

Not ready for Larry King Live: An interview with Robert Wuthnow

Feature in the [April 4, 2001](#) issue

Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University, who directed research on the public role of mainline Protestantism, observes that the mainline churches have difficulty getting media attention commensurate with their influence. The Century asked him to elaborate.

Is it significant that the mainline lacks religious celebrities who can make news and be sought out for television appearances?

That's a big element. It seems to me the mainline churches are set up institutionally not to generate celebrity-status people, whereas evangelical churches, which are likely to be independent and have an entrepreneurial minister, almost breed celebrity status. The Catholic Church has the pope and prominent bishops. But a mainline pastor operates on a kind of dialogic model, like a general assembly. That means a lot of voices representing different positions. There is no single "star" likely to emerge. A secondary problem is that, yes, the mainline church could do a better job at cultivating whatever stars they do have and whatever media message they could put out. They now might present something to the *Christian Century* and that's as far as it goes.

Is there a fear one will be accused of being a publicity seeker?

That's one way to put it. You don't want to be controversial. You don't want to be pushing yourself so much. The problem is also that the mainline leader has trouble with authenticity before the public. You've got a Jerry Falwell who can say, "God spoke to me. I see it right here in the Bible." He's claiming to speak with an authoritative voice and interpretation of an absolutely true document. A Mother Teresa can be a celebrity because of the authenticity she got from spending her life on the streets of Calcutta.

A mainline minister is most likely to be a bureaucrat—that's kind of the churches' reward system. Administratively, you are good at running a complex program at your church, or theologically you are good at juggling very complex ideas and you're not quite sure about absolute truth. At most, you can come across as an authentically humble, questioning, searching helper whom people can admire if they know you personally, but they are not going to admire you if they see you on *Larry King Live*.

Is working quietly behind the scenes the more natural and practical way for mainline figures to operate?

James Wind of the Alban Institute made that point—that the quiet way has been the historically normal way for the church to proceed. I think it's very similar to the way people who have influence in the community through business or other connections operate, with a few exceptions like a Lee Iaccoco or Bill Gates. They have influence and they don't want their names in the headlines.