Which Protestants?

by Richard Fox in the October 23, 2002 issue

Randall Balmer and Lauren Winner try the impossible in *Protestantism in America*: to lay out in 200 pages the history and current state of American Protestantism for an audience of students and general readers presumed to have no background in the subject. It is testimony to their lively writing and unusual synthetic skills that they come close to achieving their goal.

But the format forces them again and again to drop vital questions as soon as they are raised. The end result is a pastiche that covers all bases without shedding enough light on any one of them. The book will help direct newcomers to some pertinent facts and issues, but it will also confuse them about whether such a thing as "Protestantism" really exists. Sure, it's a word people continue to use, but it may be an anachronism, a nostalgic marker for something that used to exist. Balmer and Winner are so attentive to the vast range of so-called Protestant experiences and institutions that the category stretches like a balloon and pops between their fingers.

H. Richard Niebuhr wondered in the 1930s if Protestantism had ever existed at all as a coherent entity. The only thing Protestants ever had in common, he concluded, was anti-Catholicism. It disturbed him that it had never had a positive identity. Nowadays Protestants don't even have anti-Catholicism to keep themselves together as a definable movement. The real lineup of American Christian forces, as Balmer and Winner note in passing, is Catholic and Protestant liberals on one side, Catholic and Protestant conservatives on the other.

But the authors also take for granted the coherence of Protestantism. It is *sola scriptura*, in their view, that distinguishes Protestants from Catholics. Catholics are supposedly those who hold that "tradition" is an independent source of authority alongside the Bible. This contrast is too starkly drawn in light of late-20th-century Catholic Christocentrism (deemphasizing the saints and returning to the New Testament). And in any case the authors appear to concede that American Protestants are now so splintered theologically and politically that their overall unity is

purely nominal.

The authors do a much better job of mapping contemporary Protestant diversity and documenting current Protestant debates on feminism, homosexuality and social justice than they do elucidating the deeper patterns of Protestant conviction. The book favors institutional and demographic phenomena over ideas and beliefs. The three opening historical chapters do summarize the major theological developments, but those chapters aren't clearly enough connected to the analysis of contemporary Protestantism. We're left knowing that Protestants have strong views about feminism, homosexuality and social justice, but we don't hear enough about what they think about Jesus.

Why would anyone wish to embrace Protestantism, liberal or evangelical? Is it because "Protestantism offers a kind of cradle-to-grave security, rubrics and ceremonies to mark the passages of life, a measure of stability in a chaotic world"? No doubt. But it may also be because the gospel offers people a perpetual dialectic that is unsettling as well as settling, not to mention providing answers to intellectual as well as psychological predicaments. This is true of Protestant evangelicals as well as liberals, but liberal Protestants have historically been very explicit about it.

Here's where a fuller historical perspective would have come to the authors' aid. They contend that as a "theological tradition" liberal Protestantism "did not come into its own" until the turn of the 20th century. That is when the Social Gospel, in their view, brought "the Gospel to people without necessarily bringing a traditional Gospel message about the unique saving power of Christ along with it." But this judgment misses the continued centrality of Christ for a theologian like Walter Rauschenbusch in the early 20th century. It misses the proto-Social Gospel preaching of a person like Theodore Parker before the Civil War (he knew all about social as well as individual sin). Most of all it misses the broader theological and cultural liberalism of which the pre-Civil War and post-Civil War Social Gospel was only a part.

The liberal ideas that drew so many Protestants after the war had congealed long before, in the Unitarian movement and in the writing and preaching of other anti-Calvinists. There is no mention in Protestantism in America of William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker or Henry Ward Beecher. It's essential to mention them if one is going to make sense of liberal Protestantism in either the 19th or the 20th century.

This is not special pleading for dead white male elites. It's general pleading for historical understanding.

Over the last two centuries liberal Protestants have held certain ideas dear, as well as a certain orientation toward the world. It's important to identify those ideas and that orientation if we're going to make sense of contemporary Protestantism. Liberal Protestants are those who, among other things, have seen the secular world as an enticing realm of opportunity for a richer, more virtuous life. In their view, secular learning would enrich religious thought. Secular entertainments would renew Christian practices. Being more deeply religious was not only compatible with being more cosmopolitan, but demanded being more cosmopolitan. And becoming cosmopolitan didn't just mean growing in tolerance for other ways of living, but growing in wisdom by appropriating other traditions of thought. Liberal Protestants are the ones who decided to grow spiritually by opening themselves culturally to the rest of the world--all the while trying to preserve their inherited biblical faith.

Balmer and Winner make the very good point that conservative evangelicals in the 20th century changed their own attitude toward the secular realm. But the authors don't distinguish the evangelicals' recent embrace of secularity from the liberals' historic attachment to it. They point out that evangelicals excel in using modern secular modes of communication to spread their faith. And they note that evangelicals now have no more objection than liberals do to large bank accounts and the good things of the world that money can buy. Material accumulation used to be sinful in evangelical eyes, and in some liberal ones too.

But these observations lose the larger point that there is a basic difference between liberal and evangelical ways of approaching the secular arena. Liberals see the secular as a source of value. For liberals, human reason, and the scientific investigation of the world that it makes possible, are gifts from God. The Bible is a gift from God too. But for a liberal it can never be at odds with science, since science is a divine gift too. There is no reason to fear scientific analysis of the Bible, for the personality of Jesus will always surpass any culturally inscribed account of him. Jesus is safe from all imperfect human attempts to represent him and all corrupt human attempts to commandeer him for service as a tribal icon. That's what prophets are for, to rescue him from self-serving admirers.

In 21st-century America "Protestantism" is a nominal category rather than a substantive one. But liberal Protestantism, like the evangelical Protestantism that opposes it, remains substantive. The liberal nexus of convictions continues to

galvanize those Protestants (and Catholics) who trace the virtuous life to secular as well as religious foundations. Some liberals stress human sin more than others, and some stress the powers of human reason more than others. Some see Jesus as divine, one person of the Trinity; others see him as human yet uniquely wise. But what separates most all of them from most all of the evangelicals is their sense that science and faith are mutually reinforcing. The Christian task is to seek the holy in every domain of life.