

Modern American Religion
Lecture #4
“Countermodernism”
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Conservative Catholicism and Judaism

Today we conclude our series which brings us from the 1880s through the end of World War I. A number of important ideologies came from this period that all remain with us today. “The turn of the century more than any other period in American history attracts descriptions as the Liberal, Modernist, or Progressive era. ...[however] enduring and vital American religious conservatism was born.”¹ It was believed that the freedom and openness of America was what made it the new Promised Land with direct Biblical paradigms associated with the development of America’s religious development. It was thought “This is God’s way of developing the world... ‘As God passes the banner to the hands of America’”²

Marty believed that “In the next controversy, modernity and Americanism came into a strange conjunction. American liberals were gradually connecting with counterparts in Europe, while European Catholic parties right and left took notice of and sides in American political campaigns.”³ In 1908 the Vatican condemned Modernism which had the repercussion which “prevented Catholics from coming to terms with the world views and modes of modern science.”⁴ For a half century anti-intellectualism governed Catholic religious life and Progressives put their souls into social programs and service activities.⁵ Despite the Catholic Church not wanting to give into Modernist thought it still was strong and continued to grow in America.

The Catholics could be counted on to be unmovable in so many of their positions. One belief they held onto was that “Christian truth and American liberty will make you free, happy and prosperous.”⁶ Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, Maryland, argued that the World’s Parliament of Religions had “a solemn affirmation of religious principles against the great evil of our days, materialism, agnosticism, atheism.”⁷ The Catholics may not have been Modernist or Progressives, but they did stand against certain evils they saw within society. Consequently, due to what they preached and taught, they helped shape American religious culture.

At the turn of the century our Jewish friends had another agenda altogether. In 1891, under President Benjamin Harrison a movement was afoot which began to create the ideology of a Jewish political state of the name - Israel. The origins of this thought did not come from the Holocaust after World War II, it originated much earlier in American religious history. This movement simply had the design to express solidarity with the Jewish people to provide them with a homeland. By 1917 the movement was becoming stronger and Protestant Zionism was becoming fashionable. “By the restoration of Palestine to the Hebrews, we mean the establishment of a spiritual center for the world, and ultimately the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.’ This, indeed, was

Prophetic Zionism, Bible-Zionism, or Spiritual Zionism.”⁸ Marty believed, “The premillennialists were major contributors to what might be called Protestant Zionism, which was more articulate and active early in the twentieth century than was even the international Jewish movement.”⁹

However, not all Americans were on board with this ideology, “America was the Zion for most Jews... Henry Ford was there engaging in bizarre promotions against Jews.”¹⁰ Many were not ready to follow up on the Balfour Declaration of 1917, but others were onboard with the idea. Those who began to work toward a new Israel, a home for Jews in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration, dated November 2, 1917, was a classified statement of policy written by the British government on the breaking up of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I.

Agreed to at a British Cabinet meeting on October 31, 1917, the letter stated the position, that the British government supported Zionist plans for a National home for the Jewish people within Palestine. The condition that this idea moved forward was that nothing should be done which might prejudice the rights of existing communities there.

The Balfour Declaration was later incorporated into the Sèvres peace treaty with Turkey. The declaration was made in a letter from Arthur James Balfour, British Foreign Secretary to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community for transmission to the Zionist Federation which was a private Zionist organization.¹¹

Reactive Protestantism

What happened next historically is of great interest to conservatives and every form of religion in America that is conservative in nature today. Marty taught “the greatest eighteenth-century evangelist, Jonathon Edwards, was capable of expressing doom. Yet his vision was post-millennial, and hence progressive. Edwards would be an agent in helping make the world attractive for Christ’s return. The major evangelistic figure in the early half of the nineteenth century, Charles Grandison Finney, also used revivalistic rhetoric to portray portending doom to an unrepentant world.”¹² The development of evangelistic movements was now afoot in America. New inerrant thinking for the Bible was developed which gave rise to a new millennial ideology. “Pentecostalism...[or] evangelically Protestant movements” were now the rage in America.¹³

In the 1870s and 1880s the Great Reversal began with Dwight L. Moody of Chicago. “Moody came to see the world as something from which to rescue souls in travail before the second coming of Christ.”¹⁴ It was thought by these new Pentecostals that “‘this is not an earth whose regeneration may be expected day after tomorrow according to my optimistic prophecies.’ Instead it was a lost world, ‘helpless and hopeless save through some demonstration in history of an essential redemption and salvation.’”¹⁵ Moody cautioned, “‘Don’t criticize if our watches don’t agree about the time that we know [Christ] is coming.’ He resisted precise dispensationist programs: ‘I differ. I don’t know! I don’t think any one knows what is going to happen.’”¹⁶ Previously in history many dates had been set for the return of Christ, to no avail. Moody was not going to fall into this trap.

In 1902, William A. 'Billy' Sunday, who was an ex-baseball player and showman extraordinaire charged that infidelity to the infallible Bible was rampant in America and all sorts of unbelief was being preached from many a pulpit in America. He believed "What mattered now was Number Seven [of the Seven dispensations] called the 'Fullness of Times or the Kingdom.' God was then to 'restore the Davidic monarchy in His own person, re-gather dispersed Israel, establish His power over all the earth, and reign one thousand years.'" ¹⁷ Billy Sunday and others were going around the country preaching this new ideology. "The alienated immigrant was unreached, and people of education often found evangelism to be anti-intellectual, anticultural, and antisocial in ways that did not square with their ideas of biblical wholeness or fulfill their notions of biblical mission... The saved agreed perfectly with the evangelists and everyone else was unsaved or irrelevant to Kingdom purposes." ¹⁸ This ideology of being 'saved' still remains a trademark to the evangelicals today.

One of the other magnanimous names on the American scene was "Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, announcer of doom and subsequent millennial bliss, [who] began his career as a Kansas lawyer and politician. He was raised in the Episcopal Church, an orthodox Christian body that never heard of dispensations. ... Scofield became a Congregational minister and a popular teacher at the Niagara Bible Conferences." ¹⁹ He soon created the *Scofield Reference Bible* and was the annotator of this Bible. Scofield believed that America was in "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." ²⁰

Published in 1894, a big seller of this time period was William T. Stead's *If Christ Came To Chicago* which was, "Duty became the watchword: do what you want to be found doing when Jesus suddenly comes." ²¹ The Golden Rule of do unto others as you would want them to do unto you was the norm in American culture. Pentecostal theology went something like this, first or pre-millennial "Christ would come for his saints. Later he would come back to earth with his saints. The Antichrist would come to deceive after the rapture. He would attack Jewish worship and want to be God, but God would counterattack with plagues. Armies were then prophesied to converge from four directions on Israel, making efforts to kill the people of God at Armageddon." ²² All of this could be interpreted from the Bible. A Christian had to be about always doing what they wanted Christ to find them doing when Christ suddenly returned to earth. This dispensationalist thought was very challenging and somewhat confused evangelical thinking, but Biblical.

The Pentecostal people believed in *glossolalia* or symbols and words that are unintelligible, but are interpreted by those that understood them as signs of the spirit. The supernatural role of the spirit was the penultimate for the Pentecostals and they emphasized present experience as opposed to doctrinal studies which were the norm in other Protestant Churches. "Modernity meant bureaucratic rationality while Pentecostals followed charismatic emotionalism. Modernism adapted, using theological naturalism, but the Pentecostals were raging supernaturalists" ²³

Transmoderism

In the beginning part of the 1890s and then continued into the 1920s modern ecumenical movements first got their starts. “The ecumenical movement for the most part lacked such crowd pleasing personalities as Dwight L. Moody or Billy Sunday. Instead a new kind of statesman emerged in the mold of John R. Mott, a future Nobel Prize winner. ...As he traveled around the world Mott came to see that the time had at last arrived when a worldwide union of Christians might be achieved. ...Nettie Fowler McCormick of Chicago’s McCormick reaper family backed him saying that he was the one man who would specialize in worldwide work. ...Mott refused, however, to be drawn into the growing disputes between church conservatives and liberals...he said ‘there are not two gospels, one social and one individual.’”²⁴

It was believed by these and other thinkers that “The denomination was the problem, as any number of speakers at the organizing meeting at Philadelphia in 1908...One delegate called denominations ‘bird-tracks in prehistoric mud.’”²⁵ In December of 1918 came about a new organization called the Interchurch World Movement or IWM. Mostly Protestants were approached in order to raise money for this new organization. It was thought “Christ needs big men for big business...Christ was big, was he not? None ever bigger. Christ was busy, was He not? None ever busier.”²⁶

In 1920, leaders encouraged a budgeted campaign of \$366,777,720 and entered the year spending a million a month of uncollected money. It was Rockefeller who was one of the big movers behind IWM and he said “the plans are wisely and conservatively drawn.”²⁷ However, this movement was doomed and it did not last long. There was much emphasis on wholeness and healing around this movement or a unity of church world wide and wholeness of spirit. “Who is modern man...He believes in One God – the God of science, of history, of social progress of religion. He believes that God has put His spirit into all life and into his own heart as well.”²⁸ Denominations were simply a distraction to what was central in the Gospels.

Social Christianity

A final movement to look at was the best known of all these movements, that of the Protestant Social Gospel Movement. The leaders of The Social Gospel Movement were comprised of seminary professors or leading Protestant pastors. It was thought that “the Kingdom was ‘the progressive realization in human experience and history of the divine ideal of relationship between man and God and man and man’ in the spheres of life...The acknowledged professorial leader was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German Baptist who kept credentials in a small denomination and won others as pastor in Hell’s Kitchen” New York City’s toughest and worst ghetto of the time in all America.²⁹

Rauschenbusch goal was to socialize American culture and by doing so American Christianity. It was thought by Social Gospel thinkers that the Kingdom of God was Jesus Christ central purpose on this earth, i.e. bringing it to earth. This impacted economic order in relation to family life, political life, all educational institutions and the life of the Church.

General William Booth was the founder of The Salvation Army, another one of the offspring of the Social Gospel Movement, “the Salvation Army was most visible, and entered American folklore because of its uniforms, bands, street-corner solicitations, and distributing of cheer and doughnuts to troops in Europe during World War I... The Army leadership always insisted that its fundamental rescue work was spiritual before it was physical, yet the physical relief was what the world observed.”³⁰ Socialist leader Eugene Debs spoke of the Salvation Army by saying “‘In its main purpose, ... [it] has my unqualified approval and my hearty sympathy.’ Rescue, to the movements, meant help for hungry bodies, the diseased, the exploited, and not only the saving of souls.”³¹ Social Gospel also took in the Temperance Movement, but was not as high on the Women’s Movement because they thought it might threaten the family unit. In the final analysis the Social Gospel Movement became what now could be considered liberal Protestantism.

Summary of Modern American Religion 1880-1919:

The public or civil religion, of the previous Civil War period, first had to deal with the remnant of Civil War division in America. Society from the war going forward was to be transformed. “Students of such a public usually turned to Abraham Lincoln. He was the prophet of the union as religious mysticism, the theological interpreter of the union... Each Confederate memorial planted in a courthouse square in the South further enhanced the ideology that claimed a separate righteousness, and each statue of a Union soldier on northern courthouse lawns was a sign of separatism as well.”³² This hangover vestige lingered on in American religious culture into our time period of the 1880s and was not going away easily. Who was invited to sit at the American Banquet Table was still a major issue of concern for some time after the Civil War.

In the 1880s the South still believed the immigrant and industrialized north was unholy and that materialism corrupted its people. Consequently, this sacred war still had the nation divided. “A man called ‘The Fighting Parson’ of the lost cause, J. William Jones, won crowds as late as 1908 with militancy that called for prayer at veterans’ gatherings to the ‘God of Israel, God of the centuries, God of our forefathers, God of Jefferson Davis and Sidney Johnston and Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, God of the Southern Confederacy.’”³³ Christ images of Robert E. Lee with crowns of thorns pressed on his head deified General Lee to the level of Christ himself.

World War I was a cause that united Americans and was a crucial event to resolve many of the issues that separated Americans, ethnically, religiously, culturally and economically. The world had to be made safe for Democracy and the Germans had to be crushed. This new all encompassing cause or Holy War was adapted and owned by Southerners. The Bible and Robert E. Lee would have, they believed, stood for and behind this new Holy War to be waged against the Germans.

The Mormon Church bought Liberty War bonds and Mormons in general over subscribed in relation to their enlistment numbers to fight in World War I. The Catholics, empowered by their most influential figure James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore said

“‘Whatever may have been their opinions as to the expediency of the war, now that it is on,’ the Catholics, ... ‘are united in upholding the government.’”³⁴ The United States was now believed to be the manifest destiny of the Christian Republic, consequently, uniting the nation, north and south and east and west. The realization that humanity is one as Christ is one began to be the predominate thought in America.

President Woodrow Wilson an orderly Presbyterian and believer in Covenant theology with God, began to lead America with a churchly and Christian theme which brought national unity to the war effort. Wilson “Christianized every phase of a righteous war waged to save the very life of democracy...America was losing its innocence in an effort to reclaim the purity and innocence that came with its founding. Such at least was the war aim as argued by religious leaders who paradoxically wanted to use the most deadly, divisive instrument – war – hoping or claiming to bring wholeness to a world.”³⁵

If religion and missionaries sent out across the world could not accomplish bringing the world together as a whole -- then certainly war would? “The Anglo-Saxon race and nations with their churches had a vision of the whole that was not yet to be denied. Modernity had brought corrupting influences and materialist selfishness. War was a purifier, and the sacrifice of blood in a national cause was both ennobling, healing, and uniting. The world would be safe for democracy, peace would come, and religious America would take its place at last as the conscience and example and unifier of the world.”³⁶

Thank You for giving me the opportunity to share and teach *Modern American Religion* and the work of a man I admire greatly, Dr. Martin Marty, The University of Chicago, Divinity School.

Endnotes

¹ Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion The Irony of it All, 1893-1919 Vol.1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 193.

² *Ibid*, 198.

³ *Ibid*, 196.

⁴ *Ibid*, 199.

⁵ *Ibid*, 200.

⁶ *Ibid*, 195.

⁷ *Ibid*, 195.

⁸ *Ibid*, 207.

⁹ *Ibid*, 228.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 206.

¹¹ Internet Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour_Declaration_of_1917.

¹² Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion The Irony of it All, 1893-1919 Vol.1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 209.

¹³ *Ibid*, 209.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 210.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 227.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 221.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 220.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 220.

²¹ *Ibid*, 224.

²² *Ibid*, 223.

²³ *Ibid*, 239.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 273.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 274.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 280.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 281.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 267.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 288.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 284.

³¹ *Ibid*, 285.

³² *Ibid*, 299.

³³ *Ibid*, 299.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 307.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 316.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 316.

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Marty, Martin. *Modern American Religion, The Irony of it All 1893-1919, Vol. 1*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.