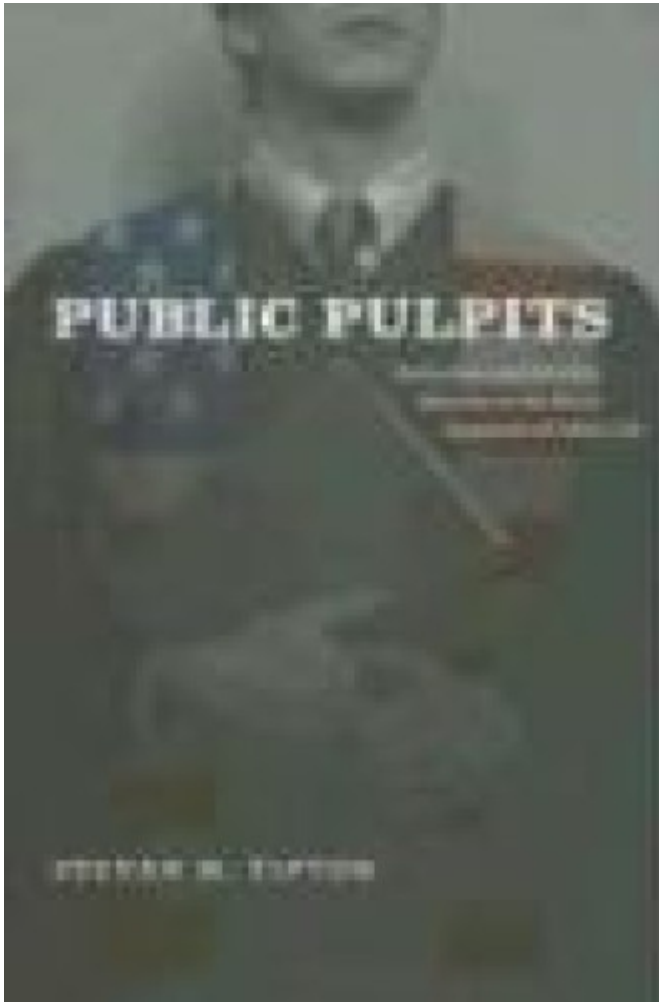


Public pews

By [Charles T. Mathewes](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Public Pulpits: Methodists and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life

Steven M. Tipton
University of Chicago Press

For the past four decades the mainline Protestant churches have been working hard to shape public discourse and national policy through their Washington offices. These offices lobby for legislation that their denominations care about and attempt to offer a religious voice on public policy matters inside the D.C. world. Despite what Steven Tipton calls their “persistent efforts,” they have received “spotty results,” and that’s putting it mildly.

From 1968 to at least 2004, American society has gradually liberalized, while American politics has grown ever more conservative. At the same time, the public image of the mainline churches has changed from one of something close to the establishment to that of a bunch of hapless naifs who are bleeding money and members almost as fast as conservative churches are gaining them. This assessment is not entirely fair, but it’s truer than those of us in the mainline want to admit.

Despite the mainline’s decline over the past few decades, its denominations remain among the most populous and richest institutions in a nation rich with institutions, and its leaders exhibit real thoughtfulness. The so-called religious right may in some counts have more members, but they are divided among thousands of congregations and associations without much orchestrating superstructure. The mainline denominations have significant strengths in potential organization and scale that conservative Christian associations lack.

Why has it been hard, then, for mainline institutions to affect public life? “How,” Tipton asks, “can the mainline Protestant churches invigorate their social witness and public advocacy in America today?” To answer the latter question is the aim of Tipton’s book *Public Pulpits*, but it is a promise only partially fulfilled.

Tipton teaches sociology at Emory University, and we can be grateful that a sociologist is tackling this important question, for much of the best theology today is done by sociologists. By and large, the interests of academic theologians such as myself are determined by the fleeting fashions of our field more than by any vivid concern with the lived lives of churches, so we float ever further into abstractions and esoterica. If you want to learn about Augustinian epistemology, liberationist Christian anti-imperialism or orthodox Syriac pneumatology, then theologians like me should be on your speed dial. But if you want to know anything about the spiritual life of teenagers or congregations in conflict or how churches can raise up

their members in the faith, you're best off turning to sociologists.

Tipton's study proves my point. It tells the story of the "institutional ecology" of the public sphere in which the denominations operate: In the 1960s and 1970s the mainline churches' leadership moved from a centrist or mildly conservative position to a frankly progressive one, while their congregations were far more mixed. The institutional consolidation of a progressive agenda was secure by 1980; one sign of this was the emergence then of parachurch groups—such as the Institute on Religion and Democracy—that protested the consolidation. These groups complained about the "leftist" and "Marxist" captivity of the mainline leadership and initially seemed interested in offering the laity a big-tent alternative to the official line of the churches, purportedly to preserve the traditional faith against the elite's woolly liberationism. But by the 1990s these parachurch groups had begun to focus their efforts on simply attacking the other side. While members of the official church hierarchies didn't fixate so totally on their enemies, they became ever more resistant to ceding them any intellectual or theoretical ground. This polarization left the vast middle underserved. And that is our condition today.

Tipton teaches two important lessons. First, he notes that today we have a "more diversified public square, crowded by a greater array of moral advocates" and institutional actors than ever before, not the least of which is a tremendously expanded state. The public square is more dense as well as more diversified; today's institutional ecology includes thousands of single-issue lobbies as well as vast national and sometimes international associations that are, in social scientist Theda Skocpol's phrase, "advocates without members"—groups like Greenpeace and the National Rifle Association that take supporters' checks but ask little else from them. Such groups are far more easily guided and have far clearer goals than mainline churches; the mainline churches are antediluvian holdovers in this era—bulky, shambling, incoherent mobs of people, as dysfunctional as any family, arguing as much with one another as with anyone else. Compare the churches to the Botoxed, Prozaced, spray-tanned, expensively suited and well-funded lobbyists who hawk their one-track messages all over D.C., and you'll see part of the problem with the church's presence in the public policy world.

The second thing Tipton notes is the way in which Freud's famous "narcissism of minor differences" operates among and within these church groups. There's a great, possibly apocryphal story about a young U.S. Army officer who was stationed at the Pentagon in the 1950s. On his first day, he reported to his superior, a general in a

palatial office. “Son,” said the general, “do you know who our enemy is?” “Of course, sir,” the bright young man replied: “The Russians.” “No,” replied the general, leaning forward, “the Russians are our adversary. Our enemy,” he said, “is the air force.” So it is, I guess, with all institutions: they have their own logic, and over time they realign themselves in order to fight for resources with other institutions that exist in the same ecology. The humans who think they govern them are as likely to be governed by them, whether they recognize it or not.

Tipton’s interviews with members of the Washington offices of several mainline churches and with other church administrators reveal this dysfunction. The tensions between the denominational Washington offices and the National Council of Churches over the Clinton administration’s health-care policy proposals in 1994, for example, seemed to be rooted not only in different philosophical approaches toward policy matters—more pragmatic for the NCC, more uncompromising for the denominational offices—but also in petty jealousies and conflicting egos among the participants involved. The cattiness and pettiness revealed there made me feel at the time as though I were listening to one family member bad-mouth another behind the other’s back in the kitchen on Thanksgiving. Our dysfunctionality goes all the way down, in the mainline not less than in other institutions, and Tipton’s frank reporting on it is merciless without being malicious.

Despite these helpful lessons, I had several frustrations with this book. First, Tipton tells his story without engaging the work of fellow scholars who are addressing the same issues. Robert Wuthnow, José Casanova, James Davison Hunter, Alan Wolfe and Nancy Ammerman are major figures in the sociology of religion who barely appear in Tipton’s book. I’m not asking for deferential footnoting but for substantive engagement. For example, one clearly relevant position is Wuthnow’s “restructuring” argument—the contention that today denominational differences are insignificant compared to differences between traditionalist and progressive camps within each denomination. And Casanova’s work on how the churches are forced to become denominations in the age of the modern nation-state would have enriched Tipton’s story immensely.

The lack of engagement with others’ work reflects the book’s lack of theoretical ambition. I finished it asking large questions: What caused this large-scale transformation of what we can call the ideological ecology of public religion? What are the prospects that churches can do better? Tipton doesn’t offer answers to these questions.

The most basic problem with the book is the lack of a unitary authorial voice. At 423 pages of text other than appendix and endnotes, the book requires a strong narrative line to be readable, but Tipton fails to provide one. The volume is a tapestry of multiple voices—a rich tapestry, but without an argumentative thread. This is more a methodological failing than a stylistic one: in writing a descriptive sociology, Tipton aimed to gather as much evidence as possible and then let the evidence speak for itself. The problem with this is that no evidence ever speaks clearly. Sharp analysis must be used to discern just what the evidence reveals; otherwise you just have an unwieldy mass of data.

In Jorge Luis Borges's story "On Rigor in Science," a national academy of scholars, in the name of precision, produces a map that is proportioned one to one—so that a mile on the earth is represented by a mile on the map, and the map will perfectly cover the whole terrain it is meant to model. Borges meant the parody as a warning, but some sociologists, Tipton among them, seem to think that level of precision an ideal.

Tipton's argumentative chastity means that he cannot engage two other problems that he identifies: one involving the tactics of the D.C. groups, the other involving their strategy. First, tactically all these groups—the denominational groups on the left and their free-standing opponents on the right—are way too morally perfectionistic and self-righteous. No self-critical voice is audible; listening to the advocates on both sides, one has the impression that they think no decent moral person could oppose them. They see the issues they engage as morally unambiguous. "The mainline churches embrace a recognizable public discourse of justice and love," Tipton says, and that certainly represents what the folks in the D.C. offices want to believe, but they seem to believe that justice is what Reinhold Niebuhr used to call a "simple possibility." When things turn out to be more difficult and complicated than that, they recoil back into a cynicism about politics that leads them to say that they would rather witness than win. And those on the right are just as smug about their purported orthodoxy. Both sides are badly in need of a Niebuhr.

Second, the book provokes concerns about the soundness of the strategy that these groups assume and that Tipton accepts: giving the pulpit the fundamental public role of speaking to society at large by engaging in jeremiads. This strategy is based on a misunderstanding of the effectiveness of the religious right. It wasn't because Jerry Falwell was a prophet that Karl Rove took him seriously, it was because Falwell had an audience who took him seriously that Rove did too. To imagine that a few

people in Washington, D.C., who represent themselves as speaking for all Methodists (when everyone knows that they don't) are the church's public face—this is delusional.

Tipton's basic question—"How can the mainline Protestant churches invigorate their social witness and public advocacy in America today?"—presumes that mainline Protestant churches exist. They do not, at least not in the sense that the vigorous religious right, however it is defined, exists. Sure, there are institutions and employees; and sure, there are parishioners and steeples. But membership in a mainline Protestant church is as distinctive a marker of one's identity in this society as wearing pants is—which is to say, it is no marker at all. If there is no distinct profile of believers, then, as Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland, there's no *there* there. Church leaders can expound on the great blessing that diversity is to the churches, and that's true (though often overstated), but it's beside the point. Diversity would be great if the people in a congregation had something in common apart from a loose habit of showing up on Sunday mornings for some songs and bad coffee. The question to ask here is not how we can organize these voices for public change, but a rather more basic one: Can these bones live?

I've been hearing expressed longings for the mainline's political mobilization for almost 20 years now, and I confess that I think the whole project is fundamentally misbegotten. Whatever you think of the religious right—really, evangelical churches—you must admire the seriousness with which they have gone about the hard task of institution building, from the ground up, since the 1970s. And the expansion of the evangelical political agenda—the big story in religion and politics since 2006—has nothing to do with the mainline. No similar activity seems to be in the offing for mainline churches; from what I can tell as a mainliner myself, they just aren't very serious about making serious believers—a prerequisite for serious political formation based on religious belief.

Churches are mistaken if they think their main public job is anything other than teaching their laity. The public pulpits are within the churches, first and foremost. This is not a conservative message—the great modern theorists of it are the liberation theologian Ivan Illich and the atheist Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Nor is it a new message: anyone who has read Augustine's sermons knows how seriously he took the task of training Christian laity. Children's education and adult education may seem boring to seminary professors, but that's where the heart of theology is, and where the heart of public theology is too. It is a matter not of speaking truth to

power but of speaking truth to five-year-olds. The city of God needs citizens, and the mainline doesn't provide them now. What we need are not public pulpits but public pews.