From declinism to discovery

By Martin E. Marty
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Finitude, contingency, transience. These three linked words signal basic elements of what it is to be a human—and especially to be a historian. David Tracy, noted theologian and next door study-neighbor, taught me this connection, and I've let it color my life and scholarly preoccupations. It will help us interpret the almost reflexive use of the rubric "decline" in relation to the western Christian presence. Specifically, do a search for "mainline Protestant" and "decline" and you will get the picture, millions of times over.

Everything and everyone *dies*, is subject to *accidents and change*, and all human endeavor will *pass and be forgotten*. What can a church historian do with this obvious insight at such a time as ours? Given my parallel calling as a peregrinating lecturer, I use the vantage acquired there to try to sense the comings and goings of topics for inquiry. One way to measure public curiosity is to listen to questions asked after a lecture.

Here are some samples of stories about once obsessively covered clusters of events or topics that "declined" in the passage of time. For years audience questions were urgent about sects and cults and NRMs. Though these left a mark and are still present, I haven't been asked about them for years. Have you? Try televangelists. For a few years they were observed and noted as emerging and durable presences. No more—unless you are a specialist, you are not likely to be able to name more than one or two of their successors. Add fundamentalism. I spent years chronicling its domestic versions. Of course, it remains and still attract millions, but "decline" has marked its career in recent decades.

Name any empire, establishment or experiment which, after prime years, did not experience decline. In the United States, Puritanism may remain with us as a cultural subtheme, but not as a dominating movement, old-New England style. Awakenings—as in Great and First and Second versions—leave a deposit, but as preeminent themes they all declined. Anti-Protestant Catholicism and Anti-Catholic Protestantism have certainly declined since the days before President Kennedy in

1960 or Pope John XXIII after 1958 or 1962 and the Second Vatican Council. Add movement ecumenism. We historians also have to busy ourselves discerning reasons for the decline of American voluntary associations and fraternal orders.

You read me wrong, or I have stated things inelegantly, if you think that I think that phenomena which experience decline simply disappear. Just the opposite: historians note how they leave deposits, traces, influences, legacies, or renewable forces that get interwoven into the cultures we now inhabit long after their "decline."

So we come to the current fascination with the "Protestant mainline," which was threatened or was declining even before it acquired this partially misfit name, a name its participants did not choose. Since my first two books in 1958, my experience, research, teaching, lecturing and writing have consistently treated the mainline not as a secure, permanent, thriving phenomenon but more as a precariously perched, complex, ambiguous but also vital presence.

In a 1985 essay in *The Annals* (subscription required)—findable in my *Religion and Republic*—I cited Dean Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* as a book-length signal of the challenges to and toppling of the mainline.

I mention this not to show that I was an early noticer of what others were overlooking, a whiner who would sit on the curbstone and weep, a masochist who enjoyed a movement having a bad time. No, whether an "early prophet" or a later one or none at all, I have always had company among historians. Weren't we all noticing it, and aren't most of us bemused by the current observers who think that mainline decline is or should be news of the unprecedented and unforeseen?

We historians have paid due attention to the contributions of what came to be called the mainline, contributions that still continue. I have been impressed by the writings of David Hollinger, as in his recent book on Protestant liberalism. Hollinger knows all about the forces which for decades have been unsettling the once more stable mainline, but he goes on to say, as I read it, What are you mainliners moaning about? You won!

Their winning—at least through their pioneering adventures on fronts dealing with civil rights, internationalism, ecumenism, many issues of sexuality and gender, friendliness to once-warred-against science, and much more—never meant complete victory. But it did mean that through the years, at least significant leaders risked much to express their faith beyond church walls, in the larger culture. If in the past

they were told they had truly (e.g., ecclesiastically) won, they should have demanded a recount. They paid a price, to be sure, because the institutional payoff has been expensive while membership and attendance and influence have "declined."

Some words to survivors of the years when mainline Protestants putatively had it easy:

- Don't whine. No one pays or should pay attention to whiners.
- Get over it! So, weakened, you survive. A friend says that to survive is not the highest goal, but if we don't survive we don't do anything else, either.
- I borrow from Lewis Thomas the observation that we learn not from trial and triumph but from trial and error. The key moment in the laboratory after a failed experiment, Thomas says, comes when someone says, "But even so, look at that!" From that perspective, the world on which historians look out is ready for people who, once unburdened from the weight of their declinism, are ready for fresh discovery.

Historians who mark their work with enduring attention to the signs of finitude, contingency and transience may not join the front rank of strategists for the once-mainline. But they can provide perspective and contribute to the search for wisdom in bewildering times—if they are not surprised, paralyzed or distracted by obsessive talk of mainline decline. Over my shoulder as I write is a framed phrase in Chinese calligraphy. It once was on the office wall of Charles Huggins, a Nobelist in science. It translates: "Discovery is our business." True for the scientists, it also informs the vocation of humanists and theologians who are mining the past for the purposes of discovery.

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