that have shaped religion in America in the last half of the twentieth century. Their impact on religious life will continue well into the new century. How they are dealt with will do much to define the course of future Christian leadership. ⊕

²¹Reprinted in *First Things* 26 (October 1992) 32.

²²Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Anchor, 1993) 7.