CONTENTS

Preface xi

1 Introduction: The Other Protestants 1

2 A Country Protestant on Steroids 10

3 Jewish Immigrants versus Anglo-Protestant Hegemony 27

4 The Missionary Boomerang 45

5 The Apotheosis of Liberal Protestantism 68

6 The 1960s and the Decline of the Mainline 90

7 Ecumenical Democrats, Evangelical Republicans, and Post-Protestants 108

8 Christianity’s American Fate: A Conservative Refuge? 132

9 Beyond the Paradox of a Religious Politics in a Secular Society 157

Notes 165

Index 185
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. 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. 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. These clear alignments gave credibility to historian Jon Meacham’s observation that in the election of 2020, “the Enlightenment is on the ballot.”

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 pre-dated 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-presentation, 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. 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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
INDEX

Abbott, Andrew, 38
abortion, 102, 111–13, 123
Abrams, Stacey, 121
Abzug, Bella, 40
Addams, Jane, 136
African American Episcopal Zion Church, 72
African American Protestants: Democratic Party and, 107; departures of, from the church, 182n37; in FCC, 72; origins of, 13; religio-cultural influence of, 6, 96–97, 154–55; threats to white supremacy from, 26; voting behavior of, 121–22
African Americans: religiously unaffiliated, 124–25; and secularism, 182n37; voting behavior of, 120–22
African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, 13, 72
agnosticism, 17, 95
American Civil Liberties Union, 42, 73
American Indian Movement, 95
American Jewish Committee, 42, 75
American Protestantism: Catholic tensions with, 76; challenges to hegemony of, 32–33, 35, 41–44, 82, 88–89, 94; cosmopolitan efforts in, 4, 70–89, 91, 96, 103, 118, 134–36, 139, 162; and denominationalism, 13, 65–66, 95–97, 134–35; European compared to, 17; Graham’s influence on, 88–89; and higher education, 18–20; liberalizing influences on, 23–25; pro-Catholic segments of, 40–41; pro-immigrant actions of, 30; pro-Jewish segments of, 32, 40–41, 90; recent transformations in, 133–37; regional characteristics of, 21–22; and science, 16–18; two-party system of, 20–22, 64, 73, 106–7; visions of a unified, 96–97, 133–36, 179n2. See also American Christianity; ecumenical Protestantism; evangelical Protestantism; fundamentalism; missionaries
Anabaptists, 3, 6
Anglicans, 14, 142. See also Church of England
anticolonialism, 74, 75, 91–92, 142, 148
anti-intellectualism, 8–9, 114–15, 174n38
antiracism, 75, 79, 81, 137–38
Antler, Joyce, 40
Arabists, 55–56
archaeology, 15–16
Arendt, Hannah, 33
Asian peoples, 6, 100
Assemblies of God, 65, 142
Association for Asian Studies, 58
atheism, 82, 95, 151–52
Augustine of Hippo, 108
authority of the Bible: challenges to, 15–16; ecumenical-evangelical divide and, 149–52; evangelical Protestantism and, 20–21, 64, 115–17, 151; fundamentalist tenet of, 72
Bacall, Lauren, 39
Bageant, Joe, 160
Baldwin, James, 182n37
Balfour Declaration, 56
Balmer, Randall, 111
Baptists, 10, 12, 13, 14, 18, 22. See also Northern Baptists; Southern Baptists
Barber, William, II, 145
Barnett, A. Doak, 58
Bass, Dorothy, 101
“Battle Hymn of the Republic,” 14
Beggington, David W., 114
Bellow, Saul, 39
Benedict, Ruth, 49, 62; The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, 52
Bennett, John C., 68–69, 82–83, 85, 93; Christians and the State, 82
Berlin, Irving, 43–44
Berrigan, Daniel, 128
Bethe, Hans, 33
Bettelheim, Bruno, 33
Bible: abortion absent from, 112; analysis and interpretation of, 15–16, 71, 116–17, 142, 149–52; anti-liberal views imputed to, 141–42; cultural significance of, 1, 14. See also authority of the Bible
Biden, Joe, 9, 118, 121, 123, 129
Black, Max, 36
Black liberation, 137–38
Black Power, 139
Blake, Eugene Carson, 81, 84, 95–96
Bob Jones University, 113
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 93, 101
Borg, Marcus, 182n32
Boston University, 84
Bourne, Randolph, 31, 32
Brooks, David, 146
Brown, W. Norman, 58
Brownmiller, Susan, 40
Brown University, 18
Brown v. Board of Education I and II (1954, 1955), 111
Bryan, William Jennings, 22
Buck, Pearl S., 50–51, 54; The Good Earth, 50
Buddhists, 48
Bultmann, Rudolf, 93, 150
Bunch, Charlotte, 127
Burkhardt, Roy, 38
Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. (2014), 158
Bush, George H. W., 113, 145
Bush, George W., 113–14, 145
business and economics, ecumenical-evangelical divide over, 80–81, 86, 91, 115, 136–37
Butler, Anthea, 113

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Calvinists, 3, 6
Canada, 10
Carlson, Tucker, 120
Carter, Jimmy, 110–11
Catholics: and abortion, 111–12, 123; demographics and, 122, 126; departures from the church, 7, 125–26, 128; discrimination and violence against, 32; European establishment of, 10; evangelical Protestants’ relations with, 7, 88, 123–24; fundamental ideas and issues of, 7; governance of, 14; immigration by, 12, 24, 28, 29–30; and Latin America, 59; liberal, 128; political voice of, 122–24; Protestant tensions with, 76; religio-cultural influence of, 6. See also post-Catholics
Catholic Social Services, 158
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 56
Chaney, James, 110
Channing, William Ellery, 17
Chiang Kai-shek, 53, 55
Chicago World’s Fair (1893), 61
China. See People’s Republic of China
Chinese Exclusion Act, 51
Christian Century (magazine), 21, 50, 54, 60, 63, 66, 73, 86, 89, 96
Christian globalism, 70, 79, 81. See also Global Christianity
Christianity. See American Christianity; American Protestantism; Catholics; ecumenical Protestantism; evangelical Protestantism; Global Christianity
Christianity Today (magazine), 21, 81, 86–87, 97
Christian Missionary Alliance, 65
Christian nationalism, 70, 119
Christian worldview, 116–17, 119
Church of England, 10, 12. See also Anglicans
Church of the Nazarene, 83, 102
church-state separation, 10, 11–12, 42–43, 122
Church Women United, 70, 78–79
Church World Service, 3
City College of New York, 35
Civil Rights Movement, 6, 96, 110
Civil War, 13, 14, 19, 22
Cizik, Richard, 118
clergy: mental health professionals’ replacement of services provided by, 37–39; part-time, 136
Cleveland, Grover, 16
Clifford, W. K., 9, 17
Clyburn, James, 121
Coates, Ta-Nehisi, 182n37
Cohen, Morris R., 35, 36
Cold War, 6, 40–41, 56–57, 81, 85
Collins, Francis, 8–9
Collins, Susan, 114
colonialism. See anticolonialism
Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, 72
Columbia University, 18, 58
Commentary (magazine), 53
communism: American opposition to, 40, 84; Catholic opposition to, 41; ecumenical Protestantism linked to, 87, 97; evangelical Protestants’ opposition to, 80, 87; and racial egalitarianism, 79; sympathies for, 55, 63
comparative studies in religion, 61
Cone, James, 137–39, 146
Congregationalists, 3, 10, 11, 12, 14, 18–19, 65, 70, 73, 77, 79, 87, 98, 129, 152, 179n2
conscience exemption, 158, 183n2, 183n3
Consultation on Church Union, 96–97, 134
contraception. See family planning
Coolidge, Calvin, 45
Cooper, Gary, 39

Cox, Harvey, 101, 104, 126, 137, 150; The Secular City, 94–95
Crosby, Bing, 43–44
Crossan, John Dominic, 182n32
Cruse, Harold, 182n37
Cuba, 95
Cultural imperialism, 65
Daly, Mary, 40, 139
Darwinism, 15, 16–17
Davies, John Paton, Jr., 55
Dawkins, Richard, 152
Day, Dorothy, 128
“death of God,” 92
Dell, Floyd, 32
Demerath, N. J., III, 129
democracy: Christianity in relation to, 84; crisis of, 8, 9; education’s importance for, 160–61; evangelical Protestantism as challenge to, 8; Republican Party as challenge to, 8
Democratic Party: African American Protestants and, 107; Catholics and, 122–23; demographics and, 109–10, 120–21, 124; ecumenical Protestantism and, 74, 107; loss of Southern voters by, 103–6; and race, 103, 120–21; religious, post-religious, and non-religious peoples’ affinity with, 7
demographics: in American Christianity, 5–6; Catholics and, 122, 126; Christian message appropriate for diverse, 67; Democratic Party and, 109–10, 124; diversity of twentieth-century American, 4, 23–24, 67, 160; ecumenical Protestantism and, 83, 101–2, 136, 176n24; evangelical Protestantism and, 101–2, 105–6, 176n24; Global South and, 141; Jewish immigrants’ effect on, 27–28, 44; Republican Party and, 109, 114; US birth rates in later twentieth century, 101–2
denominationalism, 13, 65–66, 95–97, 134–35
Deuteronomy, book of, 89
Deutscher, Isaac, 27
Dewey, John, 34–35, 160
DeWolf, L. Harold, 84, 149
Disciples of Christ, 3, 13, 88, 106, 125, 175n17
disinformation, 160. See also misinformation
dispensationalism, 72, 113, 115
dissenters, 6, 10–12, 14
divinity schools. See seminaries and divinity schools
Dobbs, Lou, 120
Dochuk, Darren, 86
Dodge, Cleveland, 46
Dodge, Ralph E., The Unpopular Missionary, 91–92
Dorrien, Gary, 138–40
Du Bois, W. E. B., 182n37
Dukakis, Michael, 113
Duke Divinity School, 73
Dulles, John Foster, and Dulles Commission, 56, 74–75, 84, 172n15
Du Mez, Kristin Kobes, 115, 154
Dutch Reformed Church, 65, 125
Dworkin, Andrea, 40
index

ecumenical-evangelical divide: and biblical interpretation, 149; over business and economics, 80–81; cultural and political significance of, 3; demographics and, 101–2, 105–6; on education, 20, 100–102; geography of, 105–6; over LGBTQ issues, 140–41; in missionary activity, 47–49, 64–65; origins of, 3–4, 21, 162; power struggles in, 80–83; on racial issues, 5–6, 73, 77, 96–97; seminaries and, 147; on sexuality, 102; on social and political issues, 79–83; social vs. individualist emphases in, 74; on Vietnam war, 95

ecumenical Protestantism: achievements of, 162–63; and biblical interpretation, 149–52; business and economic positions of, 91, 136–37; conservative churches in, 106; Democratic Party and, 74, 107; demographics of, 83, 101–2, 136, 176n24; denominations associated with, 175n17; departures of members from, 4, 71, 89, 97–105, 125–31, 134, 146–47; distance of elite leadership from ordinary churchgoers in, 70, 72–73, 79, 90–97, 102–6, 134, 139–40, 150–51; and education, 99–102, 162; fundamental ideas and issues of, 67, 70, 90–91, 129, 133, 136–37; fundamentalism vs., 49, 71–72, 76; and Global Christianity, 76; high point of, 83–85; and identity politics, 137; Jewish partnerships with, 90; and LGBTQ issues, 140–41; liberal and secular engagements of, 3–4, 6, 69–107, 128–30, 132–33, 139; media presence and public relations of, 145–46; misguided confidence of, in mid-twentieth century, 83–89; missionary activity of, 47–49, 61–64; post-Protestantism as outgrowth of, 127–31; progressive evangelicals’ appropriation of, 118–19; as prophetic minority, 133, 136–37; and racial issues, 73, 77–79, 81, 91, 96–97, 137–38; Republican Party and, 73–74, 78; as rival to evangelical Protestantism, 2–4, 6, 69–70, 85–89, 95, 97; social and political positions of, 70–71, 74–75, 93–97, 101–4, 129–30, 136–37, 139–40, 162–63; visions of Protestant unification, 96–97, 133–36, 179n2; young people’s departure from, 98–101, 126–27. See also ecumenical-evangelical divide

Eddy, Sherwood, 66

Eddy, William A., 56

education: comparative studies in religion, 61; cultural impact of, in mid-twentieth century, 99–101; democracy nourished and protected by, 160–61; ecumenical-evangelical divide over, 20, 100–102; ecumenical Protestantism and, 99–102, 162; evangelical Protestantism and, 86, 100, 111, 117, 119; higher, 18–20, 99–101, 147–48; Jewish influence on, 34–37, 42, 58, 99–100; missionaries’ influence on, 58, 61, 99–100; questioning of Christian hegemony in, 34–37; racial segregation in, 111; and religious worldviews, 161–62; Republican Party and, 109; seminaries compared to higher, 147; sex education, 102

Einstein, Albert, 32, 52

Eisenhower, Dwight, 56, 57, 83, 84, 173n30

election fraud, Republican falsehoods concerning, 8, 9

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
Electoral College, 8, 105
Eliot, George, 17
Eliot, T. S., 44; The Idea of a Christian Society, 68
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 17
Enlightenment, 4, 5, 17–18, 23
environmentalism, 118, 139–40
Ephesians, book of, 15–16
Episcopalians, 3, 12, 18, 21, 79, 80, 97–98, 102, 125, 136, 141, 175n17
epistemic demystification, 160
Erikson, Erik, 33
ethnicity: churches or organized around, 12–13; introduced into predominantly Protestant America, 23–25.
See also race
Evangelical Lutheran Church, 175n17, 179n2
evangelical Protestantism: African American Protestants in relation to, 154; anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism of, 8–9, 20, 114–18, 174n38; aversion to criticizing, 159–60; business and economic positions of, 80–81, 86, 115; Catholics’ relations with, 7, 88; debates over nature of, 114–15, 118; demographics of, 101–2, 105–6, 176n24; ecumenical Protestants joining, 98; and education, 86, 100, 102, 111, 117, 119; fundamental ideas and issues of, 4, 6, 103, 111–13, 115–16, 119; and Global Christianity, 133, 140–42, 144–45; historical origins of, 10–17, 120; individualism underlying, 72, 74, 115, 155; intensity of faith and practice in, 11; and LGBTQ issues, 140–41; Manichean approach of, 115, 117–19; media presence and public relations of, 85–87, 120, 135, 145; mediating function of, between kinship networks and nation, 12–13; megachurches, 135; membership of, 98–99, 102–3, 125; minority or victim status claimed by, 111, 144; missionary activity of, 47–48, 59, 64–65, 141; power and influence of, 2, 71, 158–59; progressives in, 118–19, 146; and racial issues, 86–87; Republican Party and, 5, 7, 8, 106–7, 109–10, 113–15, 118–20, 151; rise of, 3–4, 6–7, 71; as rival to ecumenical Protestantism, 2–4, 6, 69–70, 85–89, 95, 97; and science, 116; secularism opposed by, 117, 145; seminaries for, 86; social and political positions of, 79–80, 86–88, 103, 109, 114, 118–20; in the South, 20, 22, 105–6; Trump and, 1–2, 5, 7, 109, 113–15, 117–20; unifying efforts in, 135–36. See also ecumenical-evangelical divide; fundamentalism evolution, 15, 16–17, 71, 116
Fairbank, John K., 58
family planning, 101–2, 126, 158
FCC. See Federal Council of Churches
Fea, John, 120
Federal Council of Churches (FCC), 3, 30, 32, 70, 72, 74–78, 80, 86, 96; Commission for a Just and Durable Peace, 74
Fellowship of Reconciliation, 77
feminism, 40, 51, 127, 138–40, 169n22
Feuerbach, Ludwig, 17
Fiedler, Leslie, 39
Firestone, Shulamith, 40
First Amendment, 11, 42–43, 158
Fischer, Claude, 161
Fisher, Frederick Bohn, 63
Fisher, Galen, 54
Flanders, Ralph, 69
INDEX 191

Fleming, Daniel J., 60–61
Ford, Gerald, 145
Fox News, 120
freedom. See religious liberty
Freedom Rides, 77, 81
Freud, Sigmund, 38–39
Friedan, Betty, 40; The Feminine
Mystique, 51
Fromm, Erich, 33
Frost, Robert, 132
Fuller, Charles, 86
Fuller, Margaret, 17
Fuller Theological Seminary, 86
Fulton v. City of Philadelphia (2021), 158
fundamentalism: ecumenical Protestantism vs., 49, 71–72, 76; evangelical Protestants’ rejection of label of, 86; Graham and, 87; individualist tenor of, 72; inerrancy of Bible as tenet of, 72; Manichean approach of, 117–19, 172n12; nativist and racist tenor of, 73; as outgrowth of evangelical Protestantism, 20; social and political positions of, 172n12
Gable, Clark, 39
Gabler, Neal, 39
Galatians, book of, 48
Gallagher, Buell G., Color and Con-science, 79
Gandhi, Mohandas, 48, 53, 60, 84
Gardner, Ava, 39
Garrett Theological Seminary, 79
Gaston, K. Healan, 41
Gaustad, Edwin S., 39
gays. See LGBTQ issues
gender equality, 142
Genesis, book of, 15
German Reformed Church, 98, 179n2
GI Bill, 34
Gilkey, Langdon, 129, 149–50
Gladden, Washington, 136
Global Christianity, 65, 76, 133, 143.
See also Christian globalism
Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, 181n20
Global Ministries Program, of United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, 181n20
Global South, 25, 90, 133, 140–45
Goheen, Robert F., 37, 168n15
Goodman, Andrew, 110
Goodrich, L. Carrington, 58
Gornick, Vivian, 40
Graham, Billy, 43, 87–89, 95, 96, 103, 145, 169n28, 173n38
Graham, Franklin, 119
Grant, Cary, 39
Grant, Madison, The Passing of the Great Race, 32
Greenhouse, Linda, 112, 159
Gulick, Sidney, 72
Gushee, David P., 125, 153; After Evangelicalism, 119
Hannity, Sean, 120
Hapgood, Hutchins, 31, 32
Harper, William Rainey, 18
Harris, Kamala, 121
Harris, Sam, 151–52
Hart-Cellar Act, 25
Harvard Divinity School, 155
Harvard University, 58
Harvey, Van A., 150
Hawley, Josh, 108–9, 118
Haynes, George C., 77
Hebrews, book of, 15–16
Heller, Joseph, 39
Henry, Carl F. H., 86, 87
Herberg, Will, 41

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
Hersey, John, 51–52; Hiroshima, 52; The Wall, 52
Higher Criticism, 15–16, 87
Hinduism, 48, 60, 64
Hirschman, Albert, 33
Hispanic Catholics, 123
Hitler, Adolf, 32
Hobson, Theo, 132–33
Ho Chi Minh, 57
Hocking, William Ernest, and the Hocking Report, 61–65
Hofstadter, Richard, 20–21
Holiness churches, 20
Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Jr., 30–31
Holocaust, 52
homeschooling, 99
Hook, Sidney, 36
hooks, bell, 40
Hoover, J. Edgar, 97
Horton, Willie, 113
House, George, 77
Hout, Michael, 161
Howe, Florence, 40
Howe, Julia Ward, 14
Huguenots, 10
“Humanist Manifesto,” 35
human rights, 76, 80, 155
Hume, David, 17
Huxley, T. H., 17
Ibn Saud, King, 56
identity politics, 137
immigration: by Catholics, 12, 24, 28, 29–30; contribution of, to American Christianity, 10, 12; hiatus of, in mid-twentieth-century America, 25, 30; by Jews, 23–25, 27–44; opposition to restrictions on, 72
Indigenous populations, 25, 91–92, 141, 143
individualism, 72, 74, 115, 155
Ingersoll, Robert, 17
“In God We Trust,” 83
Ingraham, Laura, 120
Isaiah, book of, 15
Islam, 48, 144
isolationism, 71
Israel, 56, 89, 95
James, William, 34–35
Japanese Americans, WWII confinement of, 54
Jefferson, Thomas, 20, 120, 160
Jeffries, Robert, 119
Jehovah’s Witnesses, 154
Jenkins, Philip, 144
Jeremiah, book of, 112
Jews: antiprovincial attitudes among, 31; in the arts and letters, 39; Catholic immigrants compared to, 29–30; cosmopolitanism of, 25, 31, 32, 46, 99–100; in higher education, 34–37, 42, 58, 99–100; and mental health professions, 37–39; in New York, 29, 31; political impact of, 40; post-Judaic, 125, 163; Protestant engagements with, 32, 40–41, 90; religio-cultural influence of, 6, 23–25, 27–44, 46, 68–69; and secularization, 37–44; sentiments and discrimination against, 29, 32, 33–34, 43–44, 73; upward mobility of, 29–30; waves of, 28–29
Jim Crow system, 73, 77, 96, 110
Johns Hopkins University, 20
Johnson, Lyndon, 57, 90, 103, 121
Johnson-Reed Act, 25
Jones, E. Stanley, 60
Judaism, 40–42
Judd, Walter, 53–54
Judeo-Christian tradition, 40–41, 76
Kagawa, Toyohiko, 49
Kant, Immanuel, 163–64
Kaplan, Abraham, 36
Kaufmann, Walter, 36
Keddie, Tony, Republican Jesus, 151
Keller, Catherine, 138, 139
Kennedy, John F., 57, 88–89, 122, 123
Kerry, John, 123
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 84, 87, 96, 138, 146, 149; “I Have a Dream,” 96; “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 96
Kinsey, Alfred, 102
Kinzinger, Adam, 119–20
Kitcher, Philip, 152
Korea, 74
Kruse, Kevin, 86
Ku Klux Klan, 32, 73, 110
labor conditions, 73
Lamarck, Jean-Baptiste, 17
Land, Richard, 145
Landon, Kenneth, 57
Landon, Margaret, Anna and the King of Siam, 57
Latourette, Kenneth Scott, 58
Lawrence, T. H., Lady Chatterley's Lover, 92–93
Lepore, Jill, 9
Lerner, Gerda, 40
LGBTQ issues, 111, 127, 140–41, 158, 181n16
Liberation Theology, 82, 137, 146
liberty. See religious liberty
Life (magazine), 53, 88
Lilly Foundation, 100
Lincoln, Abraham, 14, 21
Lippmann, Walter, 99
Lower Criticism, 16
Luce, Henry, 53; “The American Century,” 53
Luke, Gospel of, 112
Lutherans, 3, 10, 12, 14, 19, 83, 101, 125, 175n17, 179n2
Mailer, Norman, 39
mainline Protestantism. See ecumenical Protestantism
Malcolm X, 138, 160
Manhattan Project, 33
Manichean outlook, 115, 117–19, 172n12
Marcuse, Herbert, 33
Marsden, George M., 72, 114, 116
Marty, Martin E., 20, 79, 126
Marx, Karl, 17
Maslow, Abraham, 39
May, Henry F., 17
May, Rollo, 38–39
Mays, Benjamin, 77, 96
McAlister, Melani, 144
McCain, John, 113–14
McCarran-Walter Act, 54
McCarthy, Kevin, 123
McCarthy Era, 55, 80, 83, 137
McIntire, Carl, 88
McKinley, William, 22–23
McWhorter, John, 182n37
Meacham, Jon, 5
Mead, Margaret, 49, 62, 179n38
megachurches, 135
Mencken, H. L., 32
Mennonites, 10, 13
mental health treatments, 37–38
Milford, Hugh, 56
Mill, John Stuart, 17
Millett, Kate, 40
Mills, Harriet, 58
Mises, Ludwig von, 33

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
misinformation, 8. See also disinformation
misogyny, 23, 115
missionaries, 45–67; and Africa, 59;
challenges to provincialism from,
47; cosmopolitanism of, 6, 24–25,
declining activity of, 65; ecumenical
attitudes among, 47–49, 59–64,
66–67, 69, 91–92; ecumenical-
evangelical divide evident in activity
of, 47–48, 64–65, 141; European
compared to American, 49; famous
and influential, 50–54, 57–58, 60–61;
and Global Christianity, 65, 143,
181n20; in higher education, 58, 61,
99–100; involvement of, with
Japanese and Japanese Americans,
51–52, 54–55; and Israel, 56; and Latin
America, 59; political influence
of, 45–46, 51, 54, 56–58, 74; post-
missionary activities of, 48; power
and influence of, 49–50; prevalence
and distribution of, 45; religio-
cultural influence of, 45–67, 69;
secularism as target of, 63–64;
service-centered approach of, 62–64
Modernist movement, 20
modernists, 4, 23, 71–72
Moore, Beth, 153
Moran, Sherwood, 55
Moravians, 10
Morehouse College, 81, 146
Morgan, Robin, 40
Morgenthau, Hans, 33
Mormons, 13
Morrill Act, 19
Mosaddegh, Mohammad, 56
motive (magazine), 126–27
Mott, John R., 45
Moyn, Samuel, 75–76
multiculturalism, 92, 137
Murray, John Courtney, 122
Murray, Pauli, 138
Nagel, Ernest, 36
National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People, 51
National Association of Evangelicals,
21, 69, 76, 77, 86, 88, 118
National Baptist Convention, 72
National Conference of Christians and
Jews, 73
National Council of Churches (NCC),
3, 21, 70, 80–82, 84, 86–87, 95–97,
106, 153–54
National Geographic (magazine), 49
National Institutes of Health, 9
nationalism. See Christian nationalism
National Lay Committee, 80–81
National Organization of Women, 138
National Radio Pulpit (radio show), 87
nativism, 73
natural selection, 15, 16–17
NBC Radio, 87
NCC. See National Council of Churches
Neumann, Franz, 33
New Atheists, 151–52
New Yorker (magazine), 52
Niebuhr, H. Richard: The Kingdom of
God in America, 134–35; The Social
Sources of Denominationalism, 65–66,
134
Niebuhr, Reinhold, 36, 41, 65–66, 73,
84–85, 88; Moral Man and Immoral
Society, 73
Nixon, Richard, 43, 88–89, 105, 145
Nolde, Frederick, 76–77
Noll, Mark, 8–9
“nones,” 124–27, 129, 158
nonviolent resistance, 84
North, Gary, 119
Northern Baptists, 3, 22, 65, 175n17
Northern Presbyterians, 98, 101
Northwestern University, 18

Obama, Barack, 8, 113, 120, 121, 129
Ockenga, Harold, 85–86
Orientalism, 50, 57–58
Oxnam, 84, 127

Pacific School of Religion, 79
Paine, Thomas, 17
Palestinians, 95
Palin, Sarah, 113, 142
Panofsky, Erwin, 33
Parker, Theodore, 16, 17
Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, 158
Paul (apostle), 15–16, 35, 141, 142, 149, 151, 163–64, 176n3, 181n16
Pelosi, Nancy, 123, 128
Pentecostals, 20, 87, 136, 145
People’s Republic of China, 84, 87
Pew, J. Howard, 80–81, 86
Pfeiffer, Leo, 42
philology, 15–16
Pike, James, 95
Pledge of Allegiance, 82–83
pluralism: American religious, 68–69; Catholics and, 122; ecumenical Protestantism and, 94; Judeo-Christian America and, 41–42; Protestant hegemony vs., 32
Pogrebin, Letty Cottin, 40
Porterfield, Amanda, 21, 115
post-Catholics, 124, 126, 128, 139, 155, 163
post-evangelicalism, 118–19
post-Judaic Jews, 125, 163
post-Protestantism: defined, 4; ecumenical Protestantism and, 155; effect of, on ecumenical Protestantism, 7, 146; growth of, 4, 124, 125; and higher education, 148; as outgrowth of ecumenical Protestantism, 127–31, 163; social and political positions of, 127–30, 139
Presbyterians, 3, 10, 13, 14, 18–19, 22, 65, 80, 81, 83, 87, 88, 97, 102, 106, 125, 136, 152, 175n17, 180n2. See also Northern Presbyterians Princeton Theological Seminary, 138
Princeton University, 18, 37, 168n15
Progressive Era, 24, 71, 171n4
provincialism, challenges to, 31–32, 47, 54, 85
psychoanalysis, 37–39
psychology, 37–39
Puerto Rico, 74
Pye, Lucian, 58
QAnon, 9, 115, 124
Quakers, 10, 19
Quine, W.V.O., 36, 37
race: Democratic Party and, 103, 120–21; discrimination based on, 53–54; ecumenical-evangelical divide over, 5–6, 73, 77, 96–97; ecumenical Protestants and, 73, 77–79, 81, 91, 96–97, 137–38; evangelical Protestants and, 86–87; political affiliations and, 105; Republican Party and, 109–10, 113, 120–21. See also antiracism; ethnicity; Jim Crow system; segregation rationality: evangelical Protestant indifference/hostility to, 8–9, 115–18; in nineteenth-century America, 17. See also Enlightenment Rauschenbusch, Walter, 136

For general queries, contact info@press.princeton.edu
Reagan, Ronald, 110, 112, 123, 145
Red Scare. See McCarthy Era
Reformed Church in America. See Dutch Reformed Church
Reischauer, Edwin, 58
religiously unaffiliated Americans, 107, 124–27, 129, 158
Religious Studies, 148
reproductive health care, 111, 123, 158
Republican Party: and abortion, 111–13, 123; anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism of, 114–15; Catholics and, 122–24; democratic rule challenged by, 8; demographics and, 109, 114; ecumenical Protestantism and, 73–74, 78; evangelical Protestantism and, 5, 7, 8, 106–7, 109–10, 113–15, 118–20, 151; historical shifts in, 21; and race, 109–10, 113, 120–21; Southern voters’ support for, 105–6, 110, 113
Re-Thinking Missions (Hocking Report), 61–65
revelation, authority of, 15
revivalism, 20–21
Robertson, Pat, 113, 118, 135
Robinson, John A. T., 104, 182n32; Honest to God, 92–93
Robinson, Marilynne, 152–53
Rockefeller, John D., 18
Rockefeller, John D., Jr., 46, 61–62
Rockwell, Norman, 103
Rodgers and Hammerstein, The King and I, 57
Roe v. Wade (1973), 102, 111–12
Rogers, Carl, 38–39
Rogers, Ginger, 39
Rogers, Will, 50
Romney, Mitt, 114
Roosevelt, Eleanor, 54
Roosevelt, Franklin, 56, 74–75
Roosevelt, Theodore, 23
Roth, Philip, 44
Royce, Josiah, 35
Rustin, Bayard, 77
Ryan, Paul, 123
Said, Edward, Orientalism, 58
Salinger, J. D., 39
Saturday Evening Post (magazine), 103
Schaeffer, Francis, 112
Scherer, James A., Missionary, Go Home! 92
Schlafly, Phyllis, 112
Schoenberg, Arnold, 33
Schulman, Alix Kates, 40
Schwerner, Michael, 110
science: attacks on, 9; evangelical Protestantism and, 116; liberal Protestantism and, 71; religion in relation to, 16–18
Second Amendment, 120
secularization: African American intellectuals and, 182n37; challenge to Christian hegemony from, 35, 41–43, 82; Democratic Party and, 7; ecumenical Protestantism and, 82, 94–95, 104, 127–30, 132–33, 139; evangelical Protestant opposition to, 117, 145; of founders of United States, 11; growth of, 155; Jewish immigrants and, 37–44; and mental health treatments, 37–39; religious influence on politics amid, 158–61, 163–64; as target of missionaries, 63–64. See also church-state separation
segregation, 73, 77–78, 86–87, 111
Sehat, David, 11
self-realization, 39
Sellars, Roy Wood, 35
seminaries and divinity schools, 15, 16, 61, 86–88, 93, 136–39, 146–47
Service, John S., 55
Seventh-day Adventists, 13, 65, 83, 102
sexuality, 102, 126–27
Shaull, M. Richard, 138; *Encounter with Revolution*, 81–82
Siegel, Reva, 112
Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, 92, 109
Social Gospel, 20, 30, 71, 72, 136, 171n4
socialism, 80, 118
Sockman, Ralph W., 87, 145
*Sojourners* (magazine), 118
South: anti-abortion politics in, 113;
  antigovernment sentiment in, 110;
  Democratic Party’s loss of support in,
  103–6; education in, 19–20; evangelical Protestantism in, 20, 22, 105–6;
  Republican Party support in, 105–6, 110, 113
Southern Baptists, 20, 22, 65, 112, 135, 145
Southern Strategy, 105–6, 110, 113, 121
Spinoza, Baruch, 17
Spong, John Shelby, 151, 182n32
Spurling, Hilary, 51
Stanley, Brian, 143. See also post-Catholics
Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, 23
states’ rights, 110
Steinem, Gloria, 40
Stevens, Wallace, 157
Stewart, James, 39
St. John’s Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C., 2
Strauss, Leo, 33
Stringfellow, William, 101, 126, 137; *My People Is the Enemy*, 91
Student Volunteer Movement, 81
Szilard, Leo, 33
Taft, William Howard, 45
Tagore, Dana, 45, 60
Tagore, Rabindranath, 60
Tax, Meredith, 40
Teller, Edward, 33
Thailand, 57
theology, declining influence of, 138–40, 148
Thirteenth Amendment, 54
Thurman, Howard, 77, 96
Tillich, Paul, 85, 93
*Time* (magazine), 53, 60, 75, 84
Tobias, C. E., 77, 96
Toomey, Patrick, 114
transcendentalism, 16, 17
Truman, Harry, 56, 57
Trump, Donald, 1–2, 5, 7, 9, 109, 113–15, 117–20
Twain, Mark, 47
Tyndall, John, 17
Union Theological Seminary, 60, 66, 68, 73, 137, 146
Unitarians, 17, 21
United Church of Christ, 98, 175n17, 179n2
United Farm Workers of America, 95
United Nations, 3, 75, 87; Charter, 75;
  Declaration of Human Rights, 79–80
United Presbyterian Church, 106, 125
United States: antigovernment sentiment in, 110;
  Christian origins and character of, 10–17;
  paradox of religion and politics in contemporary, 158–64;
  religio-cultural polarization in, 107, 110;
  separation of church and state in, 10, 11–12, 42–43, 122;
  as tri-faith country, 40–41, 94–95.
  See also American Christianity; American Protestantism
universalism: criticisms of, 137; ecumenical Protestantism and, 48–49, 76–77, 91, 137; of Jewish feminists, 40; Kantian, 163; missionaries and, 48–49, 66–67
University of Chicago, 18
University of Chicago Divinity School, 91
University of Michigan, 18, 19, 58
University of Virginia, 20
upward mobility, 83, 98, 102, 122
US Capitol attack (2021), 108–9
US Congress, 11, 30, 32, 53–54, 82, 158
US Constitution, 69, 82
US Foreign Service, 55
US House of Representatives, 122
US Senate, 105, 123
US State Department, 48, 56, 75
US Supreme Court, 122, 123, 183n3

Vahanian, Gabriel, The Death of God, 92
Van Buren, Paul M., The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, 92
Van Dusen, Henry P., 66, 84
Vatican II, 122, 126
Veblen, Thorstein, 31
Vietnam, 57, 95
Voltaire, 17
Voting Rights Act, 121

Wacker, Grant, 87, 173n38
Wallis, Jim, 153
Ward, Harry F., 73
Warnock, Raphael, 146
Watts, Isaac, 68
Weber, Max, 13
Weill, Kurt, 33

Weiss, Paull, 36
Weisstein, Naomi, 40
Wesleyans, 6
Weyrich, Paul, 112
White, Andrew Dickson, A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom, 18
White, Heather R., 140
White, Morton, 36
White, Walter, 51
“White Christmas” (song), 43–44
whites: anti-liberal/reactionary views of, 6, 70, 90–91, 97, 104, 106, 110; and evangelical Protestantism, 5–8, 85, 111, 113, 115, 117–18, 153–54, 161, 163; political affiliations of, 104–7, 110, 120–23, 121; Trump support from, 1–2, 109, 115, 117–18
white supremacy: African American Protestants’ challenge to, 26; ecumenical Protestantism opposed to, 91, 103; evangelical Protestantism and, 97, 126; legal entrenchment of, 54; missionaries and, 54, 59–60; science and scholarship linked to, 8; worldwide, 79
Wilberforce University, 13
Wilbur, C. Martin, 58
Wilder, Billy, 33
“Willie Horton” ad, 113
Willis, Ellen, 40
Wilson, Woodrow, 23, 45, 46, 71
Winter, Gibson, The Suburban Captivity of the Churches, 91
Wolterstorff, Nicholas, 100
women: church role and status of, 78, 78–79; and liberal Protestantism, 78–79; ordination of, 78, 142.
See also feminism; misogyny
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
<td>3, 70, 80, 136</td>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>18, 34, 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world government</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>YMCA</td>
<td>70, 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Mission of the United Presby-</td>
<td>181n20</td>
<td>youth organizations</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terian Church</td>
<td></td>
<td>YWCA</td>
<td>70, 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Tomorrow (magazine)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthen, Molly</td>
<td>116–17, 119</td>
<td>Zionism</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuthnow, Robert</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Zubovich, Gene</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>