

Week Thirteen Handout

"Christian History in America: Visions, Realities, and Turning Points"

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Class 13: Mid Twentieth Century Events, People, and Themes

Class 13 Goals

Brainstorm our collective understanding of important people, themes, and events in American Christian History between 1930 and 1970.

Examine the changing face of public religion in the context of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the growth of official religious neutrality.

For Table Discussion

Based on the lists that you generated before class, what and who would you identify as the key themes, people, and events in American Christian History between 1930 and 1970? Try to reach consensus around your table for no more than 3 items in each category.

The Rise of Pentecostalism

January 1st 1901 – Agnes Ozman speaks in tongues at Bethel Bible College

1906 – under the leadership of Charles Parham – the revival spread to Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

Initial meetings were integrated with significant female participation

Soon missionaries spread Pentecostalism throughout the country

Rise of new denominations such as Assemblies of God and Church of God in Christ

Later Charismatic Renewal Movement in mainline denominations and within the Catholic Church

The Rise of Neo-Orthodoxy

After World War I many mainline churches turned away from excessive liberalism toward Neo-Orthodoxy.

Karl Barth – Commentary on Romans

“The Gospel is not a religious message to inform mankind of their divinity or to tell them how they may become divine. The Gospel proclaims a God utterly distinct from men. Salvation comes to them from Him, because they are, as men, incapable of knowing Him, and because they have no right to claim anything from Him.”

The Emergence of Reinhold Niebuhr

Celebrity Theologian of the Mid-twentieth century

Professor at Union Theological Seminary

Encouraged people to embrace “loyalty to the ‘kingdom of God,’ the vision of a pure and unconditioned justice and love, [which] creates dissatisfaction with the imperfect love and justice of any given economic and political order.”

How does one balance the pure vision of a just society with the need to compromise in a pluralist society?

“If Hitler is defeated in the end it will be because the crisis has awakened in us the will to preserve a civilization in which justice and freedom are realities, and given us the knowledge that ambiguous methods are required for the ambiguities of history.”

Called upon policy makers to make “emotionally powerful oversimplification” to call people to action.

Became an important foreign policy advisor during the Cold War, yet proximity to power dulled his prophetic critique.

Other Major Trends

The Nationalization of Southern Christianity

With Great Migrations from the South to Northern Cities and the West Southern Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism spread as well.

Government Social Programs displace Church based Charities

The Expansion of the Government Safety Net under New Deal and Great Society took the place of many faith based ministries. (Especially during the Great Depression the need greatly exceeded the ability of private charities to fully respond)

Supreme Court Secularism

1st Amendment – originally only binding on the Federal Government

Establishment Clause

Free Exercise Clause

14th Amendment (1868) – prevented states and municipalities from taking away the rights of citizens.

1940s Gitlow and Everson cases rule that municipalities must adhere to the Establishment and Free Exercise Clause.

Accepts Jefferson’s notion of a “Wall of Separation”

Everson v. Board of Ed. 1947

“The ‘establishment of religion’ clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever from they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa.”

School Prayer

1962 – *Engel v. Vitale* – Banned mandatory school prayer

“It is neither sacrilegious nor antireligious to say that each separate government in this country should stay out of the business of writing or sanctioning official prayers and leave that purely religious function to the people themselves and to those the people choose to look to for religious guidance.”

School Bible Reading

1963 – *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* – Banned publicly sponsored devotional Bible reading in the public schools.

“The place of religion in our society is an exalted one, achieved through a long tradition of reliance on the home, the church and the inviolable citadel of the individual heart and mind. We have come to recognize through bitter experience that it is not within the power of government to invade that citadel, whether its purpose or effect be to aid or oppose, to advance or retard. In the relationship between man and religion, the State is firmly committed to a position of neutrality.”

Religion and the Cold War

America’s fighting against “evil empires” in World War II and the Cold War predisposed it to see itself as the Godly nation fighting godlessness and tyranny.

Eisenhower and the Cold War

“What is our battle against communism if it is not a fight between anti-God and a belief in the Almighty? Communists know this. They have to eliminate God from their system. When God comes in, communism has to go.”

Will Herberg

In 1955 Sociologist Will Herberg claimed American society was created by a “triple melting-pot” of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

Helped create the relatively new notion of a Judeo-Christian heritage.

Affirming our Civil Religion

Addition of “one nation under God” to the pledge of allegiance.

Addition of “In God we Trust” as the national motto and to currency.”

“This Country makes no sense unless it is founded on a strong religious belief. And I don’t care what it is.”

Eisenhower

Ceremonial Deism or Evangelical Christianity?

Contemporary Scholarship

Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*.” JAH (June 2004)

Argued that a theology of segregation was crucial to the resistance to the Civil Rights movements and just as much a part of American religion as King’s version.

Often fears of interracial marriage were expressed in religious language.

David Chappel *A Stone of Hope*

Saw the Civil Rights movement as a religious revival.
Prophetic religion was key to the movement's success and power.
The pro-integrationist message of the Bible, major southern denominations, and many religious leaders helped to mute white resistance.

Martin Luther King

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.

King's Prophetic Critique

American Segregation is a scandal in the eyes of God and contradicts the Gospel and core American values.

American society must rededicate itself to fighting against poverty at home and overseas.
American militarism is a threat to world peace and stability (especially in Vietnam)

King's Dream

I have a Dream – or I have an eschatological vision?

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5)

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. (Isaiah 40)

Summing Up

Religion maintained a vital place in American life during these decades despite official moves toward religious neutrality.

Neo-Orthodoxy and The Charismatic Movement revitalized mainline denominations and the Catholic Church.

Religious ideas were central how the nation approached the Cold War

Prophetic Christianity played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Further moves toward secularism eventually helped give rise to the New Christian Right.

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