

The Present and the Past in the Religious History of the United States

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Everywhere in the American media and probably in the European media as well, we hear that the religious situation in the United States has entered a new phase. Specialists may complain of how the mass media report the current scene, and may not agree among themselves on how to interpret what is happening. But it seems safe to propose that both parties, the media and academic specialists, have identified three principal processes of change. Let me describe these three, with several recent reports as my starting point.

One such process is signaled by the title of Diana Eck's *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*.¹⁾ For her the direction of change lies in the thickening presence of groups that are newcomers to the United States, newcomers in the sense of arriving in considerable numbers in recent years. Eck employs her eye for urban geography to good advantage as she evokes the emergence of mosques, Hindu temples, and Buddhist shrines alongside the customary presence of Protestant and Catholic churches, some of which, by implication, are not doing well.

A second version of the contemporary scene concerns shifting patterns of affiliation *within* Christianity, in particular the upwelling of charismatic and Pentecostal groups. The point of departure of Harvey Cox's *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*,²⁾ is the worldwide rise of Pentecostal groups in recent

1) (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002).

2) (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub, 1995).

decades, the United States included. Although no one knows exactly how many Americans adhere to one or another of the dozens of Pentecostal denominations — record-keeping is not their forte — the membership of the largest of them numbers in the millions (The worldwide growth of Pentecostalism in Africa and South America is even more astonishing.) If we can trust the basic numbers, more Protestants in the United States are affiliated with Pentecostalism than with all the mainstream denominations put together, and surpassed only by Roman Catholicism, and it seems likely that as many African Americans are Pentecostal as are members of the once hegemonic race-linked Baptist and Methodist denominations. *Fire from Heaven* is also about another recent tendency, the emergence of what Cox describes as “fundamentalism” within many corners of Christianity. Again he is describing a movement that is usurping the place of the “mainstream” denominations that adhere to liberal theologies. From his perspective, the current situation is characterized by a contest between “fundamentalist” and “Pentecostal” ways of being religious, a contest that worries Cox, who is no friend of the outlook he calls fundamentalism. Implicitly, the message of *Fire from Heaven* is that, as the center decays, Christianity in America and elsewhere in the world is being renewed from the periphery, for better and for worse.

A third perspective, though concurring in some respects with the two I have just cited, may be found in several studies of contemporary Christianity by the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow. In the earliest and still perhaps the best known of these reports, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*,³⁾ Wuthnow discerned a realignment of the Protestant churches into two mutually antagonistic groups, the “mainstream” or liberal churches (most Methodists, American Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, some Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, etc.) and churches or movements on the political right and generally of an “evangelical” outlook (Wuthnow carefully avoided the term

3) Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

“fundamentalist”). A minor but significant aspect of this analysis was Wuthnow’s recognition that, in the postwar years, an extensive bureaucracy had emerged among the mainstream congregations, a bureaucracy detached from local congregations and deploying its financial resources (these were considerable in the early 1960s) to advance the liberal version of social justice (the “civil rights” movement being the great example). As Wuthnow and others have noted, by the end of the 1960s the fixation with social justice was alienating many local churches, a discontent manifested in the changing demographics of the mainstream groups — that is, their failure to grow in membership as the population increased and, by the 1970s, the beginnings of absolute decline in membership that continues to the present day. (Again, the statistics are of questionable accuracy, with over-reporting of membership a common practice.)⁴⁾ Not only, then, is the once-hegemonic mainstream contending with a serious adversary that challenging the mainstream’s very understanding of religion, it is doing so in a weakened situation.⁵⁾

Wuthnow’s understanding of change was linked to events and circumstances of the 1950s and, especially, the 1960s. He returned to the 1960s in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, a book that looks back to *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*⁶⁾ by Robert Bellah and four other sociologists, a study instantly famous for its description of “Sheilism,” the phenomenon of a self-seeking, individualistic (“self-fulfillment”) mode of being religious that the pseudonymous Sheila carried on without depending on traditional institutions. *After Heaven* is about postwar changes in the nature of

4) My own local congregation, an Episcopal church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is credited by the diocese with roughly double the number of its actual members and adherents.

5) A case study of this process: R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

6) Wuthnow, *After Heaven* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998). Bellah et al., *Habits of the heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

spirituality (a term that, against the grain, Wuthnow uses for collective, reutilized practices), changes manifested in the eroding of a “dwelling” centered spirituality — “tightly bounded and hierarchical, prescribing behavior through a formalized set of rules,” with “institutions” as “the building blocks of society, tightly cemented together” — and the rise of a “seeker” version that “emphasizes looser connections, diversity, and negotiation... . Rather than rules, symbolic messages prevail,” and “people talk about... searching among options.” The data Wuthnow brings together include the effects of the “pill” on the age at which women began to have children and, in turn, the effects of *this* change on the timing of young people’s decision to marry, itself a stage of life that historically was linked with the resumption of church membership. The connections between demography and church membership come down to this: as young people postponed the age of marriage and of forming families, they ceased to be religiously active. This piece of analysis reminds us of a central fact of American church “growth” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (through the 1950s), that the chief source of new members was internal, i.e., incorporating the children of existing members, not by “converting” the alienated or indifferent to Christianity in any of its denominational versions.

Wuthnow also called attention to the emergence of a “religion industry” — the media, therapists, and others — that had increasingly displaced the traditional forms of religious leadership, especially the clergy, and, in doing so, had made it more likely that lay people favor the free-floating, extra institutional, and individualized “spirituality” he has named “seeking.” Unlike many other accounts of modern America, *After Heaven* acknowledges the presence of everyday interpretations of the world that exclude religion altogether. Not only is the seeker mode of spirituality less associated with institutions, it must justify itself “in a world that is almost totally secular.”⁷⁾

Here, then, are three quite different reports on what is “new” about the

7) Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 138; 10-11.

religious situation of the United States since the 1960s, and especially what is new about Christianity: Eck discerns a de-centered Christianity, Wuthnow, a new religion of “seeking” alongside residual elements of “dwelling,” Cox a heady wine of renewal via Pentecostalism, but also a threatening polarization. These reports are my starting point for pondering how the present situation can affect our understanding of the past. As new features of Christianity emerge, will historians respond by rewriting what happened in the decades and centuries that precede them? I focus on church and state; evangelicalism; and a “seeker” version of religion in attempting to answer this question.

Church and state

Ask Americans of any affiliation or, for that matter, of none, if s/he favors the separation of church and state, and most will immediately say, yes. Most would go on to say that this is what our civil and religious institutions practice. (It may be that, half-unconsciously, the average citizen has absorbed a powerful dose of “exceptionalism”: it is truly “American” to keep the two apart.) Yet this wisdom is not the same as a working consensus on how church and state should actually interact. The clash between liberal and conservative that Wuthnow mapped in *The Restructuring of American Religion* extends to the question of church-state relations in a way that has spilled over into national and local politics, most notably with the school prayer amendment to the Constitution that President Ronald Reagan endorsed. In turn this agitation has prompted historians and other interested parties to revisit the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in search of “what the founders meant” in 1791 when they ratified the free expression and no establishment clauses of the First Amendment, and in search as well of how an informal Protestant “establishment” in the mid-nineteenth century could at once defend its privileges and insist on religious “liberty,” or the “voluntary principle.”

What accounts for the eruption of conflict about church and state? Any answer must commence by attending to the United States Constitution and

how it is constantly re-interpreted. In two Supreme Court cases, the first in 1940, the second in 1947, the Court extended the religious clauses of the First Amendment to the states. Between 1789 and 1947, the states had been pretty much on their own in how they parceled out privileges and liberties relating to religion, the one great exception being the national government's suppression of polygamy in the territory and state of Utah. In the aftermath of the rulings of 1940 and 1947, local suits that challenged certain customary practices gradually worked their way up to the high court, most famously the case of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), filed by a secular Jew whose local school district in Long Island allowed Christian prayer to take place in the classroom, and who won a ruling from the Court that this practice violated the establishment language of the First Amendment. The following year the Court struck down the practice of having readings from the Bible and recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Meanwhile lower courts were ruling against Sunday "blue laws" instituted in the nineteenth century to prevent certain kinds of work on the Christian Sabbath. A second part of the answer concerns the Court's endorsement of a "rights revolution" that began to unfold in the 1960s. The Court helped enact this revolution in decisions such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and others relating to gender, race, and sexuality, sometimes by upholding Congressional legislation.

The larger context for the first of these processes was something that most Americans in the 1940s took for granted, a complicity between civil government and the institutional enterprise of Christianity. Once the Court extended the First Amendment to the states, this complicity became suspect — not every feature of it, to be sure (the military services still appoint and pay chaplains) — and more than suspect, something that had to be given up. Hence the unwinding of certain practices that favored Christianity. And as the Court moved to endorse and expand the rights revolution, it did so with the support of liberal/modernist denominations, or those groups within them. Both strands of change implied a rethinking of how church and state in America should be related, with liberals imagining American society as pluralistic, and pluralism as such a good, that the state should do nothing to favor one group over another — or

favor all to the same degree. In effect, liberal church people drew (unwittingly) on Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's argument that religion was a private matter, private because only in this way would the civil state not suffer from the ambitions and conflicts endemic to religion. The one person who did cite Jefferson was the Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas, who resurrected the phrase "wall of separation" from a letter Jefferson wrote in 1804, a phrase that, before he did so, had played no role in discussions of the First Amendment.

These challenges to the status quo were not welcomed by the more conservative wing of American Protestantism. Suddenly a new foe loomed that Francis J. Schaeffer and Tim LaHaye identified in widely read books as liberalism or secular humanism. Blaming these movements for the moral confusion of contemporary America, Schaeffer accused liberals of abandoning the Christian principles that had made America great. When mainstream churches endorsed the assertions of the Supreme Court about school prayer and creationism, he interpreted these actions as contradicting the Christian-centered politics of the founding fathers, declaring in *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), "These men... knew they were building on the Supreme Being who was the Creator, the final reality. And they knew that without this foundation everything in the Declaration of Independence and all that followed would be sheer unaltered nonsense." Two years earlier, the Southern Baptist minister Jerry Falwell summoned into being the Moral Majority, an organization dedicated to reversing moral decline by restoring "biblical principles" to our national politics; in practice, this meant opposing abortion, homosexuality, feminism, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the Supreme Court's decisions on school prayer. The Southern Baptist minister Pat Robertson contended for the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1988, and in 1989 helped found the Christian Coalition, which opposed gay rights and the legality of abortion while seeking public tax monies for private religious schools. Historically, Baptists in the United States but especially those Baptists on the losing side of the Civil War (the Southern Baptist Convention) had strongly insisted on the "wall of separation" in order to protect churches from the state (for

Madison and Jefferson, the purpose of the “wall” was to protect the state from religion). But the SBC bought into the “secular humanism” scare and, in the 1980s, began to repudiate its heritage once it came to feel that the greater danger was an anti-religious secular state.

The pot of church and state thus began to boil, a state of things that prompted many activists and historians to reflect anew on the question of what the Founders had intended with the First Amendment clauses on religion. The agitation I have evoked also prompted a second glance at nineteenth-century Protestantism and the ways in which it acted as an “establishment,” a mentality that some historians would regard as persisting until the 1920s or even as late as the 1950s.⁸⁾ Concerning the Founders, polemicists on each side have busied themselves ransacking the historical record, one side extracting statements that make the Founders sound like conventional Christians, the other, reconstructing the anxieties of a Jefferson and Madison about the future of the new republic were it to accept any form of state-affiliated Christianity. It was easy for critics of the Supreme Court to demonstrate that Jefferson’s phrase “wall of separation” was uniquely his, but just as easy for others to demonstrate that Madison, the chief architect of the Bill of Rights, was far from being a pious, praying Christian. It was easy, too (and the point was even made by some evangelical historians) that the “Christian America” of Francis Schaeffer’s imagination was a peculiar animal in 1789 given that three fourths of the white population, and a higher percentage of African Americans, were not affiliated with any church. (But I demur at any argument implying that the unaffiliated were hostile to Christianity or knew nothing of it, at a time, e.g. in New England, when the most widely used schoolbook was saturated

8) But for a different point of view, see the essays (and the editor’s introduction) in William R. Hutchison, ed. *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Robert Handy, *Undermined Establishment: Church-State Relations in America, 1880-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

with Christian doctrine, Christian history, and quotations from Scripture.)⁹⁾

Given the ambiguities of what is meant by “Christian America” and the limitations of any quantitative evidence, the work that has been done on mid-nineteenth-century understandings of the separation of church and state is especially fresh. Consider, for example, the jurist John T. Noonan’s *The Luster of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom*,¹⁰⁾ which includes a remarkable chapter (attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville’s sister) disputing Tocqueville’s description of the “voluntary” relationship between church and state in Jacksonian America. The fictive Ms. Tocqueville, having ventured to the United States to see for herself, recognized that her brother hid from his readers the many ways in which the civil state continued to support religion. She knew why her brother had celebrated the independence of Christianity from the civil state, for this (imagined) arrangement was in keeping with his own sympathies for the reform program of the French priest Hugues de Lemennais, who had called on the French national church to relinquish its privileged situation and embrace a pluralist (democratic) society. In sum, the fictive sister recognized that Tocqueville aligned his narrative with a political situation in France. From a second important study, Philip Hamburger’s *Separation of Church and State: A Theologically Liberal, Anti-Catholic, and American Principle*,¹¹⁾ we learn that the emergence of Catholicism as a significance presence in mid-nineteenth-century America prompted evangelical Protestants to brandish the separation of church and state as a way of being anti-Catholic. Few of these evangelicals intended to jettison the privileges they received from the civil state. Indeed, the German-American Philip Schaff, an articulate spokesman for religious freedom, led a

9) Good data may be found in Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1997), and James H. Hutson, *Forgotten Features of the Founding: The Recovery of Religious Themes in the Early American Republic* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

10) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

11) Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State: A Theologically Liberal, Anti-Catholic, and American Principle* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

movement after the Civil War to defend the sanctity of the Sabbath by adding an amendment to the Constitution. Hamburger and others are thus suggesting that the “separation of church and state,” as represented by Protestants in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, was a socio-political construction brought into being in order to legitimize anti-Catholicism and to mask their privileged situation vis-a-vis the civil state.

Perhaps it is an unintended irony that this scholarship can serve conservatives as much or more as it serves liberals. Cherished though the concept of the “separation of church and state” may be, it remains open to interpretations of the kind that the evangelical right is providing. They are not wrong; indeed, they have a good deal of history on their side. They contest what they quite rightly regard as a secular/liberal glossing of the concept to mean that religion must be excluded from the sphere of democratic citizenship. As the historian John F. Wilson has noted, the founding fathers did not propose the “wholesale segregation [of religion] from government — the kind of resolution proposed in the French Revolution — for separationist logic opens the way for radical secularization as a social policy.”¹²⁾ My broader point holds for contemporary evangelicals as well as for the liberals: church and state has become one of the sites of struggle about the past, liberals doing so in order to preserve their version of pluralism and the rights revolution that effectively secularizes the nation state, conservatives and evangelicals seeking to re-insert their moral agenda into public life.

This agitation has its parallel in the agitation among Europeans over matters like the veil. To venture into comparative history, I note that in the French case, the question is whether the concept of citizenship, and the rights that go with it, prohibits or allows certain expressions of religious difference, with many French asserting that citizenship is a wholly secular category that overrides all expressions of religious difference

12) John F. Wilson, “Religion, Government, and Power in the New American Nation,” in *Religion and American Politics From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, ed. Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77-91.

in public spaces such as schools. Until quite recently, the secular and the religious were accommodated in the American understanding of citizenship, but the tension between these two has become so great that, on matters of church and state, some Americans have moved closer to a European understanding of citizenship and civil institutions — that is, the importance of preserving — which in the United States means enacting more fully — their religiously neutral or “secular” situation.¹³⁾

Evangelicalism

I turn to the second of my topics, evangelicalism, the question being, as before, how is the present situation affecting how we understand the past? A fully satisfying answer to this question is beyond my means in this essay, the reason being that evangelicalism takes many different forms, each with its own relationship to the past. Two aspects of an ongoing, dynamic, and complicated rewriting of the past must suffice, first, the efforts to differentiate evangelicalism from fundamentalism and second, a line of work concerned with the consequences of liberalism.

In the post war years when liberal versions of the American past dominated, it became accepted wisdom to characterize evangelicalism as anti-intellectual, proof being the Scopes trial of 1925 and, in the late nineteenth century, the hostile reaction of certain Protestant theologians to Darwinism, the newer currents of biblical scholarship, and the like, a poster child in this respect being Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary. Social history was evoked to support the thesis that by the beginning of the twentieth century, evangelicals or “fundamentalists” were the left behind, people living in those parts of the United States (the South) least touched by the tendencies grouped together under modernization.

13) To cite a local example: the secularizing of the Harvard Divinity School in recent years, we no longer hold our fall and spring convocations in the university church because it is associated with Christianity; and the texts quoted during these events are drawn from a wide array of sources, include ones that by traditional criteria are marginally “religious.”

Recent work tells a very different story. Much of this scholarship is the doing of a group of self-professedly “evangelical historians,” most notably George Marsden and Mark A. Noll. Marsden and Noll earned their doctorates at mainstream institutions (Marsden trained under Sydney Ahlstrom at Yale), and both have always respected the standards of inquiry and research insisted upon within the secular academy. But both have also wanted to reclaim the evangelical tradition from obfuscation and cultural ignorance. Interestingly, both have also criticized the speculations of Francis Schaeffer and others about the founding fathers.¹⁴⁾ Marsden and Noll take seriously the faculty, Hodge included, who taught at Princeton Seminary, treating them not as head-in-the-sand, defensive figures but as intellectuals capable of a serious engagement with the limitations of Darwinian theory c. 1870. As Noll in particular has argued, the Princeton theologians were not opposed to science or reason per se, even if (in hindsight) their version of science was “Baconian” at a time when other approaches were beginning to emerge.¹⁵⁾ Taking evangelicalism seriously as an intellectual movement has also meant acknowledging the importance of the end times as foretold in Scripture to most nineteenth-century American Protestants — as it would become again for some American Protestants in the closing decades of the twentieth century. The recovery of this way of thinking has prompted a fresh understanding of the origins of fundamentalism, which now seems a movement indebted as much or more to a pre-millennialist understanding of Christian history — owed in significant measure to a handful of British religious figures — as it does to anti-Darwinism. Among the figures who combined evangelical revivalism with pre-millennialism and dispensationalism was the layman Dwight L. Moody, who helped bring into being a cluster of institutions that would

14) Mark A. Noll et al., *The Search for Christian America* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989).

15) See also E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978) and earlier. Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Ante-bellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

sustain these ideas in the twentieth century. To recover these aspects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is to diminish the significance of the Scopes trial and to increase, sharply so, the significance of theological currents that flourished in metropolitan centers in the north and did so via a complex infrastructure of colleges, biblical institutions, publications, revivals, scholarship, radio ministries, and voluntary associations, including, for example, the impressive Campus Crusade for Christ International (1951) that, by 2003, had a worldwide staff of 26,000 persons engaged in evangelism. If we insist on re-inserting the Scopes trial into this narrative, then its significance may become its capacity to nourish an “outsider” identity that, in sociological language, made for strong communities at a time when liberal Protestantism, with its guise of establishment, was becoming absorbed into the general culture. The best telling of this story remains Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, a story of an unexpected rupture within the ranks of evangelicals as some turned away from postmillennial thinking.¹⁶⁾

An excursus: a sad tendency of university-based religionists, and certainly of the liberal media, is to make much more of fundamentalism with a capital F than the actual phenomenon deserves, as when the splintering of c. 1890-1920 Protestantism is depicted solely as a clash between liberals and “fundamentalists.” That is, religionists have allowed “fundamentalism” to become a sponge that absorbs a great deal of what should properly be described as evangelicalism. In point of fact, the assertions packaged in 1910 as “Fundamentals” provoked controversy only in a small number of denominations, chiefly Presbyterian and Baptist, where battle lines were also forming as liberal and modernist theologians, who increasingly dominated seminaries in the north and west, abandoned doctrinal tests for future ministers, discarded the emphasis on sin, repentance, and conversion within Reformed (evangelical) theology, emphasized the social gospel as the proper mission of the church, and

16) Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

accepted a historical account of the making and meaning of Scripture. Liberals past and present (and Harvey Cox is such a liberal) may benefit polemically by exaggerating the reach and power of “Fundamentalism,” but we are better served as historians by placing it in a much broader context.

Another vein of evangelical scholarship has been its attention to the liberal rapprochement with modernism. This scholarship is instructive on the intellectual dimensions of secularization, a particular theme of Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, but illuminated with more precision, perhaps, in D. G. Hart’s account of the emergence of religion as a field of study within the modern college and university.¹⁷⁾ Hart, an evangelical historian with strong theological interests, shows how the Protestant clergy and church leaders who persuaded universities that religion was a legitimate field of study could only do so by recasting what religion itself signified, as in accepting the normative claims of “the scientific” (and hence, relinquishing any claim to Christianity as containing distinctive forms of truth). An old saying has it that religion begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother. Hart’s is a similar narrative: Christian leaders begat religious studies, and religious studies (with a backward glance at the Enlightenment) gave birth to the category “religion” as something wholly natural. A perfect illustration of this process is the situation at my own academic institution, the Divinity School at Harvard, where no candidate for appointment can be asked his or her own religious views — these are utterly “private,” while the (public) pace for teaching and research is neutral, e.g., secular.

Seeker religion

Let me touch briefly on a third vein of work that takes as its point of

17) Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1999).

departure the “religion industry” and “seeker spirituality,” work prompted in part by the decline of Protestant liberalism and the emergence of rootless forms of spirituality to such prominence. Does religious history figure in the story of a “culture of consumption” that so many historians (even historians of the early modern period) find attractive? The answer is emphatically yes, as demonstrated in Leigh E. Schmidt’s fascinating narrative of the intersections of consumer capitalism and religion in *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*.¹⁸⁾

As for pluralism, it is beginning to inform how we write about colonies and new nation; in recent years, two proposals for textbooks that have come my way begin by highlighting “diversity.” In this context, it is important to note three constraints on the thesis of Eck’s book. The first is a matter of religious demographics. America is as “Christian” today as it was in 1900, for Eck’s analysis overlooks the affiliations of the majority of new immigrants, many of whom bring to the United States a relatively conservative form of Christian: for example, South Koreans trained in Methodism and Presbyterianism, Africans carrying with them the legacies of nineteenth-century evangelicalism.¹⁹⁾

The second concerns the longer trajectory of pluralism. As William R. Hutchison demonstrated in *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, pluralism, meaning in this instance several different forms of Christianity, has been a feature of American society for more than two centuries. From Hutchison’s perspective, what has changed in the modern period is how this fact of *plurality* (a better word for what he is describing than pluralism) has been evaluated. Eck is witness to a particular understanding of the term that combines theological, social, and

18) Meredith McGuire, *Ritual Healing in Suburban America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), telling of a middle aged woman who, in the course of a single day, employs five different strategies of healing; Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

19) A point made by Philip Jenkins in *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), noting also that there is more diversity by numbers in certain European countries.

political elements. Theologically, she argues that Americans (and hypothetically, all humans) participate in a generalized category of “religion” to which each of the historical “world religions” contributes something and takes away something. No one faith possesses the full truth. In turn this argument supports her position that the “new” America is ultimately a harmonial culture notwithstanding the differences between faith communities. The greater the pluralism, the greater the possibilities for “symphony,” an analogy Eck borrows from the early twentieth social theorist Horace Kallan. Pluralism means, getting along better and better.

The third constraint concerns the over estimating of what is new. The past can rear up and bit the present, either to remind us of continuities or to instruct us that every report of the “new” is refracted through a political or ideological framework. If we turn to race and Christianity, the past reminds us that African Americans affiliate with race-specific denominations today as much as they did in 1880.

Wider implications

My own specialty, the history of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Puritanism, has also been affected by these trends. At one time a movement that seemed coherent, with clear boundaries, Puritanism has fractured into many parts, with outsiders being given as much or more attention than those who led the institutions of church and state — and the ranks of outsiders now stretch as far as the Native Americans, who in one recent monograph figure as a reason why the colonists adopted the baptismal policy nicknamed the “half-way covenant.” Absurd on the face of it, such assertions are accompanied with a broader reluctance to grant Puritanism the status of “origins” of American culture, as book titles of c. 1975 (and earlier) so routinely declared.

Once upon a time the puritans “were good to think,” as anthropologists used to say of pigs in some cultures: any aspect of Puritanism had its consequences for the making of a national culture. But these claims are now in doubt. Consider, for example, the reputation of the eighteenth-

century Protestant minister-theologian Jonathan Edwards, considered by some as the most important theologian in our religious history (or possibly paired with Bushnell, Rauschenbusch, and the Niebuhrs). Who is entitled to claim him as forerunner? Certainly not Pentecostals and charismatics, given his intense dislike of the “New Lights” of the 1740s. For Perry Miller, Edwards was the proto-democratic, anti-bourgeois/capitalist prophet who prefigured Reinhold Niebuhr. For the contemporary evangelical historians George Marsden and Mark Noll, Edwards was too complicit with an established church and political hierarchy to be seen as the creator of the democratic evangelicalism of the nineteenth century.²⁰⁾ But for other evangelicals, Edwards remains a living figure through books like his life of the heroic missionary David Brainerd, the most reprinted of all of Edwards’s publications. Appropriately, the tercentenary of his birth (2006) was celebrated in conferences organized, on the one hand, by mainstream scholars, some of them of evangelical affiliations, and on the other, by scholars who have never been part of the “Edwards establishment.”

Taking the present as our starting point for understanding the past is inescapable. Yet the benefits of doing can have unexpected consequences. I hope this survey of recent work makes more evident both the rewards and the risks of trying to assess the contemporary scene and working backwards from it.

20) Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), and the account of Edwards in Noll, *America’s God*.

Abstract

Christianity in the United States is undergoing several transitions, or so it is argued in provocative and important books published in recent years (many more such books have appeared than could be cited in this essay). This essay describes three such reports, each significantly different from the other; and after doing so, takes up the question of how recent developments and conflicts within Christianity in the United States affect the work of historians, a question answered by looking at the “separation of church and state,” a deeply contested matter in recent scholarship and popular polemics; the history and significance of evangelicalism and “Fundamentalism,” as these too have been debated among historians; transformations of “spirituality” or certain kinds of practice, intersecting with the emergence of a consumer culture; and, much more briefly, the history of the Puritan movement as it has been recently debated and rethought.

Two conclusions emerge from this review of debates about Christianity in America, past and present. The first concerns the “decline” of what are known as “mainstream” Protestant denominations or theologies. It is certain that the influence and size of these denominations is not what it used to be, but their decline has not necessarily made the United States less “Christian” — merely, Christian in unexpected or novel ways, like those associated with Pentecostalism or spiritual “seeking.” The second conclusion is that a major question like the meaning of church and state in the United States is being answered quite differently depending on one’s theological or political affiliation; i.e., all attempts to settle, once and for all, the meaning of church and state (as though the Constitution did this for us) are vain, because debate arises out of different expectations for what religion should be doing, politically.