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### The “Post-Protestant Thesis”: The Decline of Cultural Consensus and Path to Its Recovery

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The “Post-Protestant Thesis,” which is widely held or at least not seriously challenged by scholars of U.S. religious history, provides illuminating insight into the contemporary spiritual culture of our country. The thesis is that from the 1960’s a deep-down, fundamental change has occurred in the spiritual underpinnings of the United States. This change has brought the curtain down on a religious epoch which dates to the arrival of our earliest colonial ancestors, and it explains a root cause of our present national uncertainties.

Beginning with the crescendo of British colonist arrivals in the early seventeenth century, the cultural force guiding the country’s religious, social, and cultural development has been Protestantism. The initial cultural force of Calvinist Puritanism, specifically established Congregationalism, dominated the highly influential colonies of Northern New England through the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This strong current broadened into the diversity of “Mainline” Protestant denominations,<sup>[1]</sup> which became the prominent, central feature of the country’s spiritual and cultural landscape.

According to the Post-Protestant Thesis, sometime during the 1960’s, the institutions of “Mainline Protestantism” began a rapid deterioration, bringing its cultural dominance to an end. As a result, our culture is no longer advancing under the sway of the norms, values framework, worldview, and interests of Mainline Protestantism. In recent decades, other, alternative spiritual forces have become the primary source of influence upon our culture and institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the features and validity of this thesis. Why did this tectonic shift happen? What is the evidence that it occurred? What has taken the place of Mainline Protestantism? What are the consequences of this change?<sup>[2]</sup>

Obviously, this topic covers an enormous scope of time, events, and ideas. This paper will simplify the task of evaluating the Post-Protestant Thesis by summarizing the perspectives of four authors, and then presenting a consolidated overview based upon a synthesis of viewpoints. For this review, I have selected authors whose writings fall at different times during the roughly six-decade period following the mid-1960’s.

#### Evidence of Mainline Protestant Decline: Membership, Vitality and Practice

There appears to be virtually no one debating the conclusion that “Mainline Protestant structures...began their irreversible membership plunge in the 1960’s.”<sup>[3]</sup> According to writer Joseph Bottum, “the high point of American Protestantism occurred in about 1965, when surveys showed that more than half of the country’s population belonged to Mainline Protestant Churches.”<sup>[4]</sup> His book *An Anxious Age*, written in 2014, presents research indicating that by that time less than 10% of the population belonged to mainline Protestant churches. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life from 2014 shows that number to be 15%.<sup>[5]</sup>

Robin Burge referenced Bottum’s data when he presented more recent data in the July 12, 2021 issue of *Religion Unplugged*<sup>[6]</sup> based the General Social Survey (GSS)<sup>[7]</sup>:

As can be seen, they both tell the same basic story about American Mainline Christianity - it’s in decline. In the 1970s, the GSS indicates that over 30% of all Americans could be classified into a Mainline denomination. But that quickly changed. By the late 1980s, the share of the Mainline dropped below 20%. In the most recent estimates, the Mainline was just about 10% in 2016 and increased very slightly in 2018 to just over 11%. The CES<sup>[8]</sup> estimates are slightly higher for the Mainline, but also show a downward trajectory. About 14% of Americans were Mainline in 2008, but that’s down to 12% in the most recent data. But there’s general agreement in these surveys - Mainline Protestants have declined over time and are probably between 10-13% of the population today.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Just as important as the decline in the membership of Mainline Christian denominations as a percentage of the country’s growing population is the fact that the average age of membership is also dramatically increasing. *The 2020 Census of American Religion*, published by the Public Religion Research Institute, indicates that the average age in the various denominations of Mainline Christianity is 56 years of age.<sup>[10]</sup> This is considerably older than the average age of the U.S. population and the oldest among all major religious groups in the United States.<sup>[11]</sup>

Finally, the Pew Forum indicates that measures of “participation” and “practices” of individual members of Mainline denominations has receded more rapidly than is the case with other denominations and traditions. This decline refers to church attendance, daily prayer and evangelism (witnessing).<sup>[12]</sup>

#### Perspectives on the Post-Protestant Thesis

##### Sydney E. Ahlstrom

Sydney Ahlstrom’s perspective on the post-Protestant thesis is noteworthy primarily because of his prominence as a religious historian. The first chapter of his 1,200-page *A Religious History of the American People* (1972), titled “American Religious History in the Post-Protestant Era”<sup>[13]</sup> acknowledges the Post-Protestant Thesis, stating that it may have begun as early as the 1920’s.<sup>[14]</sup> However, realization of the end of the culture-shaping power of Protestant “evangelicalism” was delayed by several decades. His conclusion is that “Only in the 1960’s would it become apparent that the Great Puritan Epoch in American history had come to an end.”<sup>[15]</sup> He states that “In the later twentieth century the mythic quality of the American saga has evaporated.”<sup>[16]</sup>

Ahlstrom maintains that the writer of religious history must reinterpret the past in light of this sea-change that has occurred in the contemporary religious landscape. “A new present requires a new past... social and intellectual developments of the last decade have profoundly altered our interpretation of the entire course of American history.”<sup>[17]</sup> One major reassessment of religious history that Ahlstrom calls for is reconsideration of the emergence of the Black Church.<sup>[18]</sup>

##### David D. Hall

While the first edition of Alstrom's book unambiguously affirms that the U.S. is now in a post-Protestant era, it was written in 1972; therefore, scant historical perspective could be offered. The second edition published more than three decades later (2004) includes a new and final chapter, "From the Seventies to the Present," written by David D. Hall<sup>[19]</sup> that provides additional insight on the Post-Protestant Thesis.

Hall's chapter begins by asserting that at the end of the 1960's there was evidence of an emerging "second reformation", focused on liberal social activism. The momentum of this modern-day reformation was a plausible replacement for the failing "Mainline." The achievements of the civil rights movement could be regarded as the fruition of the promise of the social gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Vatican II brought the Roman Catholics into new social justice activism, which had previously been solely the terrain of liberal Protestants. And "the wineskins of worship and piety were being replenished" by the vitality of the rapid growth of the charismatic movement (p. 1097).

Yet, in subsequent decades the power of liberal denominations, the likely carriers of that anticipated reformation, went into steep decline. A religious observer could cite this decline as evidence of a lost anointing.

In place of this stalled "second reformation", Hall presents a post-Protestant history that I summarize as having five themes.

### ***Liberal – Conservative Split***

The locus of growth and activism shifted to exclusivist denominations that were detached from and even hostile to the dominant culture. Moreover, their pre-millennialist eschatology was, in many cases, out of sync with the American cultural mainstream. Hall characterizes this emerging voice as the "strongly nationalist New Right," explicitly oriented to challenge the social agenda of the more liberal National Council of Churches (NCC).

This new alignment of Protestantism, split into conservative and liberal camps, first became apparent in the 1940's with the creation of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) as an ideological opponent of the NCC. It is from these earlier origins that we see alliances emerge in the 1970's and 80's such as the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family.<sup>[20]</sup> These groups were formed in response to what they regarded as a cultural assault on core American values and the growing threat of left-leaning ideologies. Their causes were the early skirmishes in the cultural wars – initially over school prayer and school bible readings, Roe vs Wade, homosexual rights, and the advance of "secular humanism."

### ***Growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal Movements***

A second prominent feature of the religious landscape that opened as Mainline Protestantism declined has been rapid growth and social prominence of Evangelicalism, which apparently peaked in the 1970's, and Pentecostalism which by 2000 surpassed Evangelicalism. Pentecostal membership numbers in the U.S. now exceed ten million, with the predominant denominations being Church of God in Christ and Assemblies of God. Expansion of the Pentecostal movement has reached well into the Catholic Church and has even greater momentum outside the U.S.

### ***Catholicism – Stable Membership, Decline in Piety and Priestly Authority***

Hall's verdict on Catholicism in the post-Protestant era is that, due to immigration, its membership is stable. However, participation, confession and conformity with church mandates have been in decline since the 1960's. Most dramatic is the decline in seminarians from 47,000 in 1965 to 5,000 in 1997.<sup>[21]</sup> Many post-Vatican II changes in Catholic culture and the liberalization/secularization of U.S. culture have led to a concomitant decline in priestly authority. The clergy sex abuse scandal, which has plagued the Church since 1985, has caused a severe additional erosion in the goodwill attached to priesthood, well beyond what is noted in Hall's chapter.

### ***Pluralism as the New Theme of American Religion***

Summarizing various additional post-1960's religious trends, Hall argues that the new theme of U.S. religion is "pluralism." This is not new to the U.S. religious landscape but has become prominent and is adding complexity. An important cause of contemporary religious pluralism is the growing presence, largely due to immigration, of Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, and the continuing strength of the Black Church. In addition, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints as well as other sectarian traditions, continue to thrive, are well educated, and have become increasingly prosperous and culturally influential.

However, pluralism is not a simple, widely shared concept, and is not to be confused with an underlying universalist consensus of values across diverse faith traditions. For some faith traditions, all spiritual paths are seen as valid and virtuous. However, for other traditions that are well established and of increasing influence in the United States, the idea of religious universalism is not acceptable. Exclusivist doctrines are present in many Christian faiths (including Evangelicals and Pentecostals), and among Jews and Muslims.<sup>[22]</sup>

### ***Preference for Non-Institutional Forms of Religion***

Hall's final point on the post-Protestant religious landscape is that post 60's Americans do not see religious participation in the same way as their parents. Post-Protestant generations are more highly educated and live in a far more dynamic cultural environment. They do not join churches at the same rate, they join for social rather than doctrinal reasons, their lives are more transient, they donate less and move between congregations more. All these factors contribute to the decline of "denominational" Christianity, further explained elsewhere in this paper.

Younger Americans prefer a religion that is less liturgical, less dogmatic, and more personal. They seek multiple sources and diverse formats in their religious life.

### ***William G. McLoughlin***

William McLoughlin does not refer to the term "Post-Protestantism." However, he carefully documents this transition within the context of what he describes in *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (1978)<sup>[23]</sup> as "The Fourth Great Awakening (1960-1990?)." His book makes three primary points relative to the thesis:

### ***Breakdown of Consensus***

A crisis in the legitimacy of our culture and its value-belief system took root in the 1960's. McLoughlin states this is "a transformation of our worldview that may be the most drastic in our history as a nation."<sup>[24]</sup> He regards the earliest shocks to the liberal consensus to be the pessimism that arose from the successes and subsequent disastrous impacts of Mussolini, Hitler and the Soviet Union. These world level setbacks were followed by successive failures in the U.S.: the inefficiencies of the "welfare state" and the "War on Poverty," the assassination of three major political figures in the 1960's and the quagmire of the war in Vietnam. An atmosphere of doubt, the end of "manifest destiny" and a loss of confidence entered the U.S. consciousness for the first time in our nation's history.

The conclusion was that "The old priests, pastors, and rabbis simply could not provide answers to the most pressing personal problems, let alone to national and world problems."<sup>[25]</sup> "At this point, liberalism and neoliberalism, social gospel and neo-social gospel, conservatism and neoconservatism, fundamentalism and liberalism, seem to have reached dead ends."<sup>[26]</sup>

### ***Three Alternative Lifestyles and Philosophies***

in the context of the “break-up of the old consensus” new, alternative visions and philosophies were needed. McLoughlin presents three cultural currents of the 1960’s as non-religious attempts to replace the earlier social consensus. These are 1) the antinomian “Beat Generation,” 2) anti-Calvinist “Zen and other Oriental alternatives,” and 3) the pseudo religious “LSD, flower power, occult and rock concerts” expressions.

These alternatives emerged due to a spiritual hunger and openness caused by deep cultural and social uncertainty. However, they did not take root because they were each “profoundly un-American” in numerous ways.<sup>[27]</sup>

### ***The Future of the Awakening***

McLoughlin concluded: “As we approach the end of the 1970’s, it is clear that the nation is still far from reaching a new consensus in its belief-value system.”<sup>[28]</sup> Among his observations is that the rapidly growing “neo-Evangelical” faith, embodied by religious commitments and the casual and humble personal patriotism of President Jimmy Carter, offered the “most promising movement towards ideological reorientation.” However, McLoughlin finds neo-Evangelism to be too escapist, too other-worldly and individualistic in its priorities, and too laden with Fundamentalist authoritarianism to hold up as being a viable source of “new light.”

### **Joseph Bottum**

An author of contemporary influence on our topic is Joseph Bottum, author of *An Anxious Age: The Post Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (2014).<sup>[29]</sup> He thoughtfully addresses the Post-Protestant Thesis, although he is neither a Protestant nor a secularist. Bottum is a practicing Catholic. Here I highlight three central points from his book.

### ***We Live in an Age of Spiritual Anxiety***

The moral orthodoxy of present-day political correctness could only emerge in a society that was formerly Christian. We now have a post-Christian culture that presses for public morality, but without the love and redemptive presence of Christ. In the absence of a dynamic Christian community, the political arena is now the forum in which good and evil are confronted. Opponents see one another in sharply judgmental, morally loaded terms. Spiritual anxiety which was once processed through the benevolent Christian community life now seeks resolution through political discourse and culture wars.

### ***The Cultural Mississippi River of Mainline Christianity Has Dried Up***

The reason our culture has evolved into this “anxious age” is because Mainline Protestant Christianity, which for 300 years has been accepted as the spiritual “Mississippi River” of “our cultural landscape,” has all but disappeared. From its peak in 1965 when over 50% of Americans identified with membership in a mainstream Protestant church, most recent polls show that number is somewhere between 10% and 15%, and still declining. Meanwhile, those who do attend on Sunday have an average age well above the U.S. average. Accompanying this decline is a corresponding advance of incivility within our culture and institutions.

A second compelling analogy employed by Bottum to describe post-Protestant America is that of a three-legged stool, apparently reflecting appreciations expressed by Tocqueville. The three legs, each carrying tensions that dynamically support the others, are participatory *democracy*, liberating free market *capitalism*, and constraining and meaning-providing *religion*. In this equation, Protestantism provided great power because it was not a single, powerful, and therefore vulnerable institution. Rather, the integrity of Protestantism came from it being a chorus, a central cultural consensus coming from a multiplicity of independent religious institutions.

One leg of this three-legged structure has now atrophied. The other two legs struggle to fulfill the missing function so as to keep the national structure in place. The role of religion has been forced upon the ill-equipped legs of democracy and capitalism. A loss of national unity and consensus has become apparent. The question arises: what is to become of our cherished national experiment that has lost its formative structure?

### ***The New Cultural Mainstream***

A final yet central point in Joseph Bottum’s version of the post-Protestant thesis: What has become of the former cultural mainstream, and who forms the new cultural mainstream? He observes that part of Mainstream Protestantism has migrated to the fast growing, conservative Evangelical churches and Catholicism. From these two, a hoped-for new synthesis may have been expected. However, like McLoughlin almost four decades earlier, Bottum concludes that from these recipients of Protestant outflow, a source of “new light” will not emerge to become a source of social consensus. Multiple reasons are provided, the most compelling are that both are remote from the American cultural mainstream – Catholicism because of its symbolically dense and mystical liturgy, and Evangelism because of its narrow, authoritarian, non-universal pathway.

Most of the people of the former Protestant mainstream, and more importantly their children (and grandchildren), have simply stopped being Christian believers. They have not maintained the religious loyalties of their parents, *but they continue to be the mainstream*. They are not religious. However, they have inherited the characteristics of their ancestors, wanting to be good and virtuous people. And, they seek a life of meaning and long for spiritual confidence. Bottum describes them as not being the elite in an economic sense, but rather being the elect in terms of the hold that they retain on the cultural mainstream. Their values are liberal, quite uniform and predictable, and their attitude towards religion is utter disinterest.

### **Mark Tooley**

### ***American Protestant Denominations Are Declining***

Tooley, in “Post Denominational America,”<sup>[30]</sup> concurs that Mainline Protestant churches “began their irreversible membership plunge in the 1960’s.”<sup>[31]</sup> He cites three factors causing this decline:

- The successful entrepreneurship of evangelical Christianity, through radio, television, schools, and independent missions “dethroned” Mainline denominations.
- Mainline denominations were liberalized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became “hostile to populist piety”, thereby alienating large portions of their membership. In the early and mid-2000’s, traditionalists generally left, creating new denominations, joining other denominations, or departed from institutional church life.
- Like all human institutions, and distinct from the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant denominations have a “limited shelf-life.” They were born in a distinct cultural context which has since evolved, leaving Protestant culture in isolation. Furthermore, in its 500-year history, Protestant denominationalism has shown to have its own rhythm of “schism, growth, sclerosis, mergers, decline and death.”<sup>[32]</sup>

Tooley explicitly agrees with both McLoughlin and Bottum that mainstream denominations have been at the heart of American religious culture and civil society. Their decline has “sad” implications for American civil society. “The Mainline Protestant denominations, with the Baptists and a few others, have been the pillars of American religion and for much of American civil society since the beginning of our republic. All successful movements and communities ultimately need multi-generational institutions to sustain and transmit their message.”<sup>[33]</sup>

### ***Decline of Denominations Does Not Herald the End of American Christianity***

As American Protestantism declines, it has entered a post-denominational era. Even within the larger Mainline denominations, particularly the Southern Baptist Convention, individual churches do not strongly identify with their “denominational brand.” Mainline, Pentecostal, and Evangelical believers move freely among congregations. “Many, if not most, non-denominational churches are effectively Baptist in theology and polity, governed congregationally through elders, and practicing believers’ baptism.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Tooley concludes with the thesis that the traditions that birthed Protestant denominations remain strong and relevant. Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, Wesleyanism, and various forms of Baptists will continue and, in some cases, thrive.

### ***American Protestantism is Reorganizing; a New Expression Will Emerge***

Large national church organizations, with celebrity spiritual leaders, embracing subcultures and denominational brand appeal have lost relevance in contemporary American Christianity. Christians don’t look to prominent spiritual leaders for personal and social guidance. They have turned their attention to websites, independent publishers, social media, informal church circles and beyond.

The centrally organized and socially embracing form of Protestantism is passing away. American Christianity will transition and reorganize in ways that best serve life in contemporary America (paraphrase). At present, this seems chaotic and even discouraging. However, “American Christianity has always been entrepreneurial and adaptable.”<sup>[35]</sup> What may look like a decline is more likely a transition. Evolutions and the constant quest for improvement are characteristic of Protestantism (paraphrase). Therefore, “New forms of Christian vibrancy are emerging.”

## **A Synthesis of Perspectives**

### ***A Thesis Now Verified***

Drawing from the unambiguous consensus among the sources covered in this paper, the Post-Protestant Thesis seems to be a thesis no longer. Rather, it appears to be statistically and empirically verified. I have not found a contrary opinion in any of my research and general reading.

The data, in terms of identification, average age, attendance and discipline/practice is conclusive. This verdict is confirmed by my personal experience visiting Protestant churches. In general, they are poorly attended, almost exclusively by adults in the “empty nest” phase of life, and tepid in terms of spiritual power.

There are certainly numerous powerful exceptions at the level of individual churches under exceptionally gifted leadership. I have visited numerous congregations in this category as well. However, the distinctive conclusion is that the “Mississippi River” that was the Mainline Protestant churches, is running dry. Traditional Protestantism is now many decades past its prime, and the trend line continues to point south. It is no wonder therefore that the term “Old-line Protestantism” has come into popular use.<sup>[36]</sup>

### ***False Starts***

Numerous serious attempts have been made over the past six decades to replace Mainline Protestantism and become the new religious mainstream for our country. My conclusion is that they have stumbled for at least two underlying reasons: 1) their own theological and/or eschatological limitations (beliefs), and/or 2) their inability to gain broader cultural traction (leadership, management, organization).

These attempts are “second reformations” devoted to social reform (Hall), liberal Protestantism, perhaps under the umbrella of the NCC (Hall and Bottum), the neo-Evangelical faith (McLoughlin), and the nationalist New Right (Hall). I consider the energetic, promising, highly controversial, yet culturally out of place emergence of the Unification Church movement (1970-1990) to be another important story on this list.

A possibility that has not been adequately explored in this paper is the new Pentecostalism, with its twentieth century origins. It transcends denominations (Protestant and Catholic), is vast and fast growing, rooted in American Protestantism, strong in the American South, interracial from its roots, and world-wide in scope.<sup>[37]</sup> However, Pentecostalism is rather dogmatic and premillennialist. It may not offer the broad, universal source of “new light” which seems to be a requirement for new consensus in our pluralistic religious and cultural landscape. From my reading, Pentecostalism has not been nominated in the literature as a possible source of “new light.”

### ***The End of Social Consensus?***

One can argue whether or not a new “social and cultural consensus” (terminology of McLoughlin) will ever emerge in this post-Protestant era. Perhaps the cultural/ethnic diversity, profound religious pluralism, non-negotiable freedom requirements and the intensity of mass culture in our age all argue against the feasibility of a new consensus. Perhaps those very harsh social and cultural forces are, in fact, consensus killers.

Indeed, John Bottom’s thesis is not merely post-Protestant, but post-religious. He does not anticipate a new religious or reform movement bringing a consensus-inspiring “new light.” He sees our country’s future to now be in the hands of a secular generation that carries on the moral crusade of Christianity while having abandoned Christianity itself.

In that case, democracy will move into the future as a two-legged rather than three-legged stool (see Bottum) and will therefore obviously be in jeopardy. An uncivil, residual post-Christian morality will remain – where good and evil continuously contend within secular culture but in the absence of the Christian ethos of forgiveness, individual dignity, agape love, and the hope of redemption.

By comparison, Mark Tooley appears to be hopeful that, owing to its inherent innovativeness, Protestant Christianity will reassemble itself to become sustainable and healthy. However, he does not expect that a new Christian formulation will be sufficient to beneficially impact civic institutions.

## **The Successor to Mainline Protestantism**

An alternative thesis is that an opportunity exists, derivative of our spiritual vacuum. A “providential imperative” must be fulfilled. When it does, then the established historical pattern of spiritual revival, then cultural awakening, and finally political reform will again unfold.

### ***The Coming of “New Light”***

For America’s “three-legged stool” to be stabilized, a new social consensus must emerge. And, if the past is prologue, the creation of a new social consensus begins with the emergence of some form of spiritual leadership, so called “new lights.” The key ingredient would therefore be revivalists in contemporary form, suitable for the information age - who have new answers, new ways of thinking, showing us the way forward. The formula and style offered by “new lights” must meet the demands of a pluralistic, highly educated, post-denominational religious environment.

In this context, McLoughlin’s writing, though now fifty years old, still seems remarkably relevant and insightful. His answer is “yes”, history teaches us that “new lights” must emerge, though not from Mainline Protestantism. His assertion seems to be that the yet to emerge “new light” must remain consistent with the plumbline of U.S. religious history. At the same time, success will require that it be more universal and less premillennialist than what is most prominently offered by Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity.

The cultural disruption that has taken place in the U.S. since the 1960s is understood to be more fundamental, and therefore the response likely more demanding, than with previous dislocations in our history. This appears to be proven out by the impressive list of “false starts” presented above. And, that list lacks an update of new and rehashed ideological and spiritual currents now flowing through our culture. One has the sense that the emergence of “new light” is a long shot, not only desperately needed but long overdue.

### **General Requirements**

The message of religious leaders who bring “new light” must be spiritually transformative, bringing new answers that have broad contemporary relevance and appeal. Drawing further from this essay, the successor movement to Mainline Protestantism must succeed where others have failed, specifically, overcoming the narrow theological and eschatological confines of traditional Christianity, and being capable of gaining broader social/cultural traction. Finally, the “new light” must build upon and fully resonate with our spiritual inheritance, referred to above as the “plumbline of U.S. religious history.”

In summary, and hoping to avoid being unnecessarily (and inappropriately) analytical, five requirements seem to emerge from this review of the post-Protestant thesis. These requirements describe the general challenges to be met by hopeful successors to Mainline Protestantism in becoming the basis for the future spiritual foundation and therefore cultural consensus in our country. They bear thoughtful consideration by spiritual leaders and movements who feel called upon to fill the vacuum in this post-Protestant era. These requirements are:

1. Transformative spiritual power;
2. Non-dogmatic theology and non-premillennialist eschatology, befitting our pluralistic religious environment;
3. New answers to address contemporary problems, showing a way forward;
4. Ability to create popular traction sufficient to impact culture;
5. Resonance/consistency with the plumbline of 400 years of U.S. religious history.

An important final consideration: John Bottom makes the striking point that Mainline Protestantism succeeded in becoming the basis for the spiritual culture of our country largely because it was made up of a diverse “chorus” of institutions, rather than a single source of religious authority. As a “chorus,” Mainline Protestantism did not need to be infallible, was not threatening, could not be easily vilified, and could be sustained across four centuries. The successor to Mainline Protestantism, that one hopes will emerge as a “providential imperative,” would likely be required to have this same character if it is to succeed in “gaining broad cultural traction.” Accordingly, a sixth requirement may be:

6. An embracing, non-authoritarian style engendering consensus rather than polarization.

### **Relevant Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement**

This concluding section, proposing there are possible scenarios for establishing a new cultural consensus in the United States, is not complete without emphasizing the relevance of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968). The Civil Rights Movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was by far and away the most successful and impactful social movement of the past century. One can readily argue that it met all six of the requirements for lasting spiritual and cultural impact listed above. Furthermore, from the brutal, bloody and hard-fought struggle of the Civil Rights Movement emerged a winning methodology, strategy, and organization approach.<sup>[38]</sup>

Therefore, a follow-on essay, carefully evaluating what can be learned from that struggle is called for. As a sequel to this article, I hope to offer a paper, titled “Seven Lessons from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement” in an upcoming edition of this journal.

### **Notes**

[1] The Mainline Protestant denominations are generally understood to include: American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. It does not include Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Evangelical or Pentecostal Protestantism, and Protestant sectarian churches (Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.).

[2] Thank you to HJI Distinguished Professor of Historical Studies Michael Mickler for his encouragement, guidance, and suggestions in developing this research paper.

[3] Mark Tooley, “Post-Denominational America” in *Juicy Ecumenism*, a blog of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, Washington, D.C., 2023.

[4] Joseph Bottom, “The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America,” article based upon a Bradley Lecture at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., 2014.

[5] Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2105/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>

[6] *Religion Unplugged* is an online journal of The Media Project and a member of the [Institute for Nonprofit News](https://www.institutefor-nonprofitnews.org/). See [Religionunplugged.com](https://religionunplugged.com)

[7] The General Social Survey is produced and published by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

[8] The Cooperative Election Survey, formerly The Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, has been produced at Harvard University since 2006.

[9] <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2021/7/12/why-its-unlikely-us-mainline-protestants-outnumber-evangelicals>. Accessed May 2023.

[10] <https://www.prr.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/> (See Table 1)

[11] Ibid.

[12] Based on data from Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life as presented in Michael Mickler, *Church History II - The American Religious Landscape*, Section IIIB.

[13] Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Second Edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[14] Ahlstrom, p. 8.

[15] Ahlstrom, p. 8.

[16] Ahlstrom, p. 2.

[17] Ahlstrom, p. 3.

[18] Ahlstrom, pp. 12-13.

[19] David D. Hall was Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School until 2008 and presently serves as Bartlett Research Professor.

- [20] The Unification Church Movement was an important participant in this effort, primarily through the nationwide presence of the American Freedom Coalition (AFC).
- [21] The number of U.S. seminarians was 4,900 in 2018 (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops).
- [22] Hall does not assert this, but my view is that, in addition to exclusivist views on salvation, divergent eschatologies among Christian faiths prevent “pluralism” from advancing towards “universalism.” Specifically, those traditions that carry pre-millennial views appear unable to participate in the “Christian Epoch” foreseen in the eschatology of the Divine Principle.
- [23] William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- [24] McLoughlin, p. 179.
- [25] McLoughlin, p. 192.
- [26] McLoughlin, p. 196
- [27] McLoughlin, p. 199
- [28] McLoughlin, p. 211.
- [29] Joseph Bottom, *An Anxious Age: The Post Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Random House, 2014).
- [30] Tooley, “Post Denominational America.”
- [31] Tooley, p. 3
- [32] Tooley, p. 4
- [33] Tooley, p. 3
- [34] Tooley, p. 2
- [35] “Most of today’s denominations emerged from the ferment of the Second Great Awakening or were breakoffs of those denominations in the 19th and 20th centuries. The rise of post-WWII evangelicalism generated a new wave of denominational activity....”
- [36] For instance, see: *The Christian Post*, April 16, 2019. <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/decline-of-old-line-protestantism-is-new-opportunity-for-the-gospel.html>
- [37] A quick review of sources indicates that the number practicing Pentecostals worldwide is between 300 million and 600 million.
- [38] An excellent source for understanding the methodology, strategy and organization of the Civil Rights Movement is John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).