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Is There a Center to American Religious History?
William Vance Trollinger, Jr.
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Over the past few years I have been dealing with a narrow version of this question, as it has applied to the history of Protestantism in the twentieth century. In our book, *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, Douglas Jacobsen and I argued that the two-party model of Protestantism in the United States – conservative vs. liberal, fundamentalist vs. modernist, and so on – does not take into account the remarkable complexity and diversity of the Protestant religious experience in America, and in some sense presents a distorted picture of that reality. There were scholars – including Martin Marty, who generously contributed a dissenting essay to our volume – who felt that we had overstated our brief against the two-party paradigm. More relevant for our purposes this evening, there were a number of reviewers who agreed with our critique of the two-party paradigm, but who also expressed disappointment that we provided only the barest outlines of a new or better metaphor or model to explain twentieth-century Protestantism. While I had not gone into this project thinking that we would end the day with a new interpretive paradigm, I certainly was not surprised by this critique. The very first time I gave a paper on some of our preliminary findings, there was a scholar of U.S. religious history in the audience who squirmed throughout the entirety of my remarks; when I finished, before I had the chance to ask for questions, she blurted out: “I find your argument pretty convincing, but if you can’t give me a new model to replace the old one, how am I supposed to teach my course on the history of American Protestantism?” Well, if we broaden the topic from Protestantism in the United States to religion in the United States, it would seem that, in many ways, this is the issue we are addressing this evening.

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Is there a center to American religious history? Of course, this question grows out of what David Wills has referred to as “the perennial debate that always seems to hold center stage as the Big Issue in the field . . . [that is,] the ongoing quarrel between those who center their stories on the culturally formative role of a dominant Protestantism and those who emphasize the countervailing forces of religious pluralism and toleration.”¹ As I take the question, Is there some sort of center to American religion – dominant Protestantism or otherwise – that enables us to tell *the* story of American religion in a coherent and comprehensive historical narrative? Put another way – and I do think that these two questions are linked – Is the best metaphor to explain the history of American religion one that involves a “center”?

Framed thusly, it seems to me that the answer has to be no. Given the riotous diversity and overwhelming complexity of religion in the United States, I am at a loss to know what sort of “center” would make possible a narrative of American religion as a unified whole. This seems particularly clear when we take seriously regional differences; when we take seriously the “holy trinity” of social history, that is, race, class, and gender; when we get down to religion on the ground, down to local congregations and communities, down to the “lived” religious experience. To put it another way, once one makes a move toward some sort of center that makes possible a “master narrative” of U.S. religious history, the inevitable result is to minimize, exclude, and distort a good portion of the American religious experience. Perhaps it is simply a lack of imagination; perhaps I am one of those historians scored by Harry Stout and Robert Taylor for “swimming alone” in a sea of “particularities.”² But the notion that there is some sort of interpretive center or explanatory paradigm or grand synthesis that explicates all or most of the history of American religion seems an improbable one to me.

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To say this is, of course, is not to deny that there are stories in the history of religion in the United States that are particularly significant. This obviously includes the story of mainline or establishment Protestantism, a story that is important throughout the entire course of American history, but is especially important, as Paul Conkin and others have made abundantly clear, in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. In fact, many of the arguments for a center to American religious history have concentrated on the role of the “Reformed confessions” or “evangelical denomination” in antebellum America.

But once we say that mainline Protestantism is the narrative “center” of American religious history, then the implication is not only that this is the most important story, but also that other stories do not need to be told, or, more likely, that these other stories are to be told essentially in reference to the central story. I am obviously not saying anything new here. Lots of scholars have made similar observations, including Thomas Tweed and his merry band of decenterers, in their important collection of essays, *Retelling U.S. Religious History*. Besides Tweed’s very helpful introduction, what is wonderful about this book is that the essays drive home the point that even a slight shift in perspective allows us to see American religious history in a whole new light. To give but one example, in her essay entitled “Women’s History *Is* American Religious History,” Ann Braude makes the commonsensical and yet radical point that the narrative of American religion would look quite different if we “took as our point of departure [the reality] that women constitute the majority of participants in religious activities and institutions.” Doing so would not only bring into question concepts that have been central elements of the traditionally accepted narrative of religion in America – that is, declension, feminization, secularization – but it would even reveal that the generally accepted classification of religion as “public” and “private” is very much a gendered division.³

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Change the interpretive focus even slightly, and we can get an entirely different historical narrative. The point seems clear: there are many narratives in/of American religious history; these narratives differ, depending on where we are standing and what we are looking at and what questions we are asking; all of these narratives are necessarily contingent, partial, and (in some sense) distortive. Of course we can and should argue about which narratives are the most complete (or, less incomplete), and we can and should argue about which interpretations explain more (or, distort less) about religion in the United States. But if we are going to take seriously the diversity and complexity of American religion, then it is very difficult for me to see how we can come up with some sort of descriptive or analytical center that allows for the telling of a comprehensive, unified narrative.

This is my answer to the question at hand. And yet, having said all of this, I can still hear the voice of the frustrated professor I mentioned in my introduction: “If all this is true, how am I going to teach my course?” That is to say, if there is no master narrative or grand synthesis, what can we say in general terms about religion in the United States?

I will make three brief comments in response. First, it is very important to remember that we are talking about religious communities that are situated here, in the United States. This is both obvious and important. All of these religious communities deal with, respond to, and are shaped by certain historical and social “givens” of the American landscape, including a capitalist economy, the First Amendment and the separation of church and state, slavery and its legacy, the presence of a “civil religion,” and so on. (I won’t take the time to discuss these in any detail – Peter Williams does a very nice job of this in his introduction to the revised edition of *America’s Religions*.) Now, to make this point is not to say that to be situated in the United States is to be cut off from influences from beyond our borders: this certainly was not the case in colonial

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America, and it certainly is not the case today. Nevertheless, the fact is that all religious communities in the United States must respond to the American social and cultural environment, and it is in these responses that we can make certain generalizations about religion in America.

In this regard, I should note that I am just as interested in making the related argument, that one can not talk in any meaningful sense about the history of the United States without fully incorporating the history of American religion. While I do think that historians of American religion have made a good case for religion as an independent variable in U.S. history, and while many college history textbooks do a reasonable job of incorporating religion into their discussion of pre-Civil War America, the fact is that religion often disappears from surveys of twentieth-century America, except in comments related to topics such as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, the election of John F. Kennedy, and the rise of the Religious Right.

Not only do religious communities here in the United States not exist in some sort of bubble outside of the American social environment, but they also do not exist in isolation from each other. Instead, as Catherine Albanese and others have noted, these communities have contact with each other, they “exchange gifts” with each other, they change each other and are changed by each other.⁴ In fact, the boundaries between religious communities are ever-shifting and porous. In one sense, this makes it difficult to make definitive statements about this religious group or that religious group. On the other hand, the various historical narratives overlap and are intertwined with each other – and in many ways it is at these points of overlap and intertwining that we may be able to make general comments about religion in the United States.

All of these intertwining narratives and overlapping groups lead me to my third point. I mentioned at the beginning of my comments the Re-Forming the Center project. One of the most interesting aspects of working on this project was the ongoing debate among conference

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participants as to which metaphor best described twentieth-century American Protestantism. We had all sorts of proposals: Peggy Shriver talked about an archipelago of Protestant islands somehow linked under the water; Randall Balmer talked about Protestant tectonic plates in “creative collision”; Fred Kniss proposed a two-dimensional map of American Protestantism, with modernist-traditionalist and libertarian-communal axes.⁵

But as invigorating as these discussions were we did not, as I mentioned in my introduction, come up with a satisfying explanatory metaphor. And we were talking just about twentieth-century Protestantism. The leap from this to the history of religion in America is enormous. There is no question that, as Stephen Stein and others have persuasively argued, the search for conceptual models, for explanatory metaphors, is terribly important work for historians of American religion.⁶ Having said this, I think we also need to recognize that, given the phenomenal diversity and complexity of the American religious experience, we will probably not come up with a fully satisfying interpretive paradigm. While some may find this distressing, or may consider such sentiments just so much postmodern naysaying, I have to say that I find the state of the field – with the attention to diversity, overlapping narratives, multiple perspectives, the lack of clear boundaries, and the lack of an analytical center – to be exhilarating and in keeping with the messy realities of American religion. Yes, for those of us who are committed to historical narrative, there is good reason to be concerned that we be able to tell a coherent story. But of course, it was not so very long ago that those of us who taught the history of religion in America thought that we were teaching *the* story. Now, however, if we are honest with ourselves, we are painfully aware that in lots of ways we are not getting it exactly right. And if we are honest with our students and our readers, we have to acknowledge that our narratives are, at best, incomplete. From where I sit, this does not seem like such a bad thing.

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¹ Robert A. Orsi, George Marsden, David W. Wills, and Colleen McDannell, “Forum: The Decade Ahead in Scholarship,” *Religion and American Culture*, 3(winter 1993): 16.

² Harry S. Stout and Robert M. Taylor, Jr., “Studies of Religion in American Society: The State of the Art,” in Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32.

³ Ann Braude, “Women’s History *Is* American Religious History,” in Thomas Tweed, ed. *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87-107.

⁴ Catherine Albanese, “Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History,” in Thomas Tweed, ed., *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), esp. 223-26.

⁵ Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., “Conclusion,” in Jacobsen and Trollinger, eds., *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1998), 475; Fred Kniss, “Listening to the Disenfranchised: Toward a Multiparty Conception of American Religion,” in *Re-Forming the Center*, 72-90.

⁶ Stephen J. Stein, “‘Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something *Left to Do*’: Choosing a Textbook for Religion in America,” *Religion and American Culture* 3(summer 1993): 226-27.

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