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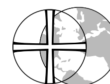

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Trading Places: Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century

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ON PALM SUNDAY A LIFETIME AGO MY FATHER ANNOUNCED TO HIS CONGREGAtion that we would be joining the Lutherans up the road for a union Good Friday service. The Lutherans had always held some fascination for me. My bus passed the church on the way to school, and I was at least dimly aware that most of my classmates out there on the prairie of southern Minnesota were Lutherans, so as we approached East Chain Lutheran Church I felt both curiosity and anxiety in roughly equal parts.

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Since the 1960s evangelical Protestants have grown in visibility and influence, while mainline Protestants have declined. Mainline churches must now learn to speak from the margins, find a prophetic voice, and understand the dynamics of the free marketplace of religion in American society.

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My father was pastor of the Evangelical Free Church. Our worship services were as plain and unadorned as our church building, which was situated about a mile from the Lutheran church and surrounded by farmland. A mile away, but a world apart. The Lutherans were the people with standing in the community, while we evangelicals were declassé. What we lacked in status, however, we made up for in piety, prayer, and preaching.

I recall being overwhelmed by the Lutheran church—the liturgy, the candles, the vestments (my father preached in a business suit). I was intrigued by all this flummery, but it made me uneasy as well, because I knew I didn't belong. I felt as though I had been invited to a fancy dinner party and wasn't sure which fork to use, or, to borrow George Gobel's famous line, I felt like the whole world was a tuxedo and I was a pair of brown shoes.

I. Trading Places

Much has happened in the four decades since that Good Friday service. Without any question evangelicals—including fundamentalists, pentecostals, and the holiness people—represent the growth sector of American Protestantism over the last quarter century, increasing in numbers, visibility, and cultural influence. Those generally associated with mainline Protestantism, on the other hand—Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and some Baptists—have faltered since the mid-1960s by almost any index: membership, church attendance, or giving. Mainline Protestants, now called old-line Protestants by some observers, invested heavily in the ecumenical movement and in such political causes as civil rights, opposition to the war in Vietnam, and the pursuit of equal rights for women. For their part, evangelicals, after a half-century hiatus, reclaimed their place in American public discourse in the mid-to-late 1970s, although, tragically, the political agenda that leaders of the religious right espouse betrays the noble legacy of evangelical activism in the nineteenth century.

In short, the religious landscape of the United States has shifted dramatically since the editors of *The Christian Century* exulted in 1951 that "America should be grateful for the spiritual tide which flows unceasingly into our national life through its institutions of religion."[1] The "institutions of religion," of course, were mainline Protestant denominations, for the editors of *The Christian Century* rarely deigned to speak of evangelical Protestants, and when they did so their tone was barely concealed contempt.

There was a time, I confess, when I took some grim satisfaction in this reversal of fortune. I have mused at length on the irony that this evangelical kid from the midwest now occupies an office that looks across the street into the Interchurch Center, better known as the "God Box" or the "Protestant Kremlin." And, much to the consternation of those who still work there, I have suggested that both the

[1] "Twelve Great Churches," *The Christian Century* (3 January 1951) 7.

Manhattan location and the Stalinesque, international-style architecture of the Interchurch Center symbolize everything wrong with mainline Protestantism—it is bland and modernist, utterly without reference to historical precedents, and wholly indifferent to the surrounding context.

Those comments, as you might imagine, excited some rather impassioned defensiveness from denizens of the God Box, but I stand behind them. Part of the difficulty facing mainline Protestantism is its insularity—there is nowhere in America more provincial than New York City—and its indifference to history and to popular sentiments. At the risk of piling on, and before turning my comments from descriptive to prescriptive, I'll offer one further observation, occasioned by the defensive responses to my comments about the Interchurch Center. Aside from the obvious error of blaming the messenger, the leaders of mainline Protestantism are in an acute state of denial, especially if they believe that they can turn the situation around with further moves toward ecumenism, more effective marketing, or resolutions from the floor of some general assembly.

The difficulties facing mainline Protestantism are complex and systemic and, yes, theological. They will not succumb to easy answers or simple formulas, and so I offer here a kind of laundry list of matters that at least one observer of the contemporary religious scene believes must be considered.

II. An Illusory Advantage

First, the ascendance of mainline Protestantism in the middle decades of the twentieth century was transitory and probably illusory. Evangelicalism has been the most influential social and religious movement in American history, but the repercussions from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy temporarily changed the dynamics of American Protestantism in the twentieth century. The abridged version of the story is that the modernists or the liberals won—at least in the short term. In 1923 J. Gresham Machen drew a distinction between the two—Christianity and liberalism—and called on liberals within his own Presbyterian denomination to do the honorable thing, to acknowledge their theological deviance and withdraw from the denomination.[2] The Presbyterian modernists, of course, refused Machen's challenge, so it was Machen and the fundamentalists who were forced to leave and to form their own congregations, schools, colleges, seminaries, mission societies, and denominations. That move proved costly, and it provided the modernists (those who would eventually become known as the Protestant mainline) with a temporary advantage. They held on to the seminaries, colleges, mission societies, and publishing houses, along with the endowments that sustained them, while the evangelicals had to start over and build from scratch.

While mainline Protestants were exulting over their victories in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, having finally banished those pesky evan-

[2]J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

gelicals, the evangelicals were busy building the foundations for their return to cultural ascendance in the mid-1970s. What is remarkable about this period of evangelical activity is not merely that evangelicals managed to organize a vast network of congregations and denominations and to construct Bible institutes and seminaries—what is remarkable is the way they went about it. They accomplished this formidable task by relying on their time-honored appeal to the masses, by speaking the idiom of the people. Throughout American history evangelicals have displayed an almost unerring knack for tapping into popular sentiments, and during these years of rebuilding they reached out to the public in innovative, often ingenious ways—from Aimee Semple McPherson's radio broadcasts and theatrical sermons at Angelus Temple in Los Angeles to Billy Graham's stadium crusades to Charles E. Fuller's *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*. While mainline Protestants basked in their pyrrhic victory in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the forces they thought they had vanquished were merely regrouping to fight another day, having mustered their troops at the grass roots.

The mainline ascendance, then, was transitory, but it was probably illusory as well due to the failure of social scientists to assess accurately the numerical strength of evangelical and mainline Protestantism. The confusion here derives from a simple problem: How do you count adherents to either mainline or evangelical groups? For decades the social scientists have counted church members, but it is difficult to imagine a less trustworthy index, because requirements for church membership are so radically different. Whereas many mainline congregations reckon church membership by baptism or confirmation, evangelicals, much like the Puritans of the seventeenth century, insist that the candidate for membership stand in front of the elders or the entire congregation and give an account of his or her conversion and spiritual pilgrimage. The challenge in many mainline congregations lies in getting your name *off* of the membership rolls, while evangelical standards for church membership are much more exacting. This divergence gives rise to the fairly common situation where a mainline church may have several thousand names listed as members and only a couple of hundred who show up on Sundays, while an evangelical congregation may have a thousand people pack the sanctuary but only a couple of hundred who submit to the rigors of applying for church membership. Add to this the fact that many evangelicals are affiliated with independent congregations, who do not divulge membership figures to denominational entities, let alone social scientists, and you have a rather skewed picture of the relative importance of evangelical and mainline Protestants in the twentieth century.

III. Speaking from the Margins

The apparent mainline ascendancy, then, was certainly transitory, but it may also have been illusory, which leads me to my second observation: marginalization is not necessarily a bad thing. The real energy in American religious life has always

come from the margins—witness the Methodists, the Mormons, the Adventists, and Christian Science in the nineteenth century or the pentecostals and various African-American groups in the twentieth. We Americans seem to have an aversion to predictability and conventionality in our religious tastes (something that does not apply to the political realm, but that, alas, is another—albeit related—story). I wonder, is it any accident that mainline Protestantism began to falter shortly after President Dwight Eisenhower laid the cornerstone for the Interchurch Center on October 12, 1958? That event was merely symbolic, of course, but the symbolism was pointed, suggesting a kind of symbiotic relationship between mainline Protestantism and American middle-class respectability.

Although mainline Protestantism has sought to strike a prophetic posture, especially in the 1960s and '70s on the issues of civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and women's equality, it always did so from the safety of the establishment, with the confidence born of knowing that cultural status, denominational connections, and (lest we forget) endowment monies and pension funds functioned as a kind of safety net. Now the changing landscape of American Protestantism allows the mainline to speak truly from the margins, and that may not altogether be a bad thing.

Positioning mainline Protestantism as marginal, however, will not be as easy as it sounds. Evangelicals, and particularly the leaders of the religious right, learned long ago the benefits of marginalization by employing the rhetoric of victimization. For better or worse we live in a culture that affords status to anyone who claims to be a victim, so any voice that claims to speak from the margins must do so with integrity and resist posturing.

Speaking from the periphery of American religious life affords the opportunity to be truly prophetic on such issues as race, gender, and sexual identity. But it also means that mainline Protestants must resign themselves to minority status and thereby surrender any aspirations they have to the cultural power they enjoyed in the 1950s. True prophets don't make for good kingmakers.

IV. Speaking with Confidence

Any prophetic voice, however, must be well-defined and articulate, something sorely lacking in mainline Protestantism at the turn of the twenty-first century. If the religious energies in America come from the margins, it is also true that the most successful religious groups in American history have been well-defined and exclusive, not inclusive. Without question, one of the ploys that evangelical groups have used to advantage is their sense of who they are and what they stand for. Other Protestants may object to their theology and what they see as intolerance and narrow-mindedness, but evangelicals know what they believe, and most can articulate what they believe in a sentence or two. I speak with some frequency to adult forums at mainline churches, and if I ask members of the audience what they believe or why they attend church the question usually meets with a dead silence.

Lobbing a question like that into an audience of evangelicals, on the other hand, would be like diving into a rugby scrum.

The point here is not that evangelicals espouse the right theology—or even good theology. Rather, they have a clear idea of who they are and what they believe. One of the catastrophes of ecumenism over the last several decades is that it has eroded all sense of theological or even denominational definition. Try articulating, for instance, the theological differences between a Methodist and a Presbyterian or a Congregationalist. I study these groups—I've written an entire book on American Presbyterians[3]—but I'd be hard-pressed to answer my own question, at least without resorting to the categories of polity or history or, in the case of the Lutherans, ethnicity.

It is long past time, I believe, to declare the ecumenical movement a failure, to pick up the pieces, and to revive a sense of doctrinal and denominational definition. Lutherans should be Lutherans, not Methodists or Presbyterians or Episcopalians. That is not to say that ecumenism has not made a contribution to religious life. It has certainly taught us the value of working together for common goals, and it has shown us the importance of respect for other traditions. But these worthy ends can be attained through the more limited means of interdenominational cooperation rather than ecumenism.

The origins of the ecumenical movement must be seen in historical context. America was deep in the throes of the cold war, and Protestants were summoned to the ramparts. Congress added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, and when Eisenhower laid the cornerstone of the Interchurch Center four years later he offered a paean to the importance of religion to the survival of democratic institutions. "In this land, our churches have always been sturdy defenders of the Constitutional and God-given rights of each citizen," Eisenhower declared at the corner of Riverside Drive and 120th Street. "We are politically free people because each of us is free to express his individual faith."[4] The ecumenical impulse, then, grew in part out of a desire to present a united front against the perils of communism, a mission that many Protestants internalized. (My wife, for instance, was told that it was her duty to attend church in order to keep the communists at bay.)

What about the theological grounds of ecumenism? Leaders of the ecumenical movement generally cite Jesus' wish, recorded in John 17, that his followers "may all be one." I don't pretend to be a theologian, but it strikes me as at least possible that Jesus was speaking in eschatological terms and that denominational divisions are inevitable in a fallen world. We have not yet attained the kingdom of God, and I'm not at all certain that the ecumenical movement has brought us any closer.

A movement back to confessional particularity, furthermore, comports better with this age of multiculturalism. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, the

[3]Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993).

[4]"Religious and Civil Liberty," *The Christian Century* (22 October 1958) 1195.

United States has become a truly pluralistic society for the first time, and much of that pluralism finds its expression in religion. Surely, in this age of self-assertion, it cannot be lost on mainline Protestants that theirs is the only voice that is largely absent from the arena of public discourse, the marketplace of multiculturalism. Mainline Protestants must reclaim the courage of their convictions, and only then will they be able to speak with clear voices.

V. KNOWING THE MARKET

My final observation about the plight of mainline Protestantism at the end of the twentieth century has to do with market forces, and here again mainline Protestants can take a lesson from evangelicals. As I suggested earlier, evangelicals throughout American history have been exquisitely attuned to popular sentiments, from George Whitefield to Billy Graham, from the great awakening to the megachurches. There is no doubt that this sensitivity to popular tastes has led to pandering, but it has also ensured the continued vitality of religion in America.

The First Amendment guarantee of free exercise of religion and its proscription of an established church set up a free market where religious entrepreneurs of all stripes compete with one another for popular followings. Evangelicals have always fared very well in this competition, in part because they have seldom felt constrained by denominational hierarchies, confessional boundaries, or liturgical rubrics. They have been free to shape—and to reshape—their message for popular consumption.

Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, have generally disdained this sort of approach, but the fact is that we live in a market-driven society. Even if mainline Protestants elect not to accommodate, for reasons of principle, to market demands and popular tastes, they should at least know what they are. Ironically, I think that some of this market research will reveal what I have already suggested—that Americans are looking for more definition from religious groups and that confessional particularity is desirable in a pluralistic age.

Americans, especially middle-class suburbanites, are anxious about their children, and this also shows up on any market-research survey, so mainline Protestants need to pay a great deal more attention to children, especially adolescents. One reason for the overwhelming (numerical) success at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, is the range of programs for children of suburbanites. Indeed, no issue causes more consternation to people of faith than the religious plight of their children, and I'm convinced that if mainline Protestants turned their attention to this matter—in part by addressing the issues I've already discussed—they could solve this quandary even more effectively than the evangelicals have.

The challenge, in short, lies in passing the faith from one generation to the next in a way that suggests permanence and that does no violence to the intelligence or the integrity of the child. The Puritans faced this quandary in the seven-

teenth century when the second generation failed to assume its place in the meetinghouse alongside their religiously heroic parents, the founding generation. Nearly every religion frets about maintaining the continuity of the faith from one generation to the next, and mainline Protestants have the intellectual, theological, and financial resources and, I expect, the will to make an important contribution to this discussion.

What else will mainline Protestants learn from the marketplace? I suspect they will learn a difficult lesson about the differences between religion and spirituality. *Religion* is a dirty word at the turn of the twenty-first century, whereas *spirituality* is all the rage. What that means, I think, is that Americans are impatient with the institutions associated with religion and theology. Some of this is the anti-authoritarian legacy of the counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Evangelicals benefitted mightily from this suspicion of institutions, while the mainline probably suffered, fairly or unfairly, from its identification with the so-called military-industrial complex.

The distinction between religion and spirituality has given rise to eclecticism and a sometimes appalling lack of discipline, but that is due, I think, to a dissatisfaction with the rhetoric coming out of the denominations, a kind of recondite theologizing that holds little interest for most people. It's not that theology is irrelevant (by no means) or that people are indifferent to theological discussions. The problem instead lies with the way that theological discussions are conducted; they tend to be highly technical and tendentious, politically driven, and utterly abstracted from the realm of everyday life. Mainline Protestants must somehow find a way to make theology relevant to people in the pew, and this implies that the leaders of mainline Protestantism must also take theology—and the Bible itself—seriously.

VI. Patchwork Protestantism

All of this makes for a formidable agenda: an assessment of mainline Protestantism's true standing in the twentieth century, a consideration of the advantages of speaking from the margins, finding a truly prophetic voice, and understanding the dynamics of the free marketplace of religion in American society. I have no illusions that the task will be easy or that all of the findings will make us comfortable, but we can no longer afford the absence of clear and distinct Protestant voices in the arena of public discourse, nor can we cede that arena to the strident voices coming from the religious right.

A dozen years ago, when I was writing about evangelicalism in America, I looked for a metaphor that would convey a sense of the internal diversity of the movement. The image then commonly in use was the mosaic, the evangelical mosaic. After some consideration, however, I rejected that metaphor as less than satisfactory. It suggested fine art rather than folk art, and it implied some kind of overall pattern that I couldn't discern.

I settled instead on the image of a patchwork quilt as a more satisfying metaphor, but it occurs to me that the image works for mainline Protestantism as well. After decades of trying to weave something out of whole cloth, Protestants should consider the possibilities of a patchwork, where each tradition brings its own patch—a patch of unique design, texture, and colors—and then contributes to the whole. A patchwork relieves us of the onerous, even impossible task of synthesizing some false unity. It allows each tradition to retain its own integrity, even while seeing itself as an integral part of a larger scheme.

If we relieve ourselves of the chimerical task of imposing an artificial uniformity on mainline Protestantism, we might be able to devote our energies to other matters, including interdenominational cooperation on social reform. We might then be able to consider theological matters, including what defines us Protestants. I even dare to hope that American Protestants at the cusp of the twenty-first century might reconsider the foundations of the theology we share. Martin Luther understood that two doctrinal principles must always be in tension. First, Luther believed in human depravity, but our sinfulness, he concluded on the basis of his reading of the New Testament, was overwhelmed by God's ineluctable grace. Protestants in the twentieth century, however, have defaulted on Luther's legacy. Mainline Protestants have emphasized the grace of God without taking adequate account of human depravity—and this in a century that gave us Hitler, the holocaust, and Hiroshima. Evangelical Protestants, on the other hand, constantly bray about human sinfulness, but they slight God's grace.

Imagine a Protestant theology that reclaims Luther's monumental "rediscovery of the gospel." That would be a worthy agenda indeed, and the patchwork quilt fashioned out of that fabric would be large enough to include the many varieties of mainline Protestants as well as evangelicals. What better way to prepare for the twenty-first century? ⊕