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1

Introduction

THE OTHER PROTESTANTS

“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” . . . “Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?” . . . “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

—MATTHEW 25:35–40

DONALD TRUMP had good reason, on June 1, 2020, to stand in front of a church on Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., holding a Bible aloft while cameras recorded the moment. As police and government troops forcibly cleared peaceful civil rights protestors from the square, Trump was proclaiming his connection to the white evangelical voters he knew would appreciate this gesture. Millions of others dismissed Trump’s

photo op as a cynical caper, but he understood his dependence on a segment of the electorate who stood for a Christian America and believed the Bible belonged to them. Enamored of Trump, few knew that the church was St. John's Episcopal, a bastion of the "other Protestants," the liberal, ecumenical Protestants known for their more inclusive vision of the gospel and of the nation.

What counts as "Christian" is always achieved, never given. It all depends on who gets control of the local franchise. From ancient times to the present, Christianity has been a movement of sensibilities, impulses, ideals, perceptions, loves, hatreds, and programs that are brought into it and are processed by distinctive groups who manage to build a critical mass of people willing to recognize them as Christian. Even Christianity's original, movement-defining documents are themselves of disparate ancestries in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹ The purposes credibly advanced in the name of Jesus of Nazareth are not infinite, but they are staggering in their diversity and range.

In today's United States, Christianity's loudest voices are those of the people to whose sensibilities Trump played that June evening. How did these people gain such power? How did they make so much of the world regard them as synonymous with Christianity writ large? This question demands an inquiry more wide ranging than trying, as many writers have already done very well, to discover Trump's appeal to white evangelicals.² Trump took advantage of a white evangelical culture that was well in place before he came along and is likely to remain a factor in American public life after he is gone. That culture's potential durability makes public understanding of its place in the history of American Christianity imperative.

Some aspects of the larger story are widely understood. This was a heavily Protestant country from the start. A

mid-twentieth-century alliance of politically conservative billionaires and media-savvy preacher-entrepreneurs enabled the rise of the religious right. Evangelicalism's simplicity and voice of confident authority offered solace and hope to vulnerable people vexed by life's genuine mysteries and too often neglected by the rich and powerful. For some white people, religion was simply a mask for racism.

All true. But there is more to it.

Evangelicalism achieved its character by rejecting a Christian alternative with markedly different implications for democracy and for the boundaries of the national community. Too often evangelicalism's rise to popularity and influence is narrated in relative isolation, not in its dialectical relationship with another Protestantism whose adherents had more respect for modern science and were more willing to accept ethnoracial diversity.

These other Protestants are commonly called *mainline*, but *ecumenical* is a more accurate label. Starting about 1960, *mainline* became a popular term for the denominations understood to be an informal "Protestant establishment" of long standing.³ This meant Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Northern Baptists, Disciples of Christ, several Lutheran bodies, and a handful of smaller Calvinist and Anabaptist confessions. Yet the label was already anachronistic by the 1970s, when these groups were losing members and cultural standing at a rapid rate. These denominations often took liberal political positions, but *liberal* fails to express a religious quality that is essential to their distinctive character: a willingness to cooperate in ecclesiastical, civic, and global affairs with a great variety of groups that professed to be Christian, and many that did not. By working with ecumenical organizations like the Federal and National Councils of Churches, Church World Service, the World Council of Churches, and the United Nations,

and by recognizing the integrity of non-Christian religions, these denominations generated intense opposition from the more sectarian Protestants who in the 1940s insisted on calling themselves *evangelical*, a label that in earlier times was routinely applied to any proselytizing group of Christians. All labels are imperfect and inevitably mask internal differences, but *ecumenical* and *evangelical* are the least confusing terms to denote the two major Protestant groups in the United States, especially since World War II.⁴

Ecumenical Protestantism channeled through Christianity the Enlightenment's critical perspective on belief and its generous view of human capabilities. In so doing, ecumenical Protestantism developed a set of relatively cosmopolitan initiatives that had two decisive consequences for American Christianity and its relation to public life. First, ecumenical ideas largely defined the terms on which evangelicalism took shape and presented itself to American society. Evangelicalism, like its parent, fundamentalism, achieved definition and gained standing as a point-by-point response to the modernizing initiatives of ecumenicals. Second, these efforts to create a more inclusive community of faith and a more pluralistic nation facilitated an out-migration by many "mainliners," who left the churches as they found homes elsewhere, in the cultural domains that ecumenical leaders had engaged sympathetically. Ecumenical preachers and teachers risked their own authority and that of Christianity by accommodating a scientifically advanced and demographically diverse modernity that their evangelical rivals kept at a greater distance. By the end of the twentieth century, the United States had a substantial population of post-Protestants—people significantly shaped by their religious ancestry but no longer affirming the faith.

Did ecumenical Protestants win the country while losing the church?⁵ Not quite. But this hyperbole contains an element of

truth. By the turn of the twenty-first century the pluralistic, proudly multicultural public life of the United States looked more like what ecumenical leaders of the 1960s wanted than what their contemporary evangelical counterparts advocated. But the evangelicals won in the narrower competition for the loyalties of the minority of Americans who now identify with the Republican Party. Evangelicalism created a safe harbor for white people who wanted to be counted as Christians without having to accept what ecumenical leaders said were the social obligations demanded by the gospel, especially the imperative to extend civil equality to nonwhites. A popular theory of modern religious history holds that evangelical churches flourished because they made greater demands on the faithful, while liberal churches declined on account of not demanding much of anything.⁶ The opposite is true. Evangelicalism made it easy to avoid the challenges of an ethnoracially diverse society and a scientifically informed culture. Moreover, it is a mistake to suppose that evangelicalism has been hijacked by outsiders. Evangelical numbers swelled during the era of Donald Trump, but those who adopted evangelical identity anew had good reason to do so. What they were joining was easily recognized.⁷ These clear alignments gave credibility to historian Jon Meacham's observation that in the election of 2020, "the Enlightenment is on the ballot."⁸

Understanding the American fate of Christianity also requires careful attention to Christianity's own shifting demographics. Race does not explain everything, but it is entwined with religion at virtually every point in the history of the United States. Ethnoreligious groups carrying their own priorities and sensibilities exercised different measures of influence over Christianity at different times. The white Protestants who ran the country well into the twentieth century were predominantly the biological

and cultural descendants of the “dissenters” from the established churches of England and Continental Europe. These Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Wesleyans built a white Protestant tent big enough to nurture both liberal-ecumenical and conservative-evangelical persuasions. Eventually, two other major demographic groups diversified American Christianity. African American Protestants, long denied civil rights, economic opportunities, and education, became major participants in the community of faith. Catholics—white, Black, and Brown—emerged from relative marginality to do the same.

In addition, two non-Christian groups came to influence how these several kinds of Christians understood themselves and their shared nation. Jewish immigrants and their descendants achieved prominence in many arenas of public life. Simultaneously, American missionaries abroad made US Christians aware of Asian peoples who practiced non-Christian faiths. Many of the missionaries (and even more of their sons and daughters) came to argue that American interests were more in line with decolonizing non-Christian nonwhites than with the old European imperial powers that remained the chief US allies during the Cold War. These two encounters with non-Christians—Jews close-up and adherents of other religions at long distance—had an especially strong effect on the most highly educated ecumenical Protestants. They developed anti-racist programs and criticized the idea of a “Christian America” because it could not be expected to treat Jews and other non-Christians as equal citizens. In frequent alliance with liberal Catholics, secular and religious Jews, and the Black Civil Rights Movement, the ecumenical Protestant leadership espoused positions on race, gender, sexuality, empire, economics, and divinity that generated adamant opposition from white evangelicals.

The edifice of American Christianity was hollowed out by the departure of the post-Protestants and of the smaller number of cradle Catholics who left their natal churches. The space vacated in this commodious religious edifice was easily occupied by white evangelicals allied with conservative Catholics on issues of sexuality, gender, and the limits of civic authority. This evangelical takeover of Christian real estate was financed by corporate interests eager to exploit “religious liberty” as an instrument for overturning the regulatory regime of the New Deal. The Republican Party’s connection to evangelicals predated Trump and was enabled by the suspicions of federal power common to white citizens of the evangelically intensive southern states. Trump tightened the connection between evangelicalism and economic conservatism, but the connection was ready-made for him.

While the Republican Party became more Christian in its self-representation, the Democratic Party, reflecting the secularization and diversification of American society, offered a political home not only for the rapidly growing ranks of post-Protestants and post-Catholics but also for remnants of the once-formidable white ecumenical Protestant community as well as for liberal Catholics, secular and religious Jews, and the great majority of African Americans who, while often conservative theologically, were strikingly independent of white evangelicals.

Christianity’s destiny has been determined by a number of forces, but this book does not treat Christianity as entirely epiphenomenal. A reluctance to take religion seriously inhibits searching inquiries into the political role of Christianity. In this too-common methodological outlook, any religion is unworthy of rigorous scrutiny. Economics, race, social structure, and the like explain history; religion is never a constellation of elements

that demand analysis. But secular avoidance is too often answered with religious apologetics. Scholarship in the apologetic tradition focuses on the details of what American Christians have done and makes little effort to identify or explain the role those actions have played in a national or global narrative except to celebrate them and to wish they had been even more influential than they have been. The result is an exceptionally distended public understanding of how Christianity has sustained itself—and in just what configurations—in America’s late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century national life.

White evangelical Protestantism is not the only cause of what Barack Obama calls the nation’s “epistemological crisis” threatening American democracy.⁹ Secularists on the political left are not immune to the temptation for an epistemic closure inimical to civic health. Some of them assert too sweepingly that science and scholarship mask patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy.¹⁰ But by any measure, evangelical Protestant leaders have done much more than overzealous progressives to create and shape today’s crisis of democracy. The white evangelicals who have controlled the Christian franchise in the United States in recent decades have provided decisive support to a Republican Party committed, for overwhelmingly nonreligious reasons, to the rule of a minority empowered by the anachronisms of the Electoral College. Prominent evangelicals, moreover, have seen fit to aid the Republican cause by participating in the dissemination of misinformation of all sorts—from unfounded accusations of election fraud to lies about COVID vaccines—thereby diminishing the capacity of millions of the faithful to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Some evangelical leaders have reacted with holy horror. They have lamented, in the words of historian Mark Noll, the “intellectual self-immolation” of evangelicalism.¹¹ Geneticist Francis

Collins, an evangelical who served under both President Trump and President Biden as director of the National Institutes of Health, has consistently condemned the antiscientific, antidemocratic activities of his fellow evangelicals and asked that they take to heart a scripture that is a special favorite of ecumenicals, John 8:32: “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”¹²

Noll and Collins remind us that not all evangelicals had sympathy for the riot of January 6, 2021, incited by President Donald Trump in support of his false claim that he had won the 2020 election. But a great many evangelicals believed his lie, and some applauded the riot. Many who stormed the Capitol prominently displayed Christian imagery. The QAnon conspiracy fantasies of the Trump era had many sources outside Christianity, but these fantasies found great traction among people whose spiritual diet had been dominated by evangelical preachers who were bound only loosely by modern standards of plausibility.¹³ Exactly what those standards are will always be a matter of some contention. Yet when pollsters report that millions of Americans believe patent falsehoods that affect the interests of the entire society, we do not need to resolve the epistemological disputes between Hume and Hegel in order to appreciate the value of education for the survival of democracy. Education affects the answer to historian Jill Lepore’s question: will this country “be governed by reflection and election, by reason and truth, rather than by accident and violence, by prejudice and deceit”?¹⁴

“The credulous man,” wrote W. K. Clifford, “is father to the liar and cheat.”¹⁵

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