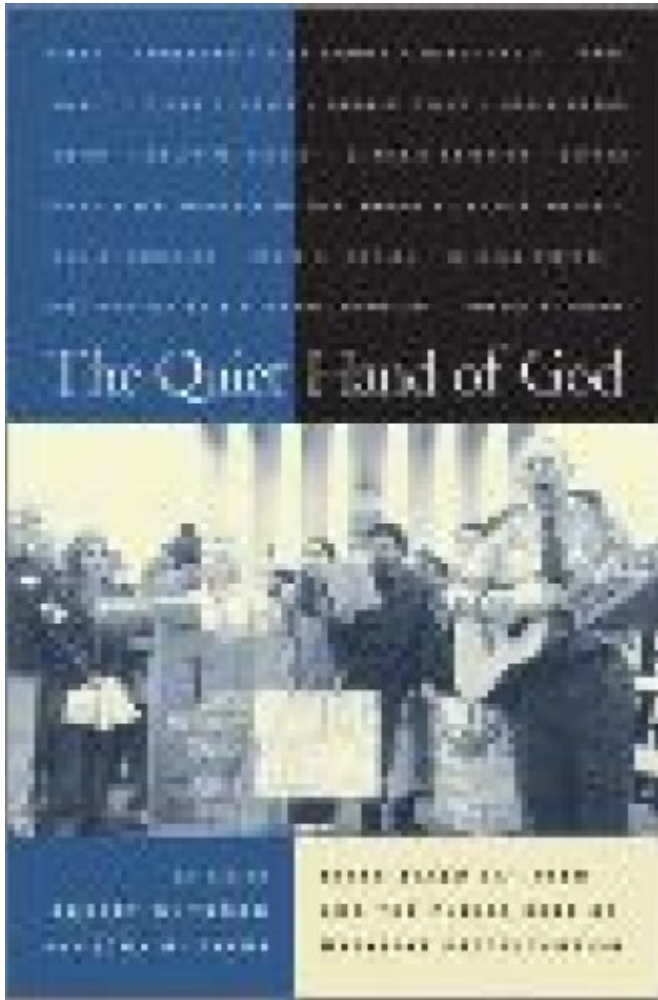


Let's argue

By [Alan Wolfe](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

In Review



The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism

Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, eds.
University of California Press

Despite the size and historic importance of mainline churches, say sociologists Robert Wuthnow and John Evans, “their activities and the ways in which they seek to influence public policy are poorly understood.” Compared to the noisy political activity of conservatives and evangelicals, that of quieter mainline Protestants can indeed be overlooked. Wuthnow and Evans have assembled a group of scholars with the aim of giving attention to mainline Christians’ ways of doing politics.

One reason mainline churches are neglected is because of the widespread perception that their ranks are rapidly depleting. Are they? Wuthnow and Evans are skeptical. Though membership in mainline denominations is not increasing, neither is it decreasing, they contend. And the members of mainline churches do not suffer from an inferiority complex, since most of them believe that their churches are growing.

Yet not everyone agrees with Wuthnow and Evans’s assessment, including other contributors to this volume. University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox calls the drop-off in membership between 1965 and 1990 “dramatic” and points out that some denominations have lost fully one-third of their adherents.

This debate matters. If one concludes that mainline churches are not losing their appeal, there is no reason seriously to question whether they ought to change the ways they have been carrying out their mission. But if one believes that they face a serious membership crisis, one is more likely to ask whether they need to engage in critical self-reflection. Among those aspects of mainline Protestantism that then would be especially subject to analysis is the way its churches involve themselves in politics. There is a strong sense among both social scientists and the general public that the leadership of mainline Protestantism has become far more liberal than the membership.

Because it focuses specifically on the political activities of mainline Protestants, *The Quiet Hand of God* makes an important contribution to this debate, albeit in often unintended ways. A number of the contributors believe that mainline churches are obliged to pursue a certain political agenda no matter how unpopular that agenda may be or how uncomfortable it may make mainline worshipers.

Bradford Verter, a visiting professor of religion and culture at Williams College, provides the clearest example of such unabashed political advocacy. In his view, mainline commitments to abolishing racism are suspect because they are half-

hearted and more rhetorical than substantive. As evidence, he cites the fate of Project Equality, which he describes as “an interfaith advocacy group that has for more than 25 years served as the mainline’s most important agent for the promotion of affirmative action.”

Project Equality certifies vendors who commit themselves to equal-opportunity hiring practices, and it is a major sponsor of diversity training. It was also involved in one of the most publicized efforts to promote racial justice: Jesse Jackson’s campaign to encourage Texaco to reform racist practices that had been brought to light when internal conversations were made public. Project Equality has fallen on hard times in recent years, which Verter takes as a sign of the mainline’s less than full commitment to the cause of racial justice.

Yet there is little mystery about why the activities of Project Equality have slowed. As a result of the general membership decline among mainline denominations, fewer funds are available for such efforts. Verter never asks whether some members might have left because they oppose the political activism associated with Project Equality, yet there is reason to believe that some have. As Verter himself points out, the individualism that lies at the heart of Protestant theology may be incompatible with the group-based claims of affirmative action. As many as 75 percent of mainline Presbyterians oppose preferential hiring, and this may be as much due to ideas inherited from Martin Luther, John Calvin or John Locke as to members’ alleged racism.

Efforts like Jackson’s are seen by many Americans as thinly disguised forms of extortion, in which Jackson obtains symbolic payments from companies in return for his promise to leave them alone. (Jackson has also faced enough questions about his financial and sexual ethics to make one wonder whether he deserves church support.) “African-Americans are tired of apologies and promises of reconciliation,” Verter writes, as if the only obligation of mainline believers is to give activists for racial equality everything for which they ask. Given the complexities of racial politics in America, denominations that attempt to do so will decline even further.

Verter is not the only contributor who takes left-wing political activism as a given for mainline churches. Michael Moody, who teaches sociology at Boston University, writes that he comes not to celebrate mainline environmental activism but to “chronicle” it. Yet celebrate it he does, despite the fact that Christianity has deep roots in anthropocentric thought. (It does not seem unreasonable to believe, as

many Christians throughout history have, that God has a special relationship with human beings because of all God's creatures they are the only ones who use their minds to honor him.) There are many reasons for churches to work on behalf of the environment, but Moody's chapter does little to challenge the view of skeptics who believe that environmental activism came first and that religious justifications for it were found afterwards, rather than the other way around.

America is a democratic society proclaiming its faith in its people. Churches in America are under no obligation to be democratic, but if they stray too far from public opinion they undermine their numerical strength and thereby undercut the very political influence they seek. Like other Baptists, Derek Davis, who directs the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University, advocates a strong wall of separation between church and state. Such positions are not all that popular in America, however. Davis points out that many Protestant clergy are "backing off positions concerning school prayer, school vouchers, and others," even in denominations with strong historic commitments to the principle of church-state separation. For him, this is evidence of the failure of Protestants to remain true to their principles. Yet Davis does not consider the huge cost of the alternative—of Protestant clergy holding fast to positions their congregants no longer support.

There are, furthermore, strong moral reasons why clergy might question a too strict church-state separation. Consider the case of school vouchers, which, on church-state grounds, Davis opposes. The strongest supporters of school vouchers are inner-city parents desperate for a better education for their children. Should Protestant clergy stand on principle and tell them that they cannot expect this help because the Constitution prohibits it? Or should they support any reasonable responses to heartfelt appeals for help? There is no easy answer. We ought to reject the view that commitment to abstract principles always takes priority over the real-world dilemmas faced by ordinary people.

No other issue has divided mainline believers more than has homosexuality. In contrast to the agenda-driven chapters by Verter, Moody and Davis, Wendy Cadge's exploration of the controversies over gay rights is a model of balance and clarity. Nowhere does Cadge take the position that homosexuality represents sinful conduct that has no place in mainline religion. But neither does she argue that mainline churches must accord homosexuals full membership rights and full access to ordination. As she reviews the history of this issue, Cadge is more impressed by the way the debate has taken place than by how it has been resolved. (As she points

out, it indeed has not yet been resolved.) In a society that provides few venues for debate over emotionally charged issues—or at least venues in which sound-bites and verbal attacks can be avoided—churches have provided an important public service in making themselves available as arenas for disagreement. Cadge encourages mainline denominations to recognize that even divisive issues provide opportunities for enlightenment and reconciliation.

Because he acknowledges the serious membership declines among mainline Protestants, Bradford Wilcox also delves more deeply into the consequences of political activism than do most of the others assembled in this book. Wilcox's subject is the family, which like homosexuality is a contentious issue for many mainline congregations and denominations. Should churches, in the name of social justice, support movements of personal liberation, even if such movements result in rising divorce rates or more children being raised in single-parent households? Or should churches, in the name of morality, encourage strong family values, even if the defense of family values is often associated with conservatives and the Religious Right?

Wilcox presents fascinating material demonstrating that these need not be either-or questions. While the leaders of many mainline churches proclaim what Wilcox calls an “expressive liberalism” committed to individual fulfillment, their church practices reinforce what he calls “progressive familism,” or efforts to support and strengthen ordinary nuclear families along egalitarian lines. Like Wendy Cadge, Wilcox provides a hopeful reading of the mainline Protestant condition; despite all the publicity given to extreme left-wing views among mainliners, their actual practices are centrist and sensible.

The important question raised by all these chapters is, “What are the most appropriate and effective forms for political engagement among mainline Protestants?” Verter has no doubt about how that question should be answered; he calls on churches to reject “reactive roles” in favor of “prophetic” ones. Churches, he believes, have to do what is right, and since racial justice is good and racism is bad their course is clear, even if following it makes churches take increasingly unpopular positions.

But there is another answer to that question, an answer that grows out of some of the important shifts that mainline Protestantism has undergone in the past half century. Sociologists Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks show that mainliners, who once

could be identified by the label “liberal Republican,” now divide their votes between the political parties roughly as other Americans do. Whatever the views of denominational leaders and clergy, mainline Protestants cluster toward the center and therefore become an important swing vote in the increasingly partisan and tendentious conflict between liberals and conservatives that dominates American politics.

If Manza and Brooks are correct, as I believe they are, prophecy is the wrong direction to take. Instead, mainline churches ought to play the role in American politics that debates over homosexuality have played within mainline Protestantism. Occupying the middle of the spectrum, mainline believers can bridge the gap between secular liberals on the one side, who share their politics but not their faith, and caring but conservative religious believers on the other, who share their faith but not their politics. “Mainline churches have learned, at least thus far, how to disagree without dividing,” Wendy Cadge writes of the internal debates over homosexuality. If they can help the entire country to learn this, they will perform an invaluable service.