

Same old slander

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue



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In this world of constant change, one thing remains absolutely predictable: the *Wall Street Journal* will never miss an opportunity to bash mainline Protestant churches. The paper has regularly printed harsh critiques of progressive churches and ecumenical organizations. Particularly mean-spirited have been its attacks on the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches—full of half truths and innuendo, forcing clergy to explain to their congregations what those organizations actually are and do. The newspaper's editors seem to find particular joy in the challenges facing Episcopalians and Presbyterians.

Why this consistent, persistent hostility? Is it because progressive churches have kept alive the truth that the gospel of Jesus Christ has social, economic and political implications that often challenge the profound individualism of the *Journal*? Is it that followers of Jesus Christ, in gratitude for their individual salvation, often get together in these churches with other followers to try to make the world a little more reflective of the biblical view of peace and justice?

Many theological conservatives have now embraced mainline Protestants' concern for gender equality, for protecting the environment and for reducing the widening gap between rich and poor. Evangelical preachers are now reminding people that Jesus talked a lot more about poverty than he did about sex. Evangelical churches

are now including issues of peace and justice in their mission. But not the Wall Street Journal. Instead, the paper continues to repeat the same old worn-out complaints.

So it is that a *Journal* book review (July 5) turns into yet another attack. To review Elesa J. Coffman's book *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (reviewed in the May 9 *Century* by David Hollinger), the *Journal* called on Barton Swaim. Coffman's thesis is that the *Christian Century* was a voice, conscience and unifying force for mainline denominations in the early and mid-20th century.

In Swaim's account of mainline history, Harry Emerson Fosdick is referred to simply as "the anti-fundamentalist preacher," as if that is all Fosdick ever was. Swaim is particularly harsh and unfair to Charles Clayton Morrison, the *Century's* founder and editor from 1908 to his retirement in 1948. Swaim refers to Morrison's "characteristic pomposity" and somehow finds offensive Morrison's goal of influencing the "best minds in the church" in hopes that "they will in turn influence the laity." How that goal is pompous eludes me. It sounds like a pretty good idea—in fact, it sounds like a definition of theological education.

Swaim dismisses outright what he calls mainline Protestant leaders' "high-flown argumentation about social justice and political positions that were unpopular, manifestly ridiculous, or both." He illustrates this claim by citing Morrison's and the *Century's* support for Prohibition—a cause backed by almost all Protestant leaders of the early 20th century.

Swaim reveals his real intent when he chides Coffman for "treating her subject too delicately, with a young scholar's reluctance to draw broad conclusions. So allow me."

The rest of Swaim's essay rehashes the old line that the mainline churches are declining numerically because their leaders embraced unpopular and radical positions. Does he mean positions in favor of racial equality or in favor of dialogue with communist China? Does Swaim have in mind the concern for stewarding God's good creation? Does he believe that these issues are not morally and theologically important? Or is it that these positions have collided with adamant individualism and conservative politics?

The low point of the review is when Swaim accuses the *Century* editors—and Martin E. Marty in particular—of "dirty tricks" in pursuing their criticism of Billy Graham in

the 1950s. Coffman reports merely that the editors were suspicious of Graham's finances and tried to investigate them.

Swaim ends by unloading on mainline church leaders for denying the authority of scripture and telling people that one cannot know that God exists. He either doesn't know or prefers to ignore the traditional theological conversation about what it means to "know" God: we cannot know God exists in the same way that we know a table and chair exist. The best theologians through the ages have reminded us that God is not an object to be observed in the same way we observe other objects. Rather, God is the source and ground of existence.

The numerical decline of the mainline churches is a complex topic, which deserves serious study and discussion. Swaim says nothing new or helpful. But then, as he tells us, that was never his intent.