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In Search of a Protestant Twentieth Century: American Religion and Power Since 1900

As was the case with many students of American religion, my interest in conservative Protestantism was brought about by rapidly overwhelming events. I had assumed that the point of view variously called evangelical, fundamentalist, holiness, Pentecostal, or millenarian was moribund in America. I found it hard to see Billy Graham as more than vestigial, to see itinerant revival and healing shows as more than chicanery, and to see so-called Christian schools as other than crabby devices used by new members of the middle-class to shelter their children from the facts of ethnic life. After all, the Rev. Dr. Graham found Richard Nixon's profanity his most offensive feature, and Christian schools seemed to draw disproportionately from the muscular, Bible-quotin' people who, especially if they drove to church in pick-up trucks, seemed to be suffering delusions of gender. The whole conservative religious scene, in other words, was out of step with the America I knew. Therefore it could be dismissed. And dismiss it I did.

As Stephen Warner (1979) warned us, however, people like myself held these opinions at considerable intellectual cost. We were unable, given this outlook, to understand many of the real motives possessed by follow-

ers of evangelicalism; we were blinded to the real sociopolitical impact such groups might have; and we could not even guess that, by 1980, all three major candidates for President of the United States would declare themselves "born again," as religious revivals melded into political campaigns. That is to say, conservative Protestantism is—and perhaps for some decades has been—a force of cultural importance, and I was among those not seeing it. I decided to educate myself by backing up to the nineteenth century, to search out the roots of this contemporary phenomenon.

My first aim here, then, is to summarize what I learned from going back 100 years. I shall argue that the changes undertaken 70 to 110 years ago by Protestantism were monumental, that among these changes was the breaking of the link between Protestantism and power in America, a link that had been quite strong for most of the nineteenth century. I want second, therefore, to show how this breakup was manifested in both domestic and foreign church affairs. Third and finally, I turn to the conservative resurgence in our day, claiming it is best understood not as dissatisfaction with turn-of-the-century *theological* changes but as dissatisfaction with the *cultural* consequences brought on, in part, by those theological changes. My title, "In Search of a Protestant Twentieth Century," thus has two distinct meanings: It refers to the futility of efforts by liberal Protestantism any longer to play a distinctively sovereign role in American political life. And it refers to equally futile efforts by conservative Protestantism, profoundly unhappy with this broken relationship between religion and power, to find programs yet in this century on which it can hang the label *Christian*.

THE MONUMENTAL CHANGES IN PROTESTANTISM

As students of social structure, we sociologists know that social change comes in lurches. Persons and cultures may undergo steady change, but institutionalized patterns of interaction tend to remain fairly constant until some event causes people to redefine their relationships. A new standard procedure then appears as these relationships get restructured.

I rehearse this obvious point before discussing the monumental changes made by American Protestantism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because I am well aware that any ideas claimed to be new can, in fact, be found earlier in somebody, somewhere. Some intellectual historians delight in just such never-ending backpedaling, and maybe without them we would err in believing all

ideas are constantly being reinvented. Nevertheless I think it accurate to say that, between 1880 and 1920, something really new occurred in American Protestantism.

Certainly there was no lack of social forces conducive to change. The Civil War had called nationhood into question. Immigrants, many of whom were not Protestant, were coming in droves. Factories were being built, and millions were moving out of rural settings into cities. America was becoming a world power. Public schools were distributing the products of the Enlightenment to more and more people, as evolution and textual analysis became part of everyday intellectual baggage; and higher education grew increasingly secular. Labor was organizing, and the vicissitudes of a capitalist economy were becoming evermore apparent.

The question is how to describe Protestantism's response to these social forces. As Henry May said: "In 1876 Protestantism presented a massive, almost unbroken front in its defense of the social status quo. Two decades later social criticism had penetrated deeply into each major church" (1949, p. 91).

But more than criticism of the social status quo was involved. Martin Marty writes:

From the 1880s to World War I the mainline Protestants saw much of their intellectual leadership adopt various versions of the new theology and much of their reformist passion shaped into a new social gospel. Biblical criticism, evolutionary thought, and modern secular philosophy were absorbed into the liberal Protestant patterns. (1970, p. 211)

In other words, Protestantism was recognizing not just the existence of social problems in need of correction but also the existence of standards lying outside of Protestantism itself, standards by which these problems, and efforts to solve them, would be judged.

Robert Handy is correct, therefore, in calling this period the breakup of the "Protestant era." Pre-Revolutionary legal efforts to make America a "Christian nation" had failed, but Protestantism bounced back with a voluntary plan that, through much of the nineteenth century, worked to make this nonetheless a "Protestant nation." But events late in the century began an erosion process that went on for the next several decades. This "second disestablishment," as Handy calls it, resulted in profound changes in the relationship between Protestantism and the surrounding society.

Of course, many were unhappy with the adjustments Protestantism was making. To put it mildly, there was no lack of theological debate during these years of transition. Through it all, however, was the implicit issue of whether America would remain a Protestant nation. As Princeton theologian, George Patton, put it in 1897:

Let us be honest with ourselves. Let us face the question whether Christianity is a supernatural religion or not, whether it is from heaven or of men, whether it is the absolute religion or simply the purest form of religion that has yet appeared. . . . [I]f we believe the latter, let us give up the old terminology and the old method of defending the faith. And when we have given up the God-man Christ Jesus, and the miracles He wrought, and His resurrection from the dead, and His atonement for sin, then . . . let us pause and ask . . . whether we are still Christians. (quoted in Hutchison, 1976, p. 204)

To most American religious leaders the answer, by 1920, was clear: No, we are not still Christians, at least not in the same sense Americans were before 1880. Not just new doctrines but new relationships—new social structures, if you will—are needed, they said, if Protestantism is to remain a force in American life. The conservatives' alleged choice between the Christian orthodoxy of the nineteenth century and no Christianity at all was understood by the liberals as a choice between a believable Christianity and no *religion* at all (Hutchison, 1976, p. 258). Just as early nineteenth century Protestants woke up to the inevitability of a voluntary church, so early twentieth century Protestants woke up to the inevitability of pluralism, the authority of science, and the realities of an urbanized, capitalistic society.¹

The consequences of this new awareness were vast, only two of which will I touch on here: (1) the altered relationship between Protestant churches and the domestic political agenda, and (2) a failure of nerve in the foreign mission field.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY PROTESTANTISM AND DOMESTIC KINGDOM BUILDING

Protestantism after 1880 found it had taken a giant step in the inner-worldly ascetic direction, reflected most clearly in the changing role of

millennialism. At least implicitly, Protestants until the Civil War assumed the Second Coming would come magically, following some cataclysm. Inspired by such leaders as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, however, churches began working actively to assist in the Kingdom's arrival. The founding of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908 was the organizational achievement in this direction, and almost as a first act it adopted the "Social Creed of the Churches" (Miller, 1958, pp. 220-221).

This inner-worldly ascetic step must, however, be seen in proper perspective. It was not simply a recognition that the world is filled with evil needing correction, nor was it simply a naive optimism that human effort could correct evil. Neo-orthodoxy a few decades later tried to pin such charges on the Social Gospellers, and superficially they were accurate charges. But much more profound was the underlying change in soteriology. People now would take responsibility for the salvation of all of society. As Donald Meyer puts it: "Rauschenbusch . . . allowed himself to believe in history" (1960, p. 16). But not just Rauschenbusch; all Social Gospellers. And not just Social Gospellers; most Protestant leaders, the Niebuhr brothers included. This world was recognized as the only world in which human action could meaningfully occur, and like it or not, with hope or with despair, people were called on to act on the stage of history. And this meant—if one acted responsibly in a religiously plural setting—justifying one's actions not by revealed, other-worldly, or otherwise private criteria (even if one claimed such criteria as inspiration) but by the criteria of a secular, humanistic society.

Thus, when Rauschenbusch wrote of the church: "She does not exist for her own sake; she is simply a working organization to create the Christian life in individuals and the kingdom of God in human society" (1907, p. 185), he was inviting a consensual definition of "Christian life" and "kingdom of God." He was, to put it another way, announcing an eagerness to work with non-Christians to achieve a goal they mutually recognized though they might call it by different names. As Handy remarks: "The kingdom idea was in many respects a spiritualized and idealized restatement of the search for a specifically Christian society [but] in an age of freedom and progress" (1971, p. 101). To put it yet another way, the church would now do its work in this world, according to worldly standards, and the channels through which it worked would be judged by their effectiveness, not by their fidelity to some doctrine. Although one may question Henry May's assertion that the Social Gospel influenced the "progressivism" of Theodore Roosevelt,

Robert LaFollette, Woodrow Wilson, and FDR (1949, pp. 204-234), there is no disputing that official Protestantism came to share the political criteria—and eventually the political agenda—of secular parties. For it to do anything else would have been to be irrelevant in a post-Protestant society.

What we observe in this change after the 1880s is Protestantism's growing awareness that it no longer set the moral agenda for the nation. Prohibition was probably the last expression of the earlier outlook, but, as is now recognized, Prohibition's success depended on a temporary coalition that included many groups for whom alcohol was not the chief enemy. Granted, many Social Gospelers who applauded labor unions, welfare programs, and a progressive income tax still balked at FDR and the New Deal because of the alcohol issue. But once the awareness was complete enough, once Protestant leaders saw what the realistic choices were, they made a kind of peace with politics, generally the Democratic Party. As Robert M. Miller noted: "The New Deal program received almost unflinching support from the Federal Council. . . . the Roosevelt program did approximate the political equivalent of the Council's social ideals" (1958, pp. 88-89). Of course, individual church members, then as now, were among the chief detractors of the New Deal. Even some denominations were reluctant to depart from the Republican Party, the party that for almost a century had been the conduit through which Protestantism had helped exercise power. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the magazines of these denominations exhibit this ambivalent character as they espouse various social programs on the one hand, while on the other hand expressing distrust of the Democratic Party, made up as it was of Catholics, Jews, machine politicians, and of course "wets."²

There was also the problem of war. The liberal tendency pushing Protestants toward support of government social programs was also pushing them toward pacifism and isolation. World War I was an especially difficult event for those progressives to digest.

In this postwar period of liberal confusion and despair Reinhold Niebuhr rose to prominence, bringing the counsel of realism: No program of human devising is capable of redeeming the world, he said. War is an acceptable, even necessary, tactic if the evil it is designed to destroy is greater than the evil war itself represents. The chief mistake Christians make, especially Christians who are heirs to the nineteenth century Protestant era, is to believe God's will is to be found in history, to believe that a religion taking its goals from the surrounding society is

authentic religion. Such beliefs, Niebuhr said, are mere "culture religion," which, knowing "no God who transcends all cultures and civilizations . . . therefore identifies God with the highest culture it knows" (1938, p. 9).

The weakness of the Niebuhrian position was obvious, however. It was one thing to hold to a neo-orthodoxy that was uncompromising in its relations with culture; it was quite another to make any claims in the name of that neo-orthodoxy if one were simultaneously: (1) committed to the ideal of religious pluralism, and (2) convinced that action in this world is obligatory. Neo-orthodoxy in America therefore left Protestants chastised for being naively optimistic, but, as Benton Johnson reminded us (1982), it otherwise did nothing to improve on liberal Protestantism's efforts to grapple with real social problems. On this score, neo-orthodoxy suffered the same fate as liberalism; it played according to the rules and with the agenda set by others, or it did not play at all. Protestantism by now had no special power of its own.

So vividly did neo-orthodoxy follow this same course that I will take a few more moments to illustrate with material that might otherwise be relegated to a footnote. In 1935 Niebuhr founded the journal *Radical Religion* and was its editor for several years. Among other themes prominent in its pages was the indictment of culture religion, especially as manifested in any "American Dream," including high hopes for New Deal legislation. Many of Roosevelt's programs, Niebuhr thought, were facades for "predatory interests." One of the spokesmen for this point of view was Richard W. Day, at the time a priest at All Angels Episcopal Church in New York City and a regular contributor to *Radical Religion*.

In 1938, however, Day wrote an essay entitled "American Dream Resurgent." It appeared in the winter issue of the journal, no doubt with Niebuhr's editorial approval. "A new alignment of political thinking is taking place among radicals, liberals and progressives in America," Day wrote. "The New Deal has had telling effect. . . . Roosevelt and his program seem to be going somewhere" (1938, p. 16).

So far, so good. Faced with two imperfect options, even the neo-orthodox must make choices. The telling point comes in Day's subsequent argument, where he allowed himself to express the belief that, in "going somewhere," Roosevelt's program is approximating "the American Dream." He is still aware, he says, of the dangers of mistaking the American Dream (a culture religion) for authentic religion, but

in spite of that, an appeal must be made to the American Dream. In its political and economic aspects, every attempt must be made to clarify it, showing what is feasible and desirable in our present situation. . . . It is impossible to say how much in the culture religion of the American Dream is Christian and how much is idolatrous; but there is some Christianity in it. . . . The strength which even a false hope generates can be used for divine purposes. (Day, 1938, p. 21)

Like Rauschenbusch before them, the neo-orthodox also had allowed themselves to believe in history.

But how could it have been otherwise? All magic had been relinquished by Protestantism a generation or two before when it recognized it had no special claim in setting the moral agenda. Yet it still regarded this world as an appropriate arena for action. Because neo-orthodoxy repudiated neither of these propositions, it was left with having to believe in the merits of its positions not because they were "Christian" but because they met certain standards whether or not they were Christian.³

Protestantism, in other words, had entered the world to such a degree that the boundary between it and any secular design for the good society was hard to find. Its special link with the exercise of power in America was dissolved to the point where an identifiable Protestant twentieth century had disappeared.

FAILURE OF NERVE IN FOREIGN MISSIONS

On the international scene, too, mainline Protestantism has played a diminishing role in this century, at least since the 1920s. Through most of the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries, whether to American Indians, Hawaii, the Levant, or East Asia had a clear goal: to convert pagans into Christians. As late as the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, missionaries in China were thus of the mind that a "punitive expedition should go to Pao Ting and destroy the city." Missionaries, said another of them, "are the vanguard of Western civilization." Thus it is proper "to make converts in a country like China," even "if the outcome is to be trouble and perhaps war" (Miller, 1974, pp. 274, 280). A Methodist bishop declared it "worth any cost in bloodshed if we can make millions of Chinese true and intelligent Christians" (Schlesinger, Jr., 1974, p. 358).

With the rise of Protestant liberalism and the shift from pre- to postmillennialism, however, such foreign mission thinking was revised. And surprisingly, the initial impact of this revision was a tremendous surge in missionary activity. At least three factors were at play. First, about this time many foreign governments actively sought missionaries from America, believing that they brought cultural and economic progress (Hutchison, 1976, p. 260). Second, the developing split between modernists and conservatives did not lead in the foreign field to the same antagonisms it did domestically, so that people like John R. Mott and Sherwood Eddy could appeal simultaneously to both sides. Third, and perhaps most important, the giant inner-worldly ascetic step Protestantism took after 1880 meant new energies were released toward the goal of "building the Kingdom on earth." The Student Volunteer Movement, a device for recruiting college students into the missionary enterprise, blossomed through its summer conferences, reaching a peak of 2700 recruits in 1920 (Handy, 1971, p. 201). "Evangelizing the world in this generation" became the slogan to express the incredible optimism early twentieth-century Protestantism felt about its work in foreign fields. From fewer than 1000 in 1890, North American missionary personnel rose ninefold by 1915, and passed the 11,000 mark in 1925 (Hogg, 1977).

After this initial burst in missionary activity, however, Protestantism faced a failure of nerve abroad just as it did at home. Surely World War I contributed to the crisis, calling into question the churches' effectiveness in "Christianizing" the world. More important, doubt arose over the very meaning of *Christian*. One National Council spokesman expressed in 1920 what many were thinking: "The so-called Christian nations are approaching moral and spiritual bankruptcy" (quoted in Handy, 1971, p. 196). From a period early in the century, then, a period with little reason to doubt the superiority of the Protestant version of Christianity, American Protestant leaders rather suddenly came to question the whole mission enterprise. No better evidence for this failure of nerve exists than the 1932 publication of *Re-thinking Missions*, a National Council report issued under the direction of Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking. The report called not only for an end to sectarian competition in the mission field but also urged cooperation with non-Christians, to the end that concern for indigenous cultures be fostered and self-determination replace missionary influence.

It perhaps does not matter that this report was heavily criticized,

because it was recommending the inevitable anyway. Add the Depression, plus the growing issues of pacifism and interventionism as World War II, Korea, and Vietnam came and went, and one can understand the radical decline in missionaries supported by mainline Protestant denominations in recent decades. From 11,000 in 1925, the figure dropped to 8,000 in 1952, 6,000 in 1970, and 3,000 in 1976. The decline continues.

As important as sheer mechanical problems like war might have been, however, such a precipitous drop must be understood socially as well. American mainline denominations had lost their conviction that *as Christians* they had much to offer. As Robert Handy said, foreign missions were rooted in the evangelical Protestantism coming out of the nineteenth century. When that viewpoint ceased to be the primary definer of cultural values and behavior patterns, the institutions that viewpoint helped create eventually eroded. From 2,700 recruits in 1920, the Student Volunteer Movement signed a mere 252 in 1928 (Handy, 1971, p. 201). As successive generations of missionaries retired, in other words, few were available as replacements. One can find many consequences of American missionary activity—some of them enormously important, as John Fairbank has argued (1974)—but they came about chiefly as the result of pre-1920s goals and inspiration. One does not find comparable Protestant foreign missions later in the twentieth century.

THE RESURGENCE OF CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM

If mainline Protestantism began losing its foreign mission nerve around 1920, the same can hardly be said of other Protestants. Table 1.1 shows the number of North American Protestant missionary personnel, for selected years, according to their denominational sponsorship.

Although missionaries sponsored by members of the National Council were declining from 11,000 in 1925 to 3,000 in 1976, nonmember bodies were increasing their missionaries from 2,500 to 30,000. Put another way, denominations united in the National Council sponsored 81 percent of the Protestant missionaries in 1925; they sponsored 9 percent in 1976, 7 percent in 1985 (Hogg, 1977; Dayton, 1986). By as early as 1938, Littell claimed, it was evident that "the main portion of finance and personnel going into the expansion of Christianity in new fields

TABLE 1.1
North American Protestant Missionary Personnel
(of which about 10% are Canadian)

Sponsor	1890	1915	1925	1952	1960	1970	1973	1976
Denominations belonging to NCCC ^a	934	9,072	11,020	7,937	8,213	6,199	4,013	3,105
NCCC affiliated but not belonging ^b				2,439	2,111	3,258	2,908	2,234
All others ^c			2,588	8,160	19,056	25,003	28,149	30,119
Total	934	9,072	13,608	18,536	29,380	34,460	35,070	35,458

^a Inasmuch as the National Council (earlier, the Federal Council) did not form until 1908, the first figure in this row is technically mislabeled.

^b The largest of these sponsors are Seventh Day Adventist, Missouri Synod Lutheran, and American Lutheran Church.

^c The largest of these sponsors are Southern Baptist and Wycliffe Bible Translators.

SOURCE: W. Richie Hogg, "The Role of American Protestantism in World Mission," in R. P. Beaver, ed., *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective*. Adapted from Tables III and VI.

was coming from the Free Churches. . . . from smaller fundamentalistic and pentecostal groups" (Littell, 1971, p. 130). The reasons for this decline among mainline Protestant bodies have just been reviewed. What is now to be asked is why Protestants outside of the mainline—Protestants we have so far lumped together as conservative—have followed a markedly different course.

The American religious movement that includes what we now call millenarian, evangelical, or fundamentalist groups had its proximate origins in the 1870s. Before this time, after all, the movement was hardly distinguishable from Protestant orthodoxy. From about 1880 to about 1920, however, conservative Protestantism—it remained several different submovements, each with its own special item on a fairly common agenda—arose as a minority party opposed to the theological adaptations being made by others. It was, in other words, a movement rooted in theology. Its leaders were drawn in part from Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Baptist clergy in good standing, and its strength lay among the bourgeoisie of the Northern cities (Sandeen, 1970; Marsden, 1980). Whether the primary concern was the Second Coming, biblical inerrancy, Genesis vs. evolution, or recognition of the Holy Spirit, conservatives before 1920 were collectively alarmed at what was happening to *Protestantism*. What bothered them was not economics, politics, and social welfare so much as cosmology, ontology, and teleology. They correctly perceived the ebbing away of the "Protestant Era," and they tried to staunch it.

By the 1920s, however, it was clear they had failed. America was no longer a "Christian" nation; the Bible had lost its authority, and the church had lost control of education. These facts are what made the Scopes trial of 1925 so symbolic. What had for several decades been a middle-class movement, as much within as alongside the major denominations, was now changing in leadership and in the social bases of its support. It was divorcing from mainline Protestantism.

But not just mainline Protestantism; the conservative movement was also at odds with the direction America was moving. Having lost the theological battle in mainline churches, conservatives turned their attention to cultural matters and necessarily became political as well. The teaching of evolution vs. creation in the schools ceased to be simply a dispute about Genesis among persons sharing a Christian culture and became instead an issue of the imminent collapse of a misguided civilization.⁴ Prohibition may have been the last issue on which these disputants agreed, but, as we saw, even that coalition broke down in the 1930s.

Within a few years there came into existence an elaborate network of parallel institutions to counteract the collapse: Bible schools and mission organizations, journals of opinions and publishing houses, new denominations and innovative ministries to youth. Conservative Protestantism exploited radio—and then TV—in ways mainline churches have yet to duplicate. It is no exaggeration to call the result a *folk religion*, perhaps—a religion much practiced by people but little recognized in the formal culture. Certainly the institutions of this folk religion were hardly noticed by majoritarian culture. Its books went unreviewed by the secular press, its radio shows remained local, and its schools showed little concern for national accreditation. It comes as a bit of a shock to realize, for example, that Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling nonfiction work of the entire decade of the 1970s.

Surely the cadre of sympathetic followers who served, and in turn were served by, this institutional network is a crucial ingredient in the conservative resurgence in the current day, but by itself this cadre explains little. If the sentiment has been there for over half a century, what happened in recent years to activate it, give it voice, strength, and visibility.

Two answers might be offered, both implied in the analysis so far. One answer helps explain the strident political tone found in some present-day Conservative Protestants. The other answer does more to explain the popularity of a Conservative Protestantism that remains largely nonpolitical.

The first answer is that, in becoming political since the 1920s, conservative Protestantism had to wait only until the forces of modernity became also the forces leading to oblivion—to Armageddon, if you will. During the Depression, World War II, the era of Sputnik, Keynesian adjustments, and Great Society programs, modernity was the path of hope for most Americans. Those who bemoaned the consequences of weakened family, neighborhood, school, church, and community were dismissed as mere alarmists. By the 1970s, however, even some erstwhile liberals had joined in alarm at the breakdown in these traditional authority structures. How reasonable it was, therefore, that the message being preached by conservative religious leaders now resonated through a wider audience and the mass media. The Tri-lateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Affairs, and regulatory agencies such as Health and Human Services would join the Supreme Court and Communist Russia as forces of darkness. Not just the outlawing of school

prayers but the London price of gold, the MX missile, and ERA would become Christian issues.

The other answer helps explain why the conservative Protestantism enjoying renewed vigor has nevertheless remained largely non-political. This answer involves the "cure of souls." Not only did main-line Protestantism tend to lose out on this score after 1920, but so also did its conservative counterpart muscle into that territory. To be sure, the concern for peace of mind and personal tranquility is not new to the conservative movement (Marsden, 1980, p. 75). But what was surely of little concern to conservatives between 1880 and 1920 had, by the 1950s and especially the 1970s, become a significant part of that movement's message. *Publishers Weekly* claims that the best-selling religious titles today are "experience-oriented, life-centered, and Bible-based" (Quebedeaux, 1982, p. 48). Positive Thinking, in other words, is at least as popular as Armageddon, as suggested by titles such as *The Christian Mother Goose* and *God's Answer to Fat: Lose It*. Billy Graham combined with Norman Vincent Peale, a merger in fact in 1957, although as Richard Quebedeaux remarks, "It took another two decades for the content and method of revivalistic Christianity and New Thought to blend together at the grass-roots" (1982, p. 82; see also Hunter, 1983).

It is this last answer, it seems to me, that best explains how conservative Protestantism can be at once political, popular, and yet remain outrageously eccentric theologically. Giving utterance to antiintellectual, antidemocratic, and antimodern sentiments, the conservative then adds the implicit, "But only for me, of course. You may believe what you like." The political directives perceived by some, in other words, are as foreign and irrelevant to the majority of religious conservatives as civil rights, nuclear disarmament, and corporate investment in South Africa are to the majority of religious liberals. I have no doubt that conservative leaders who would force the teaching of creation or bomb Godless Russia are serious. But their followers, I suspect, are not. Stacey and Shupe, for example, who studied this precise point report: "our data . . . suggest that viewers and listeners are attracted to the electronic church by its religious messages, and any political . . . dimension associated with those messages is either 'filtered out' (i.e., ignored) or is of fairly low importance to the audiences" (1982). Moral Majoritarians watched the "jiggle" shows on TV in the same proportions as the rest of the public. If necessary, they perhaps justified watching the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders because Roger Staubach was a born-again quarterback. The forces of modernity are real, after all, however

depraved their products. Maybe, therefore, if one is provided a means of expressing alarm, plus some techniques for adjusting to the depravity one is alarmed about, that is all one asks.⁵ In this connection, it is wise to recognize how few social proposals of the New Christian Right have been enacted legislatively: not the ban on abortions, nor the return to school prayers, nor the tax exemption for private segregated schools, nor the measure to restrict school busing, nor the tuition tax credit. Surely Congress in the 1980s and President Reagan were as congenial to such proposals as America is likely to see. But these proposals run counter to cultural forces not easily reversed. By contrast, declaring oneself "born again" or preferring conservative over liberal offerings from the religious cafeteria do not, in any similar sense, encounter such opposition. (It is possible that a changing judicial climate may accomplish what legislative efforts have not.)

CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying Conservative Protestantism enjoys a renewed vitality in the present day. One might therefore imagine mainline, Liberal Protestantism to be its antagonist; but it is not. Although ostensibly a religious movement, today's Conservative Protestantism is better described as a folk religion with a political wing. Put another way, despite the rhetoric and the undoubted origins in a turn-of-the-century theological controversy, the movement today is not an effort to renew that controversy. It is rather one part in the struggle over the American cultural agenda.

Not liberal theology, then, but what conservatives call "secular humanism" is the real target; and National Council churches reflect but do not create secular humanism any more than they create the American political agenda. One can search for a Protestant twentieth century in America, therefore, but not find it. Only if Conservative Protestantism should win the day—a remote possibility at best, it seems to me—is there even a chance anything distinctively Christian in label will remain in our political life.

Nor is this unexpected. In 1820, Daniel Webster declared, "Whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens," a sentiment John Adams heartily endorsed, as did most other national leaders, no doubt. But Webster was not aware of the variety of Christians, and the variety of non-Christians, America was to become. Nor could he

anticipate how science and scholarship would challenge the role of the Bible or how urban industrial society would demand universalism. A century later many Americans had faced these issues, and new conclusions had been drawn. "Whatever makes good citizens," one of these conclusions might be paraphrased, "permits good Christians—and others—to exist." Of course, the result *sounds* like mere secular humanism, but only to those whose Christianity got stuck in the nineteenth century. The fact is, Protestantism lost sovereignty, and Liberal Protestantism lost centrality as well. Conservative Protestantism, in regaining visibility, may be said to have increased in centrality since 1950, but such a change should not be mistaken as regained sovereignty. We explore this point more carefully in the next chapter.