

# *Righteous Empire Revisited*

MARTIN E. MARTY

THE WORD 'Protestant' in the subtitle of *Righteous Empire* will neither strike terror nor inspire hope in the hearts of most publics today. Before there was a United States, the people to whom the word 'Protestant' was applied after 1529 represented unsettlement and upheaval to popes and emperors, bishops and princes in formerly 'all-Catholic' European Christendom. By 1933, however, when philosopher Alfred North Whitehead surveyed Europe and the United States in *Adventures of Ideas*, he said of Protestant Christianity that it was plausible that 'its dogmas no longer dominate: its divisions no longer interest: its institutions no longer direct the patterns of life.'<sup>1</sup> That was one side of his contrast, the other being that 'the religious spirit as an effective element' in human affairs was as vital as ever—witness its triumph, he noted, in Gandhi's India.

### *The Dream of a 'New Reformation'*

Then Whitehead offered a thesis 'that a new Reformation is in full progress,' a '*re*-formation; but whether its issue be fortunate or unfortunate,' he wrote, 'depends largely on the actions of comparatively few men, and notably upon the leaders of the Protestant

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Mentor edition, 1955), 163.

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clergy.<sup>22</sup> He hoped that such leaders, such clergy, would be a part of a movement, an 'effort of Reason to provide an accurate system of theology.' He accused the clergy and other leaders of treason against Reason in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Few would assess that an empire of Reason has since risen in Protestant Christianity. However, in the United States, from its beginnings until the 1950s, Protestantism had remained sufficiently vital to 'dominate,' though not with its dogma; to display 'divisions' it could not overcome but with which it could live; and to develop institutions which, though they did not 'direct the patterns of life,' had considerable influence until the middle of the twentieth century that is hard to imagine today.

From 1607 and 1620 or 1630 until that mid-twentieth-century period, Protestant Christianity, despite its divisions and relatively weak institutions, still did much directing in the United States. While its public face may not have been able to 'strike terror' or 'inspire hope' among all citizens of other religions or no religion, Protestants still were able to exploit their own spheres of dominance and exercise power. Roman Catholics, Latter-Day Saints, Jews, and cultural dissidents certainly were aware of this dominance. As late as the middle of the twentieth century in the United States, if you were at the table when executive boards met, faculties pondered, authors were celebrating 'the American Mind,' the Social Register was registering elites, or *Who's Who* was preparing its biographical entries, your name and curriculum vitae were far more likely than not to signal that you were other than Catholic, Jewish, and the like. If you had the word 'Protestant' in the name of your organization, such as in 'Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State,' you would have found its polemical guns pointed especially at Roman Catholicism.

No more. Forty years after I was asked to sketch 'the Protestant Experience in America' and chose to speak of its 'Righteous

2. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 164.



Empire,' the 'Experience' has become less visible and vital, as it necessarily shared more of its status and influence with its companions inside pluralist America. Imperial aspirations today emerge from only one wing of Protestantism, which usually chooses to identify itself in semi-isolation from its old kin under the name 'Evangelical' or Southern Baptist.

Whether or not any of these are synonymous with 'Righteous,' many of them offer themselves as such. Their critics would see only irony in my choice of the adjective to characterize the aspirations of their predecessors. If in 1970 I could still note that 73 percent of United States citizens were identifiably Protestant, by 2006 I could locate slightly fewer than 50 percent of Americans labeled Protestant by sociologists and demographers. In 2006 the efforts to dominate with dogmas, coalesce in ways that inspire interest, build institutions called 'mega-', and use politics to 'direct the patterns of life,' are not in the hands and minds of those labeled 'Protestant' but, more likely, 'Evangelical' or 'The Christian Right.' Today, one might write a book titled *Righteous Empire: The Evangelical Experience in Recent America*, but not 'The Protestant Experience.'

The image that comes to mind in this comparison of the heirs of the *Righteous Empire* Protestants with Evangelicals is that of the ancient Greeks, with their 'empire of Reason,' looking down from their acropolises on the bustling Romans with their gods and laws and armies. Those on the hill satisfy themselves that their old values are still superior but that they are not likely to gain an audience or a hearing in a time when they see barbarians at the religious and cultural edges. These older-style Protestants—I found someone in the 1920s who called them 'standard brand'—have by no means disappeared, and in many ways and places they prosper and serve. About 20 percent of the citizens explicitly identify with them, and they work through tens of thousands of congregations and other spheres of coherence and influence. An 'empire,' however, they are not, whether their history is viewed as tragic, comic, pathetic, or, as I did and do, ironic.

So much for framing the subject and suggesting its epic character, whatever the present-day fates.

*The Development of 'Righteous Empire'*

My assignment now is to place my book in context, to tell how it came about, discuss its reception, and consider what mark it might have made. The hardest thing for me to do here is to detail 'how it came about.' Where are the traces behind its development? 'No trace = no history.' G. J. Renier's *History: Its Purpose and Method*, which I read at the start of my own ventures as an historian, reminded me of something so obvious, so apparently banal, that it is easy to overlook, crucial though it might be. Renier reminded readers that if nothing happened, then, of course, the historian has nothing to say.<sup>3</sup> One wishes that the many writers of fiction-posing-as-history (= 'faction') in our time would have the integrity to remember that.

Next, if something happened but did not leave a trace, the historian again has nothing to say. The trace may be a formal document, a monument, a coin, even a footprint such as that left by 'Friday' for Robinson Crusoe's discovery and musing, but in every case there must be a trace. We are most fortunate when there are multiple traces left by people with varieties of interests, since these allow for potentially more reliable ways of getting at the event. In the latter two cases it is clear how vital archives are for historians and why so many of us cherish occasions to use access to collections like those so consistently gathered by the American Antiquarian Society.

Having paid tribute to traces and archives, I have to begin to meet my assignment to discuss *Righteous Empire* by confessing that some documents that would throw light on my case either no longer exist or are assuredly inaccessible at this time. Never scrupulous about studying book contracts and always casual about filing them, I have no idea whether a file 'Contracts with

3. Gustaaf Johannes Renier, *History: Its Purpose and Method* (London: Allen & Unwin, [1950]).



Publishers-M.E.M.' endures. The Special Collections at the Regenstein Library at The University of Chicago is getting my papers, twenty-one boxes of which I have sent them already, among which may be one with a book-contract file. Or it may not. This year more boxes of files will be on their way to that repository. Unless and until years from now the archivists get around to sorting and filing the materials, or until some long-suffering graduate student is to write about historians of American religion—myself among them—over the past fifty years, no one will know whether such documents exist or what might be in them.

I wish I could contribute allure to my talk by hinting that there is something in those papers that might be scandalous, but I cannot think of a single page that I would want to shield from prying eyes. No, the papers won't be opened, probably until after my death, if ever, because archivists are always inundated with materials and can never easily catch up. This situation does leave me with an embarrassment when facing an audience or readership at the American Antiquarian Society. In respect to the nuts and bolts of the origin of the book, we have to go on memory, my memory, which could be fading, unreliable, or distorted.

Further, asked to comment on the original reception of the book, I do rely on the reviews, the surviving 'traces,' but will be unable to adduce the publication data of the sort we historians relish. That is the case because these reviews from back around 1970 survived only because a cut-and-pasting granddaughter neatly saved them in scrapbooks. I promise to quote some of them accurately, but then leave to some future graduate student the task of providing more ample documentation, should anyone ever be curious.

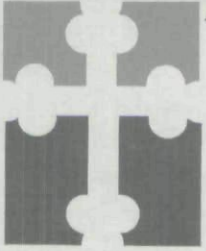
Here is the story: I was a late starter as a historian of American religion and did not take it up at all until I was twenty-six. Zealous study and writing followed during the next sixteen years. The fore-pages of *Righteous Empire* list eight titles by me from the twelve-year period before its publication in 1970. So I thought of myself as green and young, and I was green and

young when approached to write a volume on an important subject for the United States Bicentennial in 1976. Mine was among the earlier works scheduled to appear in the series, *Two Centuries of American Life*. To be approached as I was by Harold M. Hyman and Leonard W. Levy, the series editors, was a delicious challenge. To see the roster of other advertised contributors to the series—to list a few—Daniel Boorstin, D. W. Brogan, Henry Steele Commager, Lewis A. Coser, Carl N. Degler, Oscar and Mary Handlin, Seymour Martin Lipset, Ernest R. May, Russell Nye, and Moses Rischin—added to the challenge.

Since I do not possess or have access to any old surviving contracts, I can only say that I recall correspondence with series editor Levy but not with the book's editor. Years later, in chance conversation, novelist E. L. Doctorow reminded me that he had been my editor for *Righteous Empire*. By the time he told me that, I had become well aware of his stature as a novelist, but when as a Dial Press staffer he edited me in the late 1960s, his name would have meant nothing to me. He and his team certainly served the manuscript and the book's dissemination well. (I have not taken pains to see how many of the other bannered authors delivered manuscripts or saw their works published.) I was fortunate to be in the first cycle of writers, and benefited from the energies Dial put into these early books.

To the point of this book: my assignment was clear. I was to isolate the largest religious complex in the United States—Protestantism, implicitly of the 'white majority' sort. Fatefully, as some critics pointed out, I did very little with latter-day 'Evangelicalism,' which was taking its modern form and coming to new visibility in the 1970s. William R. Taylor was assigned to write *The History of Evangelicalism in America*. Though he was well equipped to write this, he either failed to deliver or the series died before his publication date. In any case, no such book ever appeared. Given the enormous role 'evangelicalism' came to occupy since 1970, it may look as if I was neglectful of this most currently intense element among American religions, but I was simply and



**Righteous  
Empire:** The  
 protestant  
experience  
in America  
by Martin E. Marty



TWO CENTURIES OF AMERICAN LIFE:  
A Bicentennial History

The dust jacket of *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970). This study by Martin E. Marty appeared as part of a series, *Two Centuries of American Life*, commemorating the 1976 United States Bicentennial.

dutifully obeying orders to keep hands off. To critics who asked, 'Where are the evangelicals?' I would say 'in Taylor's forthcoming book . . .,' though despite my 'hands off' assignment, they inevitably made many appearances in *Righteous Empire* as representatives of one of two parties in the Protestant camp by the nineteenth century.

*The Plot Condensed in Chapter Titles*

To compress the story of Protestantism as represented in more than two hundred denominations at the time of writing, and as present in numberless non-denominational cultural manifestations, required the gaining of distance for the sake of finding perspective. Recalling that my teacher Daniel J. Boorstin had written one of his three volumes on American history while teaching for a year in Japan, it occurred to me to make a humbler effort to do something similar. Given the time constraints that went with my own full-time teaching, I did wide reading and took sheaves of notes along on a two-week assignment in Israel. Sequestered in a guest house at the kibbutz Nof Ginosar and being aware of Israel's two decades, instead of two centuries, of national existence, I paid careful attention to the challenges, assignments, conceptions, and achievements that went into state-making. Since Judaism was an integral component in Israel's official make-up and since Protestantism was a vital element in the American construction, I found many structural parallels, however disparate the substantial unfoldings, and these parallels guided me in my outlining. When I returned home, I was ready to write.

Since so much condensing and shaping went into the formation of the plot, I chose to order the chaos by imposing symmetry. Part One (to 1877) included four sections, each of them made up of four chapters. Part Two (1877-) was broken into three sections with four chapters each. All twenty-eight chapters were of equal length. I compared this straight-jacketing to the acceptance of form in writing haiku or sonnets, knowing that something artificial was going on here, as it is in all constructions of



reality achieved by historians, and being aware that each chapter could well be represented in a book or a shelf or a library of its own.

All authors in this series were denied footnotes or other critical apparatus beside 'Chapter Notes' in the form of references to book titles, most of them secondary sources that had informed the writing.<sup>4</sup> Those who wanted to follow up on or argue with *Righteous Empire* were on their own in tracing specific traces, sources, and pages. All historians live with limits; those were ours in this series. Mentioning this does give me the occasion to slither in with a comparison I could not help but like. Stephen J. Stein of Indiana University wrote that 'one other scholar of comparable stature whose works I have known well adopted the same, somewhat cavalier approach to documentation—Perry Miller in his great synthesis on the American mind.' (I am not sure how relevant that sentence is here, but the comparison was flattering to 'young and green' Marty and remains so after all these years.) Series editors, Dial Press, and other 'outside' forces were the setters of limits.

As for the style and format, Robert Barry (*American Benedictine Review*) saw a tie between the aesthetic form and an aesthetic interpretation: the author, he wrote, 'presumes that the rational dimension is fundamentally aesthetic, that reality is translated into cognitive terms only when the backdrop is aesthetic, that the bits and portions of history that are termed "facts" are torn from the pattern that is artistic.' This approach means that this historian did not stress organizational features but saw 'the Church as supplying a rigorous energy that affects the lives of all the citizens of this country—as a "mystical" spirit that moves fully within the human dimension of American history.' This meant that 'what was lost in the abandonment of political establishments was certainly gained in the mythological, historical and social dimensions.'

Part One, 'The Evangelical Empire, 1776-1877,' dealt with these themes: 'The People'—Native Americans, White Anglo-Saxons, and Black Americans; 'The Land'—the constitutional

4. Some reviewers noted the absence of footnotes.

charter, the enlargement of territory from east to west, and division of territory into the North and the South; 'The Empire,' beginning with the invention of forms such as the denomination, the parish, and educational agencies; theological interpretation; efforts by Protestants to reform and serve the nation; and 'Tests of Empire'—the challenge of the cities and industry, 'fringe' Protestantism, and stresses on the empire before the Civil War.

Part Two, 'From Evangelical Empire to Protestant Experience, 1877-' began with a section on 'A Complacent Era,' Reconstruction, accommodation to culture, immigrants, and the choice of some Protestants to 'go private'; then, 'From Empire to Experience,' described the two-party system as a 'division within Protestantism,' and included a new theology, the rise of progressivism, reform, and the Social Gospel, and the controversies of the 1920s. Finally, 'The Experience Translated, Transformed,' included southern and urban ways of life, a recovery of protest and realism, the rise of ecumenism and pluralism, and the protean present when 'Everything Can Become Almost Anything Else.'

The device I am using to give this accounting is to refer to and cite reviews from the period of original publication. Many of the critics were colleagues at other institutions, most of them historians slightly more advanced in the profession than I. Given the constraints of space and time, each has to be introduced so briefly as to be cryptic. To stay to the point of substance, I will discipline myself to delete *all* adjectives which served reviewers to discuss the quality of the product.

*An Adjective-Less Review of Reviews*

The Israel where I went to ponder my outlining had nothing to compare with what American Protestants aspired to form—and which they partially achieved—a righteous empire. The 'empire' in the title evoked much discussion. Theodore C. Tappert (*Lutheran Forum*) assessed that 'empire' here meant that at least for a century 'Protestantism acted as the imperialistic custodian of national values.' A notable historian of the South, Samuel S. Hill



(*Church History*), saw that 'empire' in this context refers to the 'religious policy, largely conscious,' and that, while still 'church history,' it is different in approach because of its 'acceptance of the primary contemporary mode, that of analyzing religion in culture, and abetted by the public goals of American Protestantism itself' more than Protestant churches.

As for the origins of empire, Elliott Wright (*National Catholic Reporter*) noted that in this book 'the empire was made possible by a marriage of convenience between an evangelical minority and revolutionary fathers who, while being personally skeptical about much traditional religion, knew how to utilize biblical language to forge a "promised land" of "chosen people" out of thirteen disparate colonies.' Stephen J. Stein, whom I have already quoted, now writing in *Seminar*, saw that the idea of an 'evangelical empire' worked as the organizing theme for the first half of the book, but not for the second half, that could be characterized instead as 'demise.' He located the author in the company of 'other leading historians [who] constitute a kind of imperial school of American Religious history,' and who utilize 'the familiar perspective of viewing religious life in America through the eyes of the mainstream Protestant empire,' as this one was assigned to do.

Several reviewers noted transformations within the plot. Thus Ernest Trice Thompson, in *Presbyterian Outlook*, saw the author moving from the concept of Protestant Empire to a Protestant 'deposit.' In *Saturday Review*, Fordham University professor Walter Arnold also noted that in this writing 'the historical paradox is that this "empire" resulted in a "Protestantism without protest," a 'decorous worldliness.' Yet Arnold took from this book an understanding that 'we are all shaped by and shapers of the unfinished Protestant experience in this country,' but also claimed that with his 'ecumenical vision,' the author 'does not see any real future for the Protestant principle apart from the Catholic substance.' With those terms he was evoking the yin and yang of American religion in theologian Paul Tillich's terms.

William McLoughlin of Brown University (*American Historical Review*) located the book historiographically as 'the first post-Protestant history of American Protestantism.' McLoughlin saw the story of 'American Protestantism, like American nationalism, [representing] a tragedy of epic proportion.' The author, he wrote, 'provides a negative view of the puberty of Christianity in America and implies it may be coming of age—perhaps too late to save the empire it built on pride.' Clyde Holbrook of Oberlin College, in a publication whose reference I have lost, affirmed the author's accent on the intention by Protestants to create 'an "empire" of righteousness,' but he went on at once to note that 'the idea of a nation merely influenced by Protestant evangelicalism' had 'in these latter days, turned out to be one in which Protestantism in some quarters, has become a sanctifying agency of our national culture.' He also offered an obituary: 'The antique hope of welding this nation into a Protestant, or even Christian unit, is a cause long since lost.'

Critics commented on a racial and ethnic, as well as religious (especially anti-Catholic), component in the formation of the *Righteous Empire*. Many reviewers made much of the fact that, unlike many predecessor works, this one began with reference to the Native American, African American, and other 'people' who suffered under the Protestant imperialists. Ironist J. Madison King of Furman University agreed with a reference in the text and said that it was proper to stress Anglo-Saxon Protestants: 'After all, who else would Columbus discover America for?' and accurately foresaw the ending of that tradition or school.

The term WASP was becoming common currency in the period of my writing. While the book did not quote the WASP acronym, reviewers used it. William A. Clebsch of Stanford wrote (*Journal of Religion*) that books by Marty and Robert T. Handy 'seem[ed] to sense that, whatever may now and into the foreseeable future happen to the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the United States, the WASP has lost his sting of domination over what may now be called his fellow minority groups, whether religiously or otherwise distinguished.'



Only one reviewer reacted angrily. Harold O. Brown (*Christianity Today*) wrote that this book 'is an attempt to characterize the history of Protestantism in America—its evangelism, missions, education, and all its other aspects—as the self-righteous, self-serving spiritual propaganda machine of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, intending to subjugate the ethnics, especially blacks and southern and eastern Europeans. In order to do this, Marty must assimilate non-Anglo Saxon Protestants—e.g., Dutch, German, and Scandinavians—to the WASPS, all of whom he lumps together for blanket condemnation.'

On a more redemptive note, Beloit College poet Chad Walsh (*Chicago Daily News*) agreed that the book dealt with 'revelations of ethnic blindness,' but evidenced moderate hopefulness, after the nineteenth-century manifestation of an 'inbred blend of racism, imperialism, and middle-class smugness.' And then, Walsh noted, the author seemed to suggest that 'the "disestablishment" of Protestantism has given it the freedom to explore more deeply its own most profound insights and to bring them to bear upon a nation which is no more, and no less, God's chosen people than any other is.'

#### *The Division into 'Public' vs. 'Private' Protestantism*

By far the most noticed feature—one that was seen as pioneering and enduring—was the section on the choice by Protestants to divide into two informal, sometimes overlapping, but more often suspicious, camps that I chose to call 'Private Protestantism' versus 'Public Protestantism.' In 2006–7 there are reasons to observe a drastic role reversal between the two, but we are dealing here with *Righteous Empire* as a time-capsule that preserves visions of the world as it then appeared. 'Private' Protestantism took shape late in the nineteenth century, when evangelists gathered anti-progressive theological and political people around a 'salvationist' rhetoric. Their task as defined by self-described conservatives was to save souls, to accent bliss in a world to come, and to criticize efforts by the churches to be involved with politics,

social forces, and cultural expressions. The 'Public' party, on the other hand, while rooted in earlier evangelicalism, now accented social form, progressive or 'liberal' and 'modernist' theology, the Social Gospel, and its heirs.

Clebsch discussed many features of *Righteous Empire* but, though he would have preferred the term 'blocs' over 'parties,' foresaw that this two-party 'depiction of Protestantism will doubtlessly stand as a milepost for historiographers for a generation to come.' Philip Holtsford in *Christian Advocate* considered that no hypothesis in the book was 'more fascinating and important than the two-party concept.' Samuel S. Hill, premier historian of southern Protestantism, in *Church History* stressed that 'the most salient interpretation of the internal life of the Protestant institution highlights its two-party character, the Public party (liberals, social gospellers, the ethically oriented) and the Private party (evangelicals, revivalists, premillennialists), by tracing their roots, postures and roles.' Elliott Wright saw less salience and novelty. In the *National Catholic Reporter*, using a journalist's eye for what was current, he thought that the later chapters slipped 'too easily into the obvious but overworked split between what some call "conservative" and "liberal" Protestants and what Marty labels "private" and "public" Protestants.' James H. Smylie, historian at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, in *Theology Today* saw this distinction as limiting because it kept the author from analyzing elements that the two parties shared within the Protestant empire.

Lutheranism and other imports from Continental Europe did blur the lines to some extent, and some reviewers thought that attention to Lutheranism in America would creatively complicate the story. Thus Lutheran historians Theodore C. Tappert of Philadelphia Lutheran Seminary, in *Lutheran Forum*, and Carl S. Meyer in the *Concordia Historical Review* noted that Lutherans did not fit in perfectly to a distinction among the mainly English-language-based Protestant groups. Tappert thought the two categories did not adequately cover Missouri Synod Lutherans and



Southern Baptists, while Meyer disagreed and then agreed with the idea that this religious division had analogies in politics: 'Perhaps to think of a two-party system in Protestantism is too simple an analogy with the politics of the country, yet the politics of America, while predominately two-party, had had its splinter groups and non-aligners.'

Winthrop S. Hudson in the *Journal of Church and State* agreed that the two parties had effected polarization and suggested 'possibly one may be less sanguine than the author about prospects for renewal out of current polarization,' but added, 'this has no bearing on the major thrust of his thesis,' which Hudson, the author of one of the *very* few earlier histories of American Protestantism, affirmed. He was joined in such observations by his peer Robert T. Handy of New York's Union Theological Seminary in the *Journal of American History*, who also saw 'a growing two-party system (private versus public) within Protestantism.' Handy was soon to publish a book on Protestantism's effort to produce and dominate in *A Christian America*.

In popular media, Kenneth Woodward in *Newsweek* observed the author chronicling how 'the dream of a Protestant empire disintegrated under both internal and external pressures,' and reckoned that the author, he wrote, 'sees no way of reconciling these two disparate groups.' Stein affirmed the distinction between the two parties, but added: 'From the perspective of the 1970s it is virtually impossible to see a unified empire behind the divisions within contemporary Protestantism' especially given the *coup de grace* to the empire with the emergence of de facto religious pluralism in the middle of the 20th century.' So 'only the name and the legacy of the former kingdom remain.'

#### *Traumatic Times, Realistic Tones*

A tonal matter in *Righteous Empire* evoked responses that now demand attention. Although I am a career-long crusader against whining, being crabby, kvetching, and the like, I was writing in a time of trauma in American life, during the period of protest over

racial, ethnic, military, and 'justice' issues, and was influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr and his 'realistic' approach to national affairs. On the principle that I should not explain or defend myself here—and in fairness to reviewers—I'll cite some testimony. Thus John Woolverton in the *Virginia Seminary Quarterly* wrote that for those who want 'holy history,' 'Marty's book will be about as welcome as Eugene McCarthy at one of those Johnson administration get-togethers.' Fellow Episcopalian Earl H. Brill—again, I cannot locate the source—in the same spirit saw the author as 'tough—perhaps too tough—on the Protestants of the Nineteenth Century; many of them, after all, were deeply committed to the service of both God and man. A certain liberal bias must be filtered out of this book.'

Enter into the record this from Gilbert E. Doan in the *Lutheran*, who liked much but found 'one serious flaw,' as he saw the author being 'largely distant and full of disdain. He seems, by and large, to regard Protestantism as a biblical veneer for the American way of life.' The book could be subtitled: 'A history of the misuse of Scripture by small-minded American provincials' written with a 'gratuitous sarcasm' that is 'too transparent.' To the point: 'Marty's debunking style has an ironic implication. One infers that he is impatient with Protestantism's long-anesthetized social conscience and applauds her present slow awakening. Unless this awakening has no roots whatsoever in the church life of the last two hundred years, a reader can only wonder what happened in the interim, or how the present is built on the past, or if it isn't why should [anyone] bother reading religious history or church history at all.'

Bertram Wyatt-Brown (*Journal of Southern History*) thought that the author reflected the 'dour mood of contemporary thinkers,' and 'dwelt too much on the negative impulses,' as when he did not 'sufficiently acknowledge that the same religious system that sanctioned black subordination spawned northern abolitionism and southern manumissions (mostly before 1820).'



You can picture that it was relieving for me to read testimony from the other side. Thus Bill Conner (*Peoria Journal-Star*) noted a different tone; the book was written, the Peorian said, 'with an understanding and compassion which should not invoke rancor.' And the reviewer—I lack the name—in the *American Catholic Historical Review* found that the author is 'unabashedly committed to the tradition in which he has been so graciously nurtured, but he is equally true to the requirements of responsible historiography.'

#### *After Empire*

Finally, other reviewers, who noted the theme of demise, included Clyde Holbrook who observed: 'The antique hope of welding this nation into a Protestant, or even Christian unit is a cause long since lost.' In the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, C. Carlyle Haaland of Wagner College concluded: 'In short, Protestantism is no longer large, supreme, and secure, but small, part of the general religious crowd, and somewhat in doubt regarding its role in current American society.' Yet this reviewer judged that 'Protestant churches still maintain significant vitality as "experiencing agents" in post-Protestant times.'

Roy Larson (*Chicago Sun-Times*) saw the book as a report that American Protestantism 'is afflicted with a deep and nearly all-pervasive malaise as it tries, often reluctantly, to adjust itself to the realities of the post-Protestant era.' Larson welcomed the contrast to those Protestants who 'seem committed to an absurd belief in salvation by nostalgia.' And he suggested, on the basis of *Righteous Empire*, that Protestantism would henceforth be not an empire but an option, and would 'continue to be a viable option if its people, eschewing "the holy innocence of those who forgive themselves," can own up to what their own tradition demands and seek justification by faith—God being their judge, not their ally.'

As for the fate of the second concept, the 'Two-Party System,' after a quarter of a century I will comment on what reviewers had to say. First, the terms 'Public' and 'Private' no longer serve.

Reading their not-inaccurate assessments, it is in place to observe that an ironic role reversal has occurred. The 'Public' party is now usually referred to as 'Mainline Protestantism,' designed as a pejorative term—as was WASP—and sometimes translated 'Old-Line' or 'Side-Line.' I can envision a time when it will be simply 'Protestant,' and the alternative will simply be 'Evangelical,' as it is now in most media and popular usage, and especially politics.

*Righteous Empire*, its author handicapped because William Taylor's counterpart on evangelicalism did not appear, had to carry the whole case while necessarily slighting the evangelical story in the twentieth century. My story showed that party or bloc concentrating on saving souls for heaven and disdaining politics and its analogues. Contemporary evangelicals readily admit that it once tended to do so. Evangelicalism's identification after 1964 with candidate Barry Goldwater and all recent Republican presidents has elicited rationales from its spokespersons as to why they found both crises and opportunities that led them to come to center stage in politics, entertainment, media, and the popular imagination.

The once-imperial Protestants abdicated or yielded or revised their interests and strategies during the same period in which they were experiencing statistical decline. Many among them remain the 'public interpreters'—more than many in the media, who resort to cliché, notice. Yet if the 'public Protestants' were chaplains to the informal establishment, they are not that now and do not aspire to be. The most 'public' among them tend to be critics of—some say 'prophets' against—the social order approved by the evangelical parties.

Whatever the names or the roles, the concept remains and deserves examination, which it regularly receives. One illustration of this is a formal study by twenty-three scholars, one which eventuated in a book, *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, edited by Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. Critical of overuse or static use of the two-party concept, the editors traced the historical impetus to 'one of the earliest and clearest academic statements of the two-party



thesis: Martin Marty's *Righteous Empire* (1970).' The next sentence should not be overlooked, so I will italicize it: '*Building on the work of his graduate student, Jean Miller Schmidt, Marty argues. . .*' a position that can be implied from the cited critics and reviewers above. 'In other works, including *A Nation of Behavers* (1976) and *Pilgrims in Their Own Land* (1984), Marty has developed a more pluralistic model of American religious history—and perhaps this pluralistic vision is more quintessentially "Marty"—but the two-party influence of *Righteous Empire* has been enormous nonetheless.' The editors criticized the bipolarity and reductionism of this model. They also noted that both Schmidt and Marty have endeavored to be 'peacemakers' and were demonstrators of a 'redemptive concern' for both parties, yet *Righteous Empire*'s 'bifurcated and oppositional approach lives on.' Jacobsen and Trollinger document this claim in the work of several scholars: George Marsden,<sup>5</sup> no doubt the foremost historian of American Protestant fundamentalism; Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow,<sup>6</sup> sociologist Robert N. Bellah,<sup>7</sup> and, most of all, James Davison Hunter with his celebrated *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991).

Historians Jacobsen and Trollinger point to three historiographical trends that, by identifying pluralism and diversity within the Protestant historical canon, complicate binary approaches. First is the 'tremendous growth in scholarship about fundamentalism and evangelicalism,' as illustrated by Marsden in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, which keeps the model but makes it possible to see the evangelical wing in a different way. A second recent trend in American religious bibliography has been the expansion of the pluralist model of American religion.' This has led to a fresh (or first!) encounter with the religions once seen

5. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

6. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

7. Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (1975; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

as marginal or fringe, as typified by Catherine Albanese.<sup>8</sup> She, too, for all her pursuit of the new paradigm, is still a two-party analyst and chronicler when she deals with Protestantism, say these editors. The third trend is the appearance of a number of historical studies written by sociologists. Here Wuthnow and Hunter are prime examples. They deal with pluralism, but, say Jacobsen and Trollinger, they also do not leave the two-party paradigm behind. Thus 'even in the hands of our most sophisticated and intelligent scholars of religion in the United States, the two-party model is a limited and flawed means by which to understand the past and present of American Protestantism.' This observation inspires Jacobsen, Trollinger, and company's quest to 'Reform the Center' and to allow other stories to be told, or to have their place located elsewhere than at the margins.

While noting how the situations of 'Public' and 'Private' Protestantism have changed and how Protestantism itself is not what it was in 1970, we might also note what else *Righteous Empire* missed—as all books must be seen to miss, since the authors cannot foresee the future. The most obvious 'miss' in *Righteous Empire* was the role of more than half the 'imperial' or 'public' or 'private' characters and movements: women. Only three women appear in the 'Sources' section, as few women were writing on these subjects before 1970. A few women show up in the index, but that the deficiency was noted early on is evident from the request by the publisher for the author to prepare a revised edition, one which, among others, lifted up the place of women. In 1984 Charles Scribner's Sons, having taken over the rights from Harper and Row, which had taken over the rights from Dial, sent a contract for such a second edition. The 1986 edition was titled *Protestantism in the United States: Righteous Empire, Second Edition*. I preferred the old title, but the publishers had classroom interests in mind.

8. Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (1992; 3d ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1999).



The new edition skewed the symmetry with the addition of two chapters. One, I am embarrassed to note because to do so is to draw attention to the earlier flaw, was 'The Protestant Majority: The Struggles of Women.' It did address the imbalance, but a historian knows that a theme such as this must pervade a text and the development of it must be reflected throughout the time of researching. By the end of my teaching career in 1998, the majority of graduate students were women, some of whom pursued explicit 'women' topics but all of whom brought a new sensibility to the venture. In 1970 not one of thirty-eight officers and councilors of the American Society of Church History was a woman; in 2006 eleven of twenty were. Women have changed many of the concepts and choices of subject matter. Now there is much more accent on social history—stories of marriage and divorce, child-rearing, women in ordained ministry, health and illness, care and cure, works of mercy. 'Political' history such as stories of 'Empire' and 'Party' do not possess the near-monopoly they once did. 'Patriarchy' would stand a better chance of being treated by women than would 'Empire.'

While *Righteous Empire* was written just late enough in the development of civil rights struggles and ethnic consciousness—'multiculturalism' was not yet coined or applied—and the book was credited for its opening chapters on race, ethnicity, Native Americans and African Americans. Anyone writing American religious history today, including Protestant history, would do much more with the African American, Latino, and Asian believers, for example, Korean Americans with their large Presbyterian constituency. In many ways African American Protestants are among the strongest representatives of the Protestant impulse, but they do not dream of empire and were mainly victims of the old one.

*Going 'Home Again' to Empire?*

A final chapter in the revised *Righteous Empire* was added to ask: 'Can You Go Home Again? Power Shifts and Protestant Prospects.' It cited the most notable of the religious historians who

had taken up these topics in the previous generation, Sydney Ahlstrom, who later did his own revisiting of his classic *A Religious History of the American People*. He had hung as much on the theme of Puritans as others of us had done with the Enlightenment and other feeders into the American Protestant picture. Then in 1971 Ahlstrom admitted that he was losing the Puritan thread on the contemporary countercultural and thus anti-Puritan front. He also found radical Protestantism as such to be secular and the short-lived 'death of God' theologies threats to the continuity.<sup>9</sup> He described himself as writing 'in a rather somber mood . . . for we have been considering a time of calamities.' Attenuated by now 'was the Puritan's firm conviction that America had a divine commission to the world. The nation's organized connections with the sources of its idealism and hope were withered.' I argued that such nearly universal readings of the signs of the times were shortsighted. None of them foresaw that in the generation to come presidential candidates all were or had to be seen to be hyper-religious. In the Reagan era the language of empire, as in the Soviet's 'evil empire' and our implied or affirmed counter to it, was current, with its implication that we, the one greater power, were the empire of the good. Political argument over public school prayer and Supreme Court decisions kept religion on page one.

Did this mean one could 'go home again' to the *Righteous Empire*? Not likely, according to the sequel chapter, thanks to pluralism, conflicting signals, and the like. The freshly visible, popular, and 'public' black churches were victims, not participants, in the *Righteous Empire*. They often perpetuated some themes of the virtuous empire, but on different grounds. Again, women were cited. Third, the mainline, once 'public,' Protestants had gone into recession. They had become too ecumenical, too

9. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (1963; reprint, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). This was one of the first publications of its time to recognize that a technologically and scientifically advanced society called for a description of God in broad and impersonal terms.



friendly, too uninterested in building themselves up by demonizing 'the other,' and for other reasons too numerous to mention here. 'This is not to say that these churches were not vital,' was a claim that needed and received documentation, but the vitality was organized on different grounds, with different means toward different ends, none of which would add up to aspiration for a Second Empire.

Now the evangelicals had become the public party. Their leaders and summoned followers moved from action on the basis of what I call 'the politics of resentment'—they had been disdained or overlooked or caricatured—to 'the politics of will to power.' They were surprised to see how easily they could mobilize against the 'other' and win more power than anyone had envisioned. Politically, many leaders and followers embraced or prompted political appeals to develop a new American empire, though frustration in pursuit of it forced the invention of new metaphors for a defensive and assertive nation. As for the evangelicals, whose history William Taylor had been charted to write, there was also enormous variety within the camp, as witnessed by the rise of Pentecostalism, worldliness among successful evangelicals, some participation in forming a new center, but triumphalism when they experienced success. There were reactions to the bewilderments that came with modernity and that bred a spirit that favored absolutism and had no room for ambiguity. The end of the revised book was anything but sarcastic, cynical, disdainful, or ironic:

The righteous empire has made available some [sights, sounds, smells, styles, and substance] that pilgrims in later, more bewildering, times could draw upon to assist them in their ceaseless search for meaning in life, for objects of loyalty, for something to which to belong. . . . Ancestors, would they come home again from the past to look around, would not likely feel at home. Still, they at least would recognize many old elements in the new settings of late twentieth century America. Surprisingly, they would also play a part in the indefinite American future.

POST SCRIPT: The revised version of *Righteous Empire* now listed twenty 'other books by Martin E. Marty,' many of them about an America that the Bicentennial History series book had helped prompt. *Righteous Empire* brought me much pleasure and recognition, including the National Book Award in Philosophy and Religion in 1971. That was an event whose press and journal coverage put my granddaughter back to work fattening the *Righteous Empire* scrapbook, and later it may even have helped subsidize her college tuition.



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