

How American Protestant missionaries helped usher in post-Protestant America

David Hollinger shows how the social gospel principles that drove mission abroad boomeranged back home.

by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Protestants Abroad

How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America

By David A. Hollinger

Princeton University Press

In an essay titled “The United States of Lyncherdom” (1901), Mark Twain, in his familiar half-serious fashion, offered up a plan to put an end to American racial violence. “Let us import American missionaries from China, and send them into the lynching field,” he slyly advised.

We implore them to come back and help us in our need. Patriotism imposes this duty on them. . . . They have the martyr spirit; nothing but a martyr spirit can brave a lynching mob, and cow it and scatter it. They can save their country, we beseech them to come home and do it. . . . O kind missionary, O compassionate missionary, leave China! come home and convert these Christians.

Twain’s impolitic essay went unpublished until 1923, several years after his death, and at that time his proposal seemed but a hard-edged jest. But, David Hollinger’s new book suggests, it was prescient.

As Hollinger notes, by the end of World War II, commentators such as Congregationalist leader Buell Gallagher were observing that the “gospel of inclusive brotherhood” that missionaries preached abroad had begun to return home like a boomerang to “smite the imperialism of white nations, as well as to confound the churches.” Many missionaries and their families who had been assigned a key role in converting the benighted darker races to Western ways had instead gained abroad an appreciation for cultural diversity and had come back to the United States to challenge “cultural imperialism and arrogant paternalism” and play a leading role in contesting white Protestant hegemony. Hollinger charts the intriguing flight of this boomerang.

No one has done more than Hollinger to put mainline American Protestantism on the map of 20th-century American cultural and intellectual history, and this book adds an important chapter to that impressive legacy. As evangelicals and fundamentalists (and, to a lesser extent, Jews and Catholics) have lately threatened to take up all the oxygen in the room, Hollinger has insisted—as he put it in his 2013 book, *After*

Cloven Tongues of Fire—that we remember

prior to 1960, if you were in charge of something big and had opportunities to influence the direction of society, chances are you grew up in a white Protestant milieu. And most likely you were affiliated at least nominally with one of the “mainline” churches, of which Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Northern Baptists, and Disciples of Christ were prominent, along with several Lutheran and Reformed bodies and a smattering of smaller confessions.

Grateful as mainline Protestants might be for this reminder of their onetime significance, Hollinger’s careful and respectful attention to their history comes at a price. As he sees it, their greatest importance in the 20th century is to be found in the effects of a contradictory, potentially self-annulling belief system.

Hollinger sets the history of American liberal Protestantism within the context of what Richard Niebuhr termed “the problem of Christ and culture.” The story he tells is of believers aiming to be at once religiously Christian and culturally modern and, in particular, struggling to reconcile their Christian beliefs with the hegemony of scientific inquiry (broadly construed) over the realm of “cognitive plausibility.”

Hollinger, himself an unabashed “free thinker,” leaves little doubt that he believes that this struggle is bound to be frustrated. Responsible inquiry can warrant no particularly Christian truth claims that Christians can make, he argues, and hence either their Christianity or their modernity must be compromised or sacrificed. They must opt either for an intellectually dubious “Christian survivalism” or put their unwarranted religious beliefs behind them, as Hollinger, raised in a liberal Protestant household, has himself done. Not surprisingly, he finds the latter path far more promising. This suicide of many Christian “ecumenicals” as Christians, their steady march toward a secular “post-Protestantism,” is not for Hollinger tragic nor merely ironic. It is a triumph, for them and for American society and culture generally.

That said, Hollinger does empathize with the difficulties and the pain that the tensions between Christ and culture have engendered for mainline Protestants. He has been tough on figures such as William James and Reinhold Niebuhr for the shoddy reasoning and sometimes desperate stratagems by which they attempted to erase or at least ease the conflicts between faith and scientific truth, but he has endowed their efforts with a certain nobility nonetheless. And he is fully appreciative

of the robust social gospel that mainline church leaders built for their congregants, which placed those leaders (if not necessarily a majority of those congregants) at the cutting edge of battles for social justice, especially civil rights, in the years following World War II.

The egalitarian ethical project of this social gospel has enjoyed considerable success in the late 20th century, while mainline Protestants have lost demographic ground on the one hand to secular political allies (including their children and grandchildren) who do not feel the need to search for a cognitively plausible Christ to buttress shared values, and on the other hand to evangelical political adversaries who are quite content with a cognitively implausible Christ and a different set of values.

Hollinger commends ecumenical Christians for bending a knee to modernity and serving the nation well, even as they have suffered defeat on the organizational front to evangelicals and failed to put their children in the pews. Still, Hollinger's relationship with liberal Christian survivalists who find a *post-Protestant* identity much less appealing than he does has, on his own account, been unsurprisingly testy at times—particularly when they have pressed for a return to influence in his own sanctuary, the secular American research university.

Hollinger sets his narrative of the course of mainline Protestant missionary activity since the 1930s firmly within this interpretative framework. He hinted at the significance of missionaries for his understanding of liberal Protestantism and post-Protestantism generally in earlier writings. In *Protestants Abroad*, he makes that case in full detail.

The missionary project had a transformative effect on American culture.

On the face of it, the notion that missionaries contributed significantly to the growth of secular post-Protestantism seems counterintuitive. No one, one would think, would have been more immune to doubts about the absolute and superior truth of Christian beliefs than those who devoted their lives to converting nonbelievers to those beliefs. Surely, missionaries were the most unbendingly certain of Christians.

Well, no, Hollinger demonstrates. To be sure, at the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 delegates adopted as their watchword a commitment to “the evangelization of the world in this generation,” promising, as one Presbyterian missionary had put it in 1893, to offer to non-Christians “the steel hand of truth encased in the velvet glove of love.”

But already by the 1920s a dissenting element in the American missionary community was calling this project into question. Howard Bliss, the president of the American University in Beirut, reported in 1920 that he and his faculty did not believe “that Christianity is the sole channel through which divine and saving truth has been conveyed.” The year 1925 alone witnessed the publication of books by six prominent missionaries—Frank Rawlinson, Daniel J. Fleming, E. Stanley Jones, Frank C. Laubach, A. K. Reischauer, and Mary Scheffler Platt—who attacked the paternalist presumptions of missionary preaching, expressed deep respect for the cultures and religions of the non-Western world, and placed humanitarian service above evangelization. As Jones put it in the most widely read of these volumes, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, “We want the East to keep its own soul.”

This dissent culminated in the publication in 1932 of an explosive report of a commission conceived by the leader of the Protestant missionary effort, John R. Mott, underwritten by John D. Rockefeller Jr., and largely written by Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking. *Re-Thinking Missions*, or the “Hocking Report” as it came to be known, argued that “educational and other philanthropic” effort, rather than preaching and conversion, should be placed at the heart of the missionary enterprise. The missionary should be “a learner and a co-worker,” conveying the Christian way of life by quiet example and not by proselytizing. The aim of missionary work was a shared moral community with people of non-Christian faith, not the evangelizing of the world.

The report was unsurprisingly denounced by fundamentalists such as J. Gresham Machen, who, as Hollinger says, “had no doubt that the gospel had to be preached unapologetically to the multitudes all over the world, no matter what their inherited faith.” Liberal Christians handled the report gingerly, shocked themselves by its “diminution of Christianity’s uniqueness.” Important missionary theorists such as Edmund Soper insisted in the 1940s that one could affirm the uniqueness of Christianity without implying that “God has not made himself known in other ways in other religions.” Continuity with other faiths and Christian uniqueness were not incompatible. In his view, as Hollinger wryly puts it, “divine substance was widely distributed. But Christians have more of it.”

This compromise was anathema to fundamentalists and many other conservative Christians, who were convinced that the whole of divine substance resided in Christianity. Having appropriated the “evangelical” label solely for themselves in the 1940s, they aggressively wrenched the missionary project, which they conceived in

the Edinburgh spirit, out of the increasingly weak grip of ecumenical hands. By 1980, 90 percent of foreign missionaries from North America served under such evangelical auspices.

Hollinger argues that historians have underplayed the significance of the Hocking Report, for despite the best efforts of liberal Christians to soft pedal its radicalism, it forecast the drift of mainline Protestant thinking over the next half century and the collapse of the mainline missionary project. Ecumenical Protestants found it increasingly difficult thereafter, he observes, to say what exactly Christianity brought to the missionary table that could not be found just as well in secular humanitarianism—as evangelicals and secularists alike never tired of pointing out.

Admirably calling for “a moral community extending to all human beings,” Protestant liberals were hard-pressed to explain how such a universalist ambition “that claimed empathetic engagement with a great range of human cultures” could march under the banner of one particular faith among others. “The missionary project, and its ecumenical follow-up endeavors, adopted a thinner and thinner conception of Christianity while using Christianity as a container for a vision of what it meant to be human.” Christian liberals “asked Christianity to be open enough to serve as a stand-in for a species-wide ‘we,’ and closed enough to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians. The tension between the universal and the particular was crushing.” More and more ecumenical leaders leaned toward the universal. “The drive to include became all the more powerful, and the character of just what it was into which a diverse population was being welcomed became more elusive.”

But the mainline Protestant missionary project was not eclipsed before it had exercised significant boomerang effects at home beginning in the 1940s. Some of these were non-starters. As they downplayed evangelism and thinned out the particularism of their Christianity abroad, the liberal missionary community began to question denominational divides. Often vigorously cross-denominational in their efforts overseas and willing even at times to engage in cartel-like divisions of foreign territory, missionaries forged something of an informal “Protestant International.” Consequently, they were eager to advance denominational mergers in the United States, hoping even eventually to emulate the national Protestant churches that had been established in India, China, Japan, Thailand, and Zimbabwe. In this, they met mostly with failure. Presbyterians and Methodists (if not Baptists) did eventually manage to patch up their sectional divide which dated from the Civil War, and

Congregationalists did combine with the (mostly German) Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ. But that was pretty much it. As Hollinger says, “Calls for greater integration of Sunday mornings in the United States ran up against the feeling of churchgoers and many of their pastors that the rituals and practices distinctive to their own church were actually very important.”

Other boomerang effects had a greater impact on American society and politics. Not least, missionaries—and especially, the children of missionaries—played an important role in midcentury U.S. foreign policy. Few went so far as missionary son Henry Luce in promoting hegemonic visions of an “American Century,” but most were confident (until the Vietnam War) in the coincidence of American global interests and their cosmopolitan humanitarianism. Many signed up for service in the Office of Strategic Services (precursor to the CIA), the State Department, and other policymaking positions. Within and without the halls of government, they generally pressed vigorously (if often unsuccessfully) for measures sympathetic to the aspirations of Asian and Middle Eastern nationalists and at odds with the remnants of European colonialism.

To cite but a few of many examples from Hollinger’s impressive research, China Hands such as John Paton Davies Jr. and John S. Service warned their superiors during World War II of the corruption of Chiang Kai-shek’s regime and urged rapprochement with communist insurgents led by Mao Zedong. Former missionary Kenneth Landon—whose missionary wife, Margaret, authored best seller *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944), upon which *The King and I* franchise was built—almost single-handedly secured the strong postwar alliance of the United States and Thailand.

Another missionary son, William Eddy, played a pivotal role in securing the still steadfast alliance of the United States with Saudi Arabia, and Eddy and others within the missionary orbit not only called for an end to colonialism in the Middle East but warned American leaders of the explosive consequences likely to follow upon the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. Throwing themselves into the politics of international development in the 1940s and 1950s, liberal Christian activists such as Chinese convert Y. C. (“Jimmy”) Yen launched impressive projects throughout the Third World. The International Voluntary Service organization, a secular nongovernment operation launched by Protestant churches in 1953, served as the template for the Peace Corps.

Perhaps most significantly, ecumenical Protestants building on the commitment to the conflation of ethical humanism and Christianity that guided so many in the missionary project took the lead in pressing for an international dedication to human rights. Led by onetime missionaries, the Committee on Religious Liberty of the mainline Federal Council of Churches lobbied successfully in 1945 for a United Nations charter that affirmed the ideals of human rights and established a Commission on Human Rights to attempt to protect them. As historian Samuel Moyn has said, American ecumenical Protestants “were by any standard most responsible for the original move to the internationalization of religious freedom and, in fact, for the presence of the entire notion of human rights in international affairs.”

Domestically, ex-missionaries and their children were in the vanguard for racial justice. They were among the few Americans to protest the confinement of Japanese Americans during the war, and they did what little they could to mollify this massive abuse of civil liberties. And there was a definite missionary penumbra surrounding white allies of the African American civil rights movement from the 1940s forward. Soper’s *Racism: A World Issue* (1947) was “one of the most sweeping antiracist books written by any white American prior to the 1960s.”

Ex-missionaries led the fight for racial justice.

Finally, Hollinger happily observes, the Protestant missionary legacy had a substantial impact on his own congregation—“in no other institutional setting was missionary cosmopolitanism more visible than in academia.” Here missionary sons W. Norman Brown and Edwin Reischauer played a pivotal role in establishing South and East Asian area studies programs in American universities, along with Reischauer’s Harvard colleague John Fairbank, who had no direct missionary lineage but “was surrounded by missionary-connected friends, allies, students, and informants.” Earlier leaders of the study of the Far East such as ex-missionary Kenneth Latourette, who made his professional home at Yale Divinity School and delivered a presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1948 on “The Christian Understanding of History,” were displaced by post-Protestants appreciative of the role of missionaries in advancing American curiosity about distant realms but reliably secular in their inquiries.

Hollinger thus diligently piles up convincing evidence of the ubiquity of missionary boomerangs in weakening the still powerful hold of a provincial white Protestantism on conceptions of American identity in the mid-20th century. He is not inattentive to

the blind spots of his subjects—he is particularly hard on the gender inequities they ignored. But what stands out instead in this book is his admiration, indeed affection, for the vigorous cosmopolitanism of the missionary legacy. Once more he firmly joins liberal Protestants to the secular Jews whom he admires as well for their similar role in expanding the horizons of American culture and relaxing its borders.

Protestants Abroad fits snugly within Hollinger's long-standing narrative of the price that ecumenical Protestants paid as a religious community for their thinning of the particularism of Christianity. Clearly missionaries were prominent among the church leaders who got out ahead of the rank and file on controversial social and political matters and lost the loyalty of many of them. And the weight of Hollinger's extensive biographical evidence is that they also pioneered the art of raising post-Protestant children who may well have admired their moral strength and shared their humanitarian values but found little need for their religious beliefs.

Hollinger himself remains impatient with those who persisted in "God-talk" long after he thinks it lost its plausibility, favoring post-Protestant "mish kids" over their still devout parents in this regard. But arguably, on his own evidence, there is something to be said, even if one does not speak it oneself, for God-talk or even Christ-talk. It may very well be that the tension between the universal and the particular was crushing for missionary theory, but was it so for missionary practice? There is little evidence in Hollinger's book that this was the case.

Many of the numerous life stories in Hollinger's books are tales of courage, courage that was for many of those who mustered it sustained by Christian belief, however thin it may have been. Civil rights activist and former missionary Ruth Harris was described by one of the students she inspired as "acting up for Christ"—not for humanity but for Christ. And the same might be said of many of those who gave us a more cosmopolitan republic. Could they have found the strength to act up elsewhere, outside the confines of Christian belief? Maybe, but in their Christianity was where they found it.

Thin God-talk is not necessarily weak God-talk; it can be wiry God-talk. God-talk lean, supple, and articulated alongside humility and doubt. Might one not cop to the considerable uncertainty that remains in even such wiry God-talk and despite doing so be moved by religious faith to do far more good than one might otherwise have done? The more cosmopolitan American republic that liberal Protestant missionaries did so much to create is of late under siege. If we are to protect it, perhaps a few

courageous, die-hard ecumenical Christian survivalists will come in handy.

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