The center and beyond

by Milton J Coalter in the October 27, 1999 issue

Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present, edited by Doublas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr.

That the main title of this book appears on its front cover without capitalization is a clue to the book's motivation but not to the bulk of its contents. The majority of these well-researched and informative essays are not primarily about the center of American Protestantism. Instead, they strive to disprove thesis that two major religious parties have contended for the allegiances of white 20th-century Protestants.

According to that thesis, a coalition of conservatives, evangelicals, charismatics and fundamentalists on the right have battled a cadre of mainline, liberal and progressive Protestants on the left for dominance. First proposed by Jean Miller Schmidt and Martin Marty in the '70s, this image of "two diametrically and bitterly opposed camps" has become so much a part of sociological and historical analysis that the notion of a contemporary culture war is common in the academy, the press and the church.

Employing a variety of excellent case studies of denominations that frequently have been used to prove this paradigm, as well as essays on traditions and movements that "cannot be, and did not want to be, squeezed into one of the two parties," Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. seek to expose the "inadequacies and inaccuracies of the two-party model." They contend that this bipolar stereotype does not square with the experience of the vast majority of Protestants. Moreover, it has had the destructive effect of blinding white Protestants to the diversity within and outside their ranks, thereby unnecessarily curtailing their opportunities to find common cause with others in the pursuit of faithful discipleship.

So much of this book is dedicated to this contention that even the editors acknowledge that it may be seen as "an exercise in overkill. . . . Doesn't everyone already admit that the two-party model is, at best, a limited tool for exploring the dynamics of American Protestantism?" No, Jacobsen and Trollinger insist. This bogus

thesis remains the default, shorthand interpretation of the Protestant scene used by scholars and churchpeople.

The more interesting question might be: Why is the promise of this work's title left unfulfilled? These essays will long stand as helpful reminders of the complexity of "lived religion," an experience that seldom falls into nice, neat either-or patterns. An essay by Marty, in turn, provides a useful warning against jettisoning too quickly the idea that Protestant "conservatives" and "liberals" are at odds with one another and that they press their fellow disciples to take sides on such still unresolved issues as abortion, homosexuality and scriptural revelation.

The argument carried through much of this volume reverses the old caution not to lose sight of the big picture when attending to the details of historical events. It claims that historians, sociologists and church leaders have not been able to see the trees because they have concentrated too hard on the forest. They have ignored the evidence against the two-party thesis that careful attention to the variety of the Protestant experience would have provided. Jacobsen and Trollinger associate attending to the variety with a "postmodern" perspective on American Protestantism. They spurn grand schemes to categorize the options available to American Protestants because they believe that such models constrict this community's vision and foment unnecessary and destructive division in the body of Christ.

Faith communities certainly need a clear map of the diverse historical, sociological and theological geography that surrounds them. But do they not also require a sense of where God calls them to stand or, perhaps more important, to move? After all, Christians are called to be a pilgrim people seeking the path to God, rather than wandering nomads distracted by the infinite variety of flora, fauna and terrain along the way.

Essays by Mark Ellingsen and Gerald Sheppard—on the value of postliberal biblical narrative theology and a postmodern rediscovery of the gospel, respectively—suggest that the supposed two parties in conflict over scripture and theology share misleading Enlightenment assumptions that any Protestant center, present or future, should avoid. Indeed, Ellingsen makes the intriguing proposal that many laypeople already regard the scriptures the way postliberal narrative theologians do.

These two helpful essays are not enough to fulfill the promise of the book's title. One can learn a great deal from this volume about American Protestantism from 1900 to the present, as well as about the shortcomings of the two-party thesis that has dominated the interpretation of the period. But the latter is so fully examined that little space remains for addressing the tantalizing topic of re-forming Protestantism's center, and thus of aiding those Protestants who have found no home in either the religious "right" or "left."

Jacobsen and Trollinger, both historians of American religion, have directed three national conferences on "re-forming the center"—the source of many of the essays in this book. Both describe themselves as "more pietistic and ethical in our faith than doctrinal." Unfortunately, this interesting juxtaposition remains unexplained. Both are uncomfortable with the term "center." The notion of a center—a position that lies between options—seems to reinforce the two-party thesis. And speaking of a center can imply that those not in it are on the edges and, therefore, marginal. The editors would like to move beyond the patronizing hegemony of mainline Protestantism that the term suggests.

Searching for alternative descriptors of the "center," the editor's recall Peggy Shriver's suggestion that we regard American Protestantism as "a Protestant archipelago, a circle of islands connected together under water," and Randall Balmer's proposal that what we are observing is "an evolving geography of religious tectonic plates in creative collision." Both images carry promise. But if Protestants are connected "under water," what exactly is the theological, pietistic and/or ethical ground that connects them, and if they are "in creative collision," what motivates their colliding? Despite the problems with the word, Vance and Tollinger state, "Still, for now we retain 'center,' albeit a center that is construed in a non-hegemonic, multi-polar, multi-dimensional, and nonhierarchical fashion."

The editors excuse themselves from discussing this problem more fully by stating that it "pushes us well beyond the confines of this particular volume." If so, then a better title for their book might have been taken from its last two lines: "Let's put the two-party paradigm of American Protestantism to rest. It's time to move on." The question, of course, is, "Move on to where?"--a question with which the book, unfortunately, does not even begin to grapple.