

Us liberals

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A reevaluation of liberal Protestantism and its real but sometimes overstated decline is being conducted by American historians like David Hollinger (whose work has been featured in the *Century*), Elesa Coffman and Matthew Hedstrom (whose book on liberal religion is reviewed [here](#)). The scholarly discussion merited an article last month in the *New York Times*.

The primary question is posed by Hollinger: Did liberal (or “mainline”) Protestants of the mid 20th-century win the culture war of their era against conservatives and fundamentalists even as their own membership numbers began to decline? Did liberal religious ideas of tolerance, social justice, racial equality, interfaith dialogue and interdenominational cooperation triumph at the cost of eroding liberal Christian institutions? It’s a fascinating question, and one that raises at once the complicated question of how winning and losing is to be defined.

What often gets lost in discussions of winners and losers, however, is just how much both liberal and conservative Protestants have changed internally over the past 60 years in response to each other and in response to larger cultural and intellectual shifts. The same labels get used, but the products beneath the labels have shifted.

Many liberal Protestant leaders of the current era are self-consciously postmodern, localist and communitarian in sympathy. They are happy to talk about church as their primary community and about the Bible as a fundamental narrative. Energized by liturgy and enamored of ancient spiritual practices, these liberal Protestants are

different from liberals of the early 20th century, who were self-consciously modernist, globally minded, confident that the social sciences were the handmaidens of theology and a new world order. Liberals of this earlier era were famously indifferent to church, sacrament and tradition, but that's no longer true of liberals—quite the opposite. At the *Century*, we sometimes have to call an informal moratorium on publishing yet another article on silent prayer, monastic spirituality or eucharistic theology or celebrating the communitarian philosophy of Wendell Berry.

Meanwhile, evangelical leaders today tend to be globally minded social reformers, committed to the integration of faith and higher learning—quite different from the insular and defensive evangelicals of midcentury. Indeed, in important ways today's evangelical leaders resemble the liberal leaders of midcentury.

According to Alasdair MacIntyre's oft-cited definition, a tradition is "an argument extended through time" about how the goods and values of that tradition are best understood and defended. Over the past few decades, liberal Protestants have not abandoned key features of their tradition—such as a commitment to social justice, to the historical-critical study of the Bible, and to a self-critical dialogue with nonbelievers and believers of other faiths—but they have engaged in a lively argument over how such commitments can best be deepened, preserved and faithfully extended.

Which is simply to say that liberal Protestantism is a tradition, not a static set of beliefs. Whatever the historians may conclude, it is a tradition that is full of life.