

# The Accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment: An Old Drama Still Being Enacted

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*Abstract: Throughout its history, the United States has been a major site for the accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment. This accommodation has been driven by two closely related but distinct processes: the demystification of religion's cognitive claims by scientific advances, exemplified by the Higher Criticism in Biblical scholarship and the Darwinian revolution in natural history; and the demographic diversification of society, placing Protestants in the increasingly intimate company of Americans who did not share a Protestant past and thus inspiring doubts about the validity of inherited ideas and practices for the entire human species. The accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment will continue to hold a place among American narratives as long as "diversity" and "science" remain respected values, and as long as the population includes a substantial number of Protestants. If you think that time has passed, look around you.*

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In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr., invoked the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock and Jefferson writing the Declaration of Independence. In that 1963 meditation on American national destiny, fashioned as a weapon in the black struggle for civil rights, King repeatedly mobilized the sanctions of both Protestant Christianity and the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Like the great majority of Americans of his and every generation, King believed that these two massive inventories of ideals and practices work together well enough. But not everyone who has shared this basic conviction understands the relation between the two in quite the same terms. And there are others who have depicted the relation as one of deep tension, even hostility. Protestant Christianity, the Enlightenment, and a host of claims and counterclaims about how the two interact with one another are deeply constitutive of American history. We often speak about "the religious" and "the secular," or about "the

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heart” and “the head,” but American life as actually lived beneath these abstractions has been much more particular and demands scrutiny in its historical density.

The United States, whatever else it may have been in its entire history as a subject of narration, has been a major site for the engagement of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment. This engagement was – and continues to be – a world-historical event, or at least one of the defining experiences of the North Atlantic West and its global cultural extensions from the eighteenth century to the present. Still, the United States has been a uniquely conspicuous arena for this engagement in part because of the sheer demographic preponderance of Protestants, especially dissenting Protestants from Great Britain, during the formative years of the society and long thereafter. Relatively recent social transformations can easily blind contemporaries to how overwhelmingly Northern European Protestant in origin the educated and empowered classes of the United States have traditionally been. The upward mobility of Catholic and Jewish populations since World War II and the massive immigration following the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 – producing millions of non-Protestant Americans from Asia, Latin America, and the former Soviet lands – have given the leadership of American society a novel look. To be sure, there have long been large numbers of non-Protestants in the population at large, but before 1960, if you held a major leadership position and had real opportunities to influence the direction of society, you most likely grew up in a white Protestant milieu. The example of King is a reminder, moreover, that the substantial population of African Americans has long been, and remains, largely Protestant.

In the United States, the engagement of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment most often took the form of

*accommodation*. The bulk of the men and women in control of American institutions – educational, political, and social – have sought to retain the cultural capital of the Reformation while diversifying their investments in a variety of opportunities and challenges, many of which came to them under the sign of the Enlightenment. The legacy of the Enlightenment in much of Europe, by contrast, played out in the rejection of, or indifference to, the Christianity to which the Enlightenment was largely a dialectical response, even while state churches remained fixtures of the established order. In the United States, too, there were people who rejected Protestant Christianity. But here the legacy of the Enlightenment most often appeared in the liberalization of doctrine and Biblical interpretation and in the denominational system’s functioning as an expanse of voluntary associations providing vital solidarities midway between the nation, on the one hand, and the family and local community, on the other.

The sharper church-state separation in the United States liberated religiously defined affiliations to serve as intermediate solidarities, a role such affiliations could less easily perform in settings where religious authority was associated with state power. Hence in addition to orthodox, evangelical Protestants who have been more suspicious of the critical spirit of the Enlightenment, American life has included a formidable population of “liberal” or “ecumenical” Protestants building and maintaining religiously defined communities even as they absorbed and participated in many aspects of modern civilization that more conservative Protestants held at a distance. As late as the mid-1960s, membership in the classic “mainstream liberal” denominations – Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian,

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and so on – reached an all-time high. Because educated, middle-class Americans maintained Protestant affiliations well into the twentieth century, the Enlightenment was extensively engaged within, rather than merely beyond, the churches. Had the educated middle class moved farther from Protestantism, the cultural capital of the Reformation would not have been preserved and renewed to the degree that made it an object of struggle for so long.

The intensity of the Enlightenment-Protestant relationship in America resulted also from the discomforts created by the very church-state separation that encouraged the flourishing of religious affiliations. The United States is the only major nation in the world that still operates under an eighteenth-century constitution, one that, anomalously in the governance cultures of even that century, makes no mention of God. The U.S. federal government is a peculiarly Enlightenment-grounded entity, and for that reason has inspired many attempts to inject Christianity into it, or to insist that God has been there, unacknowledged, all along.<sup>2</sup>

The role of liberal religion in American history is too often missed by observers who consider the consequences of the Enlightenment only outside religion and recognize religion only when found in its most obscurantist forms.<sup>3</sup> The fundamentalists who rejected evolution and the historical study of the Bible and have lobbied for God to be written into the Constitution receive extensive attention in our textbooks, but the banner of Protestant Christianity has also been flown by defenders of Darwin and the Higher Criticism and by critics of the idea of a “Christian America.” Quarrels within American Protestantism revolve around the feeling among more orthodox, evangelical parties that mainstream liberals are actually

secularists in disguise, as well as the feeling among ecumenical parties that their evangelical co-religionists are sinking the true Christian faith with an albatross of anachronistic dogmas and alliances forged with reactionary political forces. These quarrels, shaped in part by the campaign for a “reasonable Christianity” waged by Unitarians early in the nineteenth century, continue to the present day, sharply distinguishing the United States from the historically Protestant countries of Europe. The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian nations have long been among the most de-Christianized in the world. The United States really is different. Accordingly, the copious literature on “secularization” often treats the United States as a special case.<sup>4</sup>

Never was the United States a more special case than it is today. Indeed, contemporary American conditions invite renewed attention to the historic accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment. An increasingly prominent feature of public life is the affirmation of religion in general and of Protestant Christianity in particular. Republican candidates for office especially have been loquacious in expressing their faith and firm in declaring its relevance to secular governance. Michelle Bachman, Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, Richard Perry, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum are among the most visible examples.<sup>5</sup> Leaders of the Democratic Party, too, including President Barack Obama, have proclaimed their faith and have contributed to an atmosphere in which the constitutional principle of church-state separation is widely held to have been interpreted too strictly.

The Enlightenment-derived arguments of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, which maintain that debates over public policy should be confined to the sphere of “public reason,” are routinely criticized

as naive and doctrinaire. We are awash with confident denunciations of “the secularization thesis” (usually construed as the claim that the world becomes less religious as it becomes industrialized) and with earnest pleas to listen empathically to the testimonies – heavily Protestant in orientation – of religious yearning and experience now prevalent in popular culture. The writings of “the New Atheists” revive the rationalist-naturalist critiques of religion that had largely gone into remission during the decades when religion was widely understood to have been privatized and hence less in need of refutation by skeptics. Affirmations of a secular orientation less strident than those of the New Atheists provoke extensive attention, moreover, because debates about the nation and its future are so much more religion-saturated that at any time since the 1950s. In a country that has now elected a president from a member of a notoriously stigmatized ethnoracial group, atheism remains more anathema than blackness: almost half of all voters are still comfortable telling pollsters that they would never support an atheist for president. Observers disagree whether American piety has religious depth or is a largely symbolic structure controlled by worldly interests; either way, religious formations are indisputably part of the life of the United States today.<sup>6</sup>

In this contemporary setting, it is all the more important to understand how the accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment has taken place and how the dynamics of this accommodation continue to affect the public culture of the United States. Two processes have driven the accommodation, growing increasingly interconnected over time. One is *cognitive demystification*, or the critical assessment of truth claims in light of scientific knowledge. In this classic

dynamic of “science and religion” discourse, the specific content of religious belief is reformulated to take account of what geologists, biologists, physicists, astronomers, historians, and other naturalistically grounded communities persuade religious leaders is true about the world. Normally, the religious doctrines rejected in this process are said to have been inessential to begin with. They are cast aside as mere projections of historically particular aspects of past cultures, which can be replaced by formulations that reflect the true essentials of the faith and vindicate yet again the compatibility of faith with knowledge. Sometimes, however, cognitive demystification pushes people toward nonbelief.

The second process, *demographic diversification*, involves intimate contact with people of different backgrounds who display contrasting opinions and assumptions and thereby stimulate doubt that the ways of one’s own tribe are indeed authorized by divine authority and viable, if not imperative, for other tribes, too. The dynamic here is also classical: cosmopolitanism – a great Enlightenment ideal – challenging provincial faiths. Wider experiences, either through foreign travel or, more often, through contact with immigrants, change the context for deciding what is good and true. Living in proximity to people who do not take Protestant Christianity for granted could be unsettling. Here again, the standard response is to liberalize, to treat inherited doctrines as sufficiently flexible to enable one to abide by them while coexisting “pluralistically,” or even cooperating, with people who do not accept those doctrines. Sometimes, however, awareness of the range of human possibilities results in abandoning the faith of the natal community altogether.

Philosopher Charles Peirce understood how easily the two processes can be linked. In “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce

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argued that all efforts to stabilize belief will ultimately fail unless you adopt beliefs that can withstand exposure to the world at large. When you encounter other people who hold very different opinions than your own, and who can present striking evidence to support those opinions, it is harder to be sure that you are right. Your own experience and that of those around you may yield a particular set of certainties, but if another group of people moves into the neighborhood and obliges you to confront their foreign experience and the truth claims apparently vindicated by that experience, your old certainties become less so. Can you keep the rest of the world away from your own tribe? Perhaps, but it is not easy. Peirce made this argument in 1877, while defending the superiority of science in the specific context of the Darwinian controversy. He understood science to entail the taking of all relevant evidence into account, wherever it came from, and truth to be what all the world's inquirers could agree on if all their testimonies could be assimilated. He perceived modernity as an experience of difference in which hiding out with one's own kind was not likely to work. In this way, he integrated the Enlightenment's cosmopolitanism with its critical spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Hence demographic diversification and cognitive demystification can have their own force, but also reinforce one another; and they can even overlap. When Westerners brought modern medicine into locales where it was new, indigenous belief systems were put under stress by the Westerners and their novel and often highly effective means of interpreting and treating disease. When the 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions made Americans aware of the sophistication of many non-Christian religions and of the ways in which myths assumed to be peculiarly Christian had ready analogues in

other faiths, confidence in the uniqueness and supreme value of Christianity required a bit more energy to maintain.<sup>8</sup> When Jewish intellectuals in the middle decades of the twentieth century advanced secular perspectives in a variety of academic disciplines and other arenas of culture, a common Protestant culture was more difficult to sustain. Cognitive demystification can proceed within a tribe, but commerce with neighboring tribes can diminish the predictable resistance to it.

Cognitive demystification operated most aggressively in the nineteenth century, especially in relation to the Darwinian revolution in natural history. Virtually all Americans who gave any thought to the relation of science to religion prior to the Darwinian controversy believed that reason and revelation, rightly understood, reinforced one another. Bacon and Luther, it had often been said in the years just before Darwin, were twins in the advancement of modern life. In the context of this deeply entrenched understanding of the symbiotic nature of the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, the religious implications of natural selection were debated in the United States with more intensity, and for a longer period of time, than in the other countries of the North Atlantic West. Although some discussants concluded, then or much later, that Darwinian science was fatal to Christianity, the overwhelming majority of American commentators were "reconcilers." The copious discourse of the late nineteenth century sought mainly to establish that science and religion were not in conflict after all, no matter what the freethinking philosophers of Europe asserted. Even Andrew Dickson White, author of the monumental 1896 work, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, insisted that

the only warfare attendant upon the advance of science was caused by the mistaken efforts of theologians to go beyond their proper sphere. Christianity itself, allowed the stolid Episcopalian president of Cornell University, was just as sound as ever. The persistence of strong creationist constituencies right down to the present shows that the greatest single instance of cognitive demystification remains contested in the United States. At the other extreme, the fact that biologists are the most atheistic of all American groups today reminds us that the Darwinian revolution has helped lead many people outside the faith. But the larger truth is that accommodation with evolution rather than rejection of it or of Christianity has been the rule for Americans who are born into Protestant communities.<sup>9</sup>

Many other examples of the process of accommodation in the face of cognitive demystification could be cited, including the adjustments compelled by the historical study of the Bible. But because this process and its prominent examples are well known, I will simply flag it with this supremely important instance and move on to the less-extensively discussed second process, demographic diversification, which emerged most strikingly in the twentieth century.

Demographic diversification began with some highly pertinent agents of change functioning at a geographical distance. The sympathetic study of foreign cultures by anthropologists promoted the “cultural relativism” associated above all with Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. This movement explicitly and relentlessly questioned the certainties of the home culture by juxtaposing them with often romanticized images of distant communities of humans.<sup>10</sup> Another factor was the gradual effect American Protestant missionaries had on the communities that

had sent them abroad. Returning home with positive readings of foreign peoples and with jarring suggestions for changes in American churches and the surrounding society, missionaries and their children, exemplified by the writer Pearl Buck, often were potent liberalizers. But the chief agent of change, which I focus on here, was immigration compounded by upward class mobility.

The prodigious increase of Catholic and Jewish immigration starting in the 1880s positioned Protestant Christianity even more firmly on the defensive. Certainly, Protestants well before the Civil War had felt sufficiently threatened by Catholic migration from Ireland, and to some extent from Germany, to discriminate systematically against Catholics and thereby keep “popish” corruptions from disrupting their religious confidence and their control of American institutions. Public schools in many parts of the country became more secular in order to neutralize the charge that these schools were de facto Protestant institutions (which to a large extent they had been, as Catholics correctly discerned).<sup>11</sup> But well into the twentieth century, two circumstances rendered the numerous Catholics more of a political problem for Anglo-Protestant hegemonists than a religious one for believers: the extensive system of Catholic schools kept the bulk of the Catholic population something of a thing apart in local communities, and the relatively weak class position of most Catholics until after World War II diminished the frequency with which their ideas circulated in the national media and academia. A few Protestants converted to Catholicism, but the vast majority of Protestants of all persuasions felt so superior to Catholics that the latter’s opinions and practices rarely called their own into question. Demographic diversification was held at a certain distance.

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Yet only temporarily. The situation changed rapidly in the early 1960s with the election of John F. Kennedy as president and the dramatic liberalization of Catholic doctrine by Pope John XXIII's Vatican II Council. These developments turned Catholics into more serious interlocutors. Catholics became sufficiently intimate neighbors to compel the sympathetic attention that helped "provincialize" American Protestantism, pushing Protestant leaders to renounce the proprietary relationship to the American nation that had so long been a foundation for their own authority. To be sure, the most theologically and politically conservative elements within Protestantism continued to espouse the idea that the United States was a Protestant nation. But in the view of the mainstream leadership, as voiced by *The Christian Century*, Kennedy's inauguration marked "the end of Protestantism as a national religion" and the fuller acceptance of the secularity of a nation grounded in the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime, the much smaller population of immigrant Jews and their descendants presented a sharper challenge to Protestant epistemic and social confidence. Enthusiastically immersed in public schools and seeking full participation in American institutions of virtually all sorts, the highly literate and upwardly mobile Jewish population of the post-1880 migration was concentrated in the nation's cultural capital, New York City. Jews were harder to dismiss as bearers of ideas and practices at odds with the Protestant heritage. Their witness was so compelling that it eventually forced the development of the concept of "the Judeo-Christian tradition." But long before that phrase caught on in the 1950s, Jewish intellectuals had begun to converse with John Dewey, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Randolph Bourne, Hutchins Hapgood, and other products of American Protes-

tant culture who were already stretching its boundaries in secular directions (in the context of many episodes of cognitive demystification) and were eager to explore the diversity Jews embodied.

Unlike the Catholic population, moreover, many Jews were resoundingly secular in their orientation and carried not an alien religion but rather the most radically Enlightenment-generated strains of European thought, including Marxist and Freudian understandings of religion itself. Secular Jews were also leaders in the exploration of modernist movements in the arts that contested the more rationalist elements in the legacy of the Enlightenment while offering precious little support to the Protestant orthodoxy against which the Enlightenment was so largely defined. As non-Christians, the Jewish intellectuals were more foreign than the Catholics, yet, paradoxically, their high degree of secularism created a common foundation with liberalizing Protestants, many of whom continued to see Catholics as superstitious dupes of a medieval establishment in Rome. Especially in literature, the arts, and social criticism, Jewish intellectuals joined ecumenical Protestants and ex-Protestants in national leadership during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Two antiprovincial revolts, one against the constraints of traditional Jewish life and another against the constraints of traditional American Protestant life, reinforced each other and accelerated the cosmopolitan aspirations of both.<sup>13</sup>

The role of Jewish Americans in the process of demographic diversification increased when the barriers against their inclusion in academia collapsed after World War II. The teaching and public discussion of philosophy, literature, history, sociology, and political science had remained an Anglo-Protestant reserve long after resistance to Jews had dimin-

ished in medicine, law, engineering, and natural science. The leading secular academic humanists and social scientists of the prewar generation, exemplified by lapsed Congregationalist John Dewey, had been of Protestant origin. The post-war change was rapid and extensive. By the end of the 1960s, the Carnegie Foundation reported that self-identifying Jews, while constituting only about 3 percent of the national population, accounted for 36 percent of sociologists, 22 percent of historians, and 20 percent of philosophers at the seventeen most prestigious universities. Later in the twentieth century, the increase of female and black faculty brought a different sort of demographic diversification, one that discredited sexist and racist traditions rather than religious biases. But there was also another difference: the addition of women and African Americans to the humanities and social sciences was often justified by the need for the special perspectives they could bring to scholarship and teaching. This was decidedly not the case with Jews. No one declared that there was a need for “a Jewish perspective.” It was instead the epistemic universalism of the Enlightenment that defined intellectually the coming of Jews into American academia. Hence that episode stands as a peculiarly vivid case of the overlap between demographic diversification and cognitive demystification: the Jewish academics, like their counterparts in literature and the arts, were living examples of how life’s deepest challenges could be addressed beyond the frame provided by Protestant Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

All these developments presented a striking challenge to Americans with institutionalized responsibility for the preservation and critical revision of Protestantism during the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most por-

tentous phases of the entire multicentury accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment, broadly construed, was the crisis experienced by the old “Protestant Establishment” during and after the 1960s. The theologically and politically liberal leaders of the National Council of Churches and its most important denominational affiliates (the United Methodists, the United Church of Christ, the Northern Presbyterians, the Northern Baptists, the Episcopalians, the Disciples of Christ, and several Lutheran bodies) were caught in the ferocious cross fire of national controversies over all the classic issues of the period, especially civil rights, Vietnam, empire, feminism, abortion, and sexual orientation. As ecumenical Protestant leaders tried to mobilize their constituencies on the leftward side of these issues, they were simultaneously attacked by evangelicals for selling out religion to social activism and abandoned by many of their own youth for moving too slowly. Membership in the historically mainstream denominations declined rapidly in the late 1960s and 1970s while evangelicals, who maintained a strong public following, moved aggressively into national political leadership during the 1970s and 1980s.

This religious crisis revolved around a particular outlook the ecumenical leadership brought to the conflicts of that era. A cosmopolitan and rationalist perspective, it was inspired by the demographic diversification that liberal Protestants observed in their social environment and by the cognitive demystification of their cosmos that modern science had achieved. Self-consciously “modern,” this viewpoint included an increasingly generous opinion of foreign peoples and their inherited religions, a revulsion toward the persistence of anti-black racism in their own country, a recognition that the American nation was as much the possession of

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non-Protestants as of Protestants, a positive response to secular psychology and sociology, and a growing receptivity to theologies that rejected or downplayed the role of supernatural power. The accommodations the ecumenical Protestant leadership made with secular liberalism generated countermeasures from fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and holiness Protestants. These conservatives, deeply resenting the authority exercised by the mainstream liberals partly as a result of the latter's generally strong class position, established a formidable array of counter-institutions. The National Association of Evangelicals was founded in 1942, Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, and *Christianity Today* in 1956. In the 1960s, evangelicals were able to offer the public a credible, highly visible alternative to the style of Protestantism promoted by the National Council of Churches, the Union Theological Seminary, and *The Christian Century*. By 1965, when the liberal theologian Harvey Cox concluded his best-selling *The Secular City* with the injunction to stop talking about God and focus simply on "liberating the captives," evangelicals had provided religious cover for Protestants dubious about the captive-liberating, diversity-welcoming, supernaturalism-questioning projects of the ecumenists.<sup>15</sup>

In a fateful dialectic, enterprising, media-savvy evangelical leaders espoused a series of perspectives that remained popular with the white public during the turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s, just as the ecumenical leadership more firmly renounced these views. The idea of a "Christian America" is a prominent example, though there were many more such cases. While the ecumenical leadership, deciding that its missionary project was culturally imperialist, diminished its size and turned from preaching to social services, evangelicals took up and pursued with a vengeance the traditional mission-

ary function of preaching the gospel. When the ecumenical leadership finally backed away from the traditional assumption that the heterosexual, nuclear, patriarchal family is God's will, evangelical leaders seized the idea, called it "family values," and ran with it to great success. Evangelicals remained largely aloof from the civil rights movement – often declaring racism to be an individual sin rather than a civic evil to be diminished by state power – while ecumenical leaders widened the gap between themselves and their rank-and-file church members by strongly supporting the activities of Martin Luther King, Jr., and numerous kindred initiatives, including the Freedom Summer operation launched in 1964 to register blacks to vote. The departure of civil rights issues from the agenda of American politics eliminated a barrier to the Religious Right's national credibility, facilitating their triumphs in the 1980s: evangelicals gained more power during the Reagan years by merely acquiescing to civil rights measures that many of them had opposed, treating them now as a *fait accompli*. Ecumenists engaged in extensive, probing discussions of the antisupernaturalist writings of the most radical of their theologians. The buzz in the seminaries, *Time* reported in 1965, was that "it is no longer possible to think about or believe in a transcendent God who acts in human history. . . . Christianity will have to survive, if at all, without him." Evangelicals stood fast for traditional understandings of the Bible and made it clear that God really was in charge of things. These certainties played well in the average church pew.<sup>16</sup>

The accommodating ecumenical Protestants, having absorbed much of modernity, found their social base diminishing while Protestantism was increasingly associated with people who had resisted these accommodations. Ecumenists' ap-

proval of contraception and a role for sex other than reproduction had a marked effect on birth rate differentials between the two Protestant parties: during the baby boom, Presbyterian women had an average of 1.6 children while evangelical women had an average of 2.4, a birth rate considerably higher than even for Catholic women during that era. Ecumenical leaders encouraged their youth to explore the wider world of which evangelical leaders counseled their own youth to be suspicious. They also accepted perspectives on women and the family that reduced their capacity to reproduce themselves at precisely the same time they took positions on empire, race, sex, abortion, and divinity that diminished their ability to recruit new members from the Seventh Day Adventist and Church of the Nazarene, ranks which in earlier generations provided many converts to the more respectable Methodist and Episcopalian faiths. Evangelicals, by contrast, had more children and kept them.

What happened to ecumenical Protestantism during the 1960s crisis and its aftermath can be instructively compared to what happened simultaneously to the Democratic Party in national politics. “We have lost the South for a generation,” President Lyndon Johnson is widely quoted as having said in 1964 when the Democratic Party aligned itself with the cause of civil rights for African Americans. The manner in which ecumenists risked their hold on American Protestantism is similar to the way the Democratic leadership imperiled its hold on the South, and with similar consequences. At issue in the control of American Protestantism was not only race – the crucial issue for the Democrats – but also imperialism, feminism, abortion, and sexuality, in addition to critical perspectives on supernaturalism. Ecumenical leaders were

not as aware as the president was of the risks they were taking, nor were they as blunt in the moments when the truth dawned on them. But they, like Johnson, believed that the time had come to redirect the institutions and populations they were trying to lead, and they behaved accordingly. They encouraged secular alliances that blurred the boundaries of their faith community and risked the gradual loss of their children to post-Protestant persuasions. Just as Democrats lost most of the South to the Republican Party, so, too, did ecumenists yield more and more of the cultural capital of the Reformation to the evangelicals.

But Protestantism is not America. Neither is the South. The Democrats did well enough in the national arena by paying the price of turning the states of the Old Confederacy over to white Republicans. The ecumenists, even while they lost the leadership of Protestantism, advanced many of the goals of secular liberalism that they had embraced. The United States today, even with the prominence of politically conservative evangelical Protestants, looks much more like the country ecumenical leaders of the 1960s hoped it would become than the one their evangelical rivals sought to create. Sociologist N. J. Demerath III has put this point hyperbolically: the ecumenical Protestants scored a “cultural victory” while experiencing “organizational defeat.” They campaigned for “individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry,” Demerath observes – exactly the Enlightenment values that gained rather than lost ground in American public culture in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> These values were not peculiar to ecumenical Protestants, but their emphatic espousal demonstrated an accommodation with secular liberalism, especially as instantiated in specific causes such as civil rights, feminism, and the

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critical reassessment of inherited religious doctrine.

To treat the ecumenical Protestant saga of the last half-century as a culmination of the accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment, as I do here, invites several qualifications. It will not do to suppose that the evangelical Protestants, who in my telling of the story are primarily resisters to modernity, experienced neither transformations within their own ranks nor internal diversification. An excellent guide to disagreements within American evangelical Protestantism is historian Mark Noll's well-titled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, which characterizes the fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century as "an intellectual disaster." But I believe it is fair to say that many of the loudest voices in the evangelical conversation today, exemplified by Nancy Pearcey's *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, make Noll look like no less impassioned a defender of the Enlightenment than Harvey Cox. It is all a matter of degree and emphasis.<sup>18</sup>

Neither will it do to imagine that every novelty prompted by cognitive demystification and demographic diversification amounts to a triumph of the Enlightenment narrowly construed as a set of naturalistic and rationalist dispositions. The Enlightenment as a presence in modern history certainly was just that; indeed, much of its legacy can be traced to the power of those dispositions to explain human experience and diminish suspicion of the alternatives to Protestant orthodoxy confronted in the process of demographic diversification. But the Enlightenment provided more than an outlook to accommodate increasing diversity. It functioned as an almost infinite series of stepping-stones to many ideas and practices that eighteenth-century intel-

lectuals never contemplated. The world that American Protestants and their progeny eventually made their own, in cooperation with Americans who had no Protestant past whatsoever, is a vast expanse encompassing dispersed elements of culture from throughout the globe. The Enlightenment was destined to be a great provider of stepping-stones for European-derived American Protestants because the Enlightenment was largely a product of European Christian self-scrutiny in the first place.

Finally, we are left with the mystery of where a given historical formation such as "ecumenical Protestantism" – or even "the Enlightenment" itself – is best considered an agent and where it is best considered a vehicle. The heavily Christian foundations of modern science and of the Enlightenment are now widely acknowledged. And the Christianity of Paul the Apostle was itself as much a collection of historical results as of causes. It is easy to say that Protestants who most fully accommodate secular liberalism have turned their institutions into vehicles for agencies outside Christianity, but the trajectories that flowed into ecumenical Protestantism and helped make it what it became were not, in themselves, autochthonous: those forces were complex results of earlier conditions, like strong winds that had picked up many diverse materials from the various territories through which they had blown.

The accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment will find a place among American narratives so long as there are Americans whose formation was significantly Protestant and who owe a large part of their understanding of human reason to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century savants who inspired Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. If you think that time is passing, look around you.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *The Christian Century*, June 12, 1963, 769–775.
- <sup>2</sup> There were strong movements to this effect in the middle of the nineteenth century, and they continued episodically in the twentieth. In 1947 and again in 1954, the National Association of Evangelicals attempted to amend the Constitution to include the following passage, introduced into the U.S. Senate (where it died in committee) by Vermont Republican Senator Ralph Flanders: “This nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Savior and Ruler of nations, through whom we are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God”; see “The Congress: Hunting Time,” *Time*, May 24, 1954, 23.
- <sup>3</sup> The heavily religious character of the Enlightenment as it flourished even in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America is emphasized in what remains after more than three decades the standard account of its topic: Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). The range and vitality of liberal theological endeavors throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been documented and analyzed in the massive work of Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 3 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Prominent examples from recent years include Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, eds., *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape, eds., *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in Honour of Hugh McLeod* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2010).
- <sup>5</sup> For an unusually probing exploration of this feature of American politics, see Ryan Lizza, “Leap of Faith,” *The New Yorker*, August 15 and 22, 2011, 54–63.
- <sup>6</sup> Three excellent collections of original academic essays exploring these current engagements are Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); George Levine, ed., *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *Religion and the Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also the most searching and comprehensive recent contribution to the sociology of religion in the United States: Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (November 1877): 1–15.
- <sup>8</sup> An influential study of this pivotal episode in demographic diversification at a geographic distance is Grant Wacker, “A Plural World: The Protestant Awakening to World Religions,” in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900–1960*, ed. William Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 253–277.
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896). Among the many excellent studies of the religious aspects of the Darwinian controversy, two have been especially influential: James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). The standard work on the persistence of creationist ideas is Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006). For the religious views of biologists, see Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, “Atheists: A Psychological Profile,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 312. Biologists challenging a literal reading of the Bible remain in difficulty even today in some

Protestant colleges; see, for example, [http://m.insidehighered.com/layout/set/popup/news/2011/08/15/a\\_professor\\_s\\_departure\\_raises\\_questions\\_about\\_freedom\\_of\\_scholarship\\_at\\_calvin\\_college](http://m.insidehighered.com/layout/set/popup/news/2011/08/15/a_professor_s_departure_raises_questions_about_freedom_of_scholarship_at_calvin_college).

<sup>10</sup> A recent, exhaustive treatment of this movement is found in John S. Gilkeson, *Anthropologists and the Rediscovery of America, 1886 – 1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Fresh light on the Protestant-Catholic relationship in the middle decades of the nineteenth century is cast by Jon Gjerde, *Catholicism and the Shaping of 19th Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Marty, “Protestantism Enters Third Phase,” *The Christian Century*, January 18, 1961, 72.

<sup>13</sup> I have discussed the coming together of these two antiprovincial revolts in “Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia,” *American Quarterly* 27 (1975): 133 – 151. A recent and highly original contribution to the study of these developments is Daniel Greene, *The Jewish Origins of Cultural Pluralism: The Menorah Association and American Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> For an extended treatment with attendant documentation of the developments summarized in this paragraph, see David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. chap. 2, “Jewish Intellectuals and the De-Christianization of American Public Culture in the Twentieth Century.”

<sup>15</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 268.

<sup>16</sup> “Theology: The God is Dead Movement,” *Time*, October 22, 1965. For a fuller account with attendant documentation of the developments mentioned in this paragraph and those following, see David A. Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestants and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” *Journal of American History* 98 (June 2011): 21 – 48.

<sup>17</sup> N. J. Demerath III, “Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1995): 458 – 469, esp. 458 – 460.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994); Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004).