

# THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS DEPRESSION, 1925-1935\*

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"It is too early to assess the impact of the Great Depression upon American Protestantism," wrote Robert Moats Miller in his recent study of American Protestantism and social issues in the period between the world wars.<sup>1</sup> No doubt it is too early for any overall assessment, yet it is becoming steadily clearer that American religion passed through an important transition in the depression period. If we are to gain a fuller understanding of developments in American Christianity since the 1930's, then serious attention needs to be given to that bleak period. Inasmuch as our understanding of times long past are significantly influenced by our definitions of the present situation, attempts to deal with that particular period of crisis in our recent past may help us more adequately to see the whole story of American religion in fairer perspective. Furthermore, a number of recent dissertations, articles and books have dealt in whole or in part with the period between the wars; they provide guidance for handling the vast array of sources relevant for an understanding of religion in the depression, supply material for at least preliminary interpretations, and point to the need for further analysis. This paper is one effort to suggest some interpretative guide lines for further exploration into an important topic.

## I

In approaching the problem, I believe that it is important to distinguish between the economic depression of the 1930's and what may be called the religious depression. That there was an intimate relationship between them I have no doubt, yet they are also distinguishable phenomena. William Kelley Wright, professor of philosophy at Dartmouth College, writing in the heart of the depression period, declared that "today we are passing through a period of religious depression not less severe than the concomitant moral and economic depression."<sup>2</sup> Some months before the stock market crash of October, 1929, William L. Sullivan, a Unitarian writer, prepared an article entitled "Our Spiritual Destitution" in which he noted that the religion of his day was "timorous, unimaginative, quick with comment upon the contemporaneous, but unable in the authentic manner of its great tradition to judge the contemporaneous by categories that are eternal."<sup>3</sup> The effects of religious depression began to be felt by the middle 1920's within

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Protestantism, then the dominant and of course numerically the largest among the three overall religious groupings into which American religion is familiarly, though too simply, cast.

One sensitive indicator of a religion's vitality is its missionary program. By the middle of the third decade of the present century, Protestantism was becoming aware of a serious decline in missionary enthusiasm and conviction. At the 1926 meeting of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America, there was evident discouragement on the part of missionary leaders concerning the apathy of local churches toward the cause of missions.<sup>4</sup> Even after the disastrous effects of the economic depression had overtaken the missions boards, there was clear recognition that the problem was much more than financial, and that it had predated the economic crisis. "However, we all know that this is not a sufficient explanation of what was happening on the home base," Edmund B. Chafee reported in 1934. "Interest in missions was waning before the depression. All through the decade of the 1920's the foreign missionary enterprise was being questioned and it was failing to attract the vigorous support which it formerly enjoyed."<sup>5</sup> In his sociological study of religion in the economic depression, Samuel C. Kincheloe reported that "even before the depression, missionary funds had begun to decrease."<sup>6</sup> Examination of the income figures of the major mission boards for the later 1920's reveals an irregular pattern but with a generally declining trend—and this in a period of booming prosperity!<sup>7</sup> In an article entitled "The Decline of American Protestantism," Charles Stelzle in 1930 reported that according to the United Stewardship Council, per capita gifts for benevolence fell from \$5.57 in 1921 to \$3.43 in 1929.<sup>8</sup>

There was also a decline in the missionary force in these same years. The number of foreign missionaries in 1929 was less by 4.7 per cent than that for 1923.<sup>9</sup> The steadily waning interest of young people in responding to the missionary challenge was a source of concern at the 1929 meeting of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America, at which it was reported that though 2700 students had volunteered for foreign service in 1920, only 252 had offered themselves in 1928.<sup>10</sup> The decline of the missionary force for China was especially perplexing to missionary leaders, and led Albert W. Beaven to make a statement in 1928 that was in a strange way more prophetic than he could know. "What an absurdity if after one hundred years of service," he exclaimed, "after building up in China \$90,000,000 of missionary investments in terms of helpfulness, we were to abandon it, withdrawing our Christian representatives, forsaking the whole enterprise, while at the

very same time Russia with all the questionable principles she stands for is eager to offer the Orient men, counsel, money and moral backing."<sup>11</sup> It was the decline in missionary interest that led to the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry in the early 1930's, which itself reflected a questioning of familiar missionary emphases within Protestantism.

The home missions movement also felt the pinch of declining interest and diminishing funds before 1929. Nearly two years before the crash, the executive secretary of the Home Missions Council said:

Almost all major denominations are now in a period of financial stringency in the conduct of mission work. We are in the days of falling budgets. There has been more or less retrenchment all along the line, and new work has been for several years practically at a standstill.<sup>12</sup>

On the rural church scene there was clear evidence of decline before 1929, both in terms of benevolence contributions and the attendance at services of resident members.<sup>13</sup>

The problem of falling attendance was not limited to the rural scene, of course, for churches in all areas reported difficulties in maintaining attendance levels. A general trend toward the dropping of traditional Sunday evening services, especially in the cities, was observed.<sup>14</sup> Decline in Sunday school enrollment was also evident; C. Luther Fry found in 1930 that "the proportion of young people attending church schools is greater today than in 1906, but less than in 1916."<sup>15</sup> Attempts to plot an "evangelistic index line" for a number of major denominations point to a sharp downturn in the winning of converts and the reception of new members in the 1920's.<sup>16</sup> A somewhat less tangible evidence of Protestant decline was the lowered status of ministers. Paul A. Carter has pointed out that the ministry sank low in public esteem in this period; he quotes a minister of that time who declared that it was "a fairly safe generalization to say that no profession of men is so thoroughly empty of dignity and grace as that of the Protestant minister today."<sup>17</sup>

Many observers have called attention to the slump which overtook the social gospel in the later 1920's; it is referred to in the very title of Carter's book, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel*. But in his recent examination of the period, Robert Moats Miller has found that "social Christianity continued to burn bright enough to warrant future historians in using slightly less somber hues in painting their pictures of the social attitudes of American Protestantism in the Prosperity Decade."<sup>18</sup> I think the apparent contradiction may be resolved by concluding that though proportionately the social emphasis remained strong, the social gospel movement as a whole was caught in Protestantism's overall decline.

Some of the keenest observers of the religious life of the late

1920's recognized that they were in some kind of a religious depression. For example, the Episcopal Bishop of Central New York, Charles Fiske, was convinced in 1928 that he had "evidence of a sad disintegration of American Protestantism."<sup>19</sup> And in his first book, published in 1927, Reinhold Niebuhr remarked that "a psychology of defeat, of which both fundamentalism and modernism are symptoms, has gripped the forces of religion."<sup>20</sup> At least part of the reason for the decline was the penetration into the churches of the prevailing mood of the 1920's. For Protestantism was deeply affected by the general disillusionment of the postwar decade. During the war itself, the American people, with the vigorous support of most religious leaders, maintained a spirit of high optimism. But the tide turned swiftly. As Arthur S. Link has recently reminded us, "the 1920's were a period made almost unique by an extraordinary reaction against idealism and reform."<sup>21</sup> The rapid subsidence of the war spirit, so Walter M. Horton observed in a book written in 1929 but published the following year, led "to a wave of spiritual depression and religious skepticism, widespread and devastating."<sup>22</sup> Protestantism felt the corrosive effects of disillusionment at the very beginning of the decade, for the collapse of the grandiose Interchurch World Movement in 1920 was at least in part caused by the swift change in mood. Winthrop S. Hudson has summarized the swift decline of Protestantism in a vivid way:

Nothing is more striking than the astonishing reversal in the position occupied by the churches and the role played by religion in American life which took place before the new century was well under way. By the nineteen twenties, the contagious enthusiasm which had been poured into the Student Volunteer Movement, the Sunday School Movement, the Men and Religion Forward Movement, the Laymen's Missionary Movement, the Interchurch World Movement, and other organized activities of the churches had largely evaporated.<sup>23</sup>

As the decade wore on, scientism, behaviorism, and humanism became more conspicuous in the thought of the time. Religion was often viewed with a negative if not with a hostile eye. In his effort to state the case for "a promethean religion for the modern world," William Pepperell Montague declared in 1930 that "there is today a widespread and increasing belief that the minimum essentials of Christian supernaturalism . . . have been rendered antiquated, false, and absurd by our modern knowledge."<sup>24</sup> More extreme was Joseph Wood Krutch's pessimistic statement of "the modern temper" in 1929. Referring to such classic words as "Sin" and "Love," Krutch wrote that "all the capital letters in the composing-room cannot make the words more than that which they have become—shadows, as essentially unreal as some of the theological dogmas which have been completely forgotten."<sup>25</sup> Criticism of religion and the churches was expressed not only by men like Montague and Krutch, by H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, but also

by many less well-known men. One opinion study showed that although about 78 per cent of the views about traditional Christianity published in 1905 were favorable and only 22 per cent were unfavorable, by 1930 the situation had almost reversed, so that 67 per cent of the opinions published were unfavorable.<sup>26</sup>

Protestantism was deeply penetrated by the disillusionment of the time in part at least because of a long-standing identification of Protestantism with American culture which left the churches quite exposed to cultural cross-currents. The roots of this identification go far back to the beginnings of American history. As André Siegfried stated the matter in 1927:

If we wish to understand the real sources of American inspiration, we must go back to the English Puritanism of the seventeenth century, for the civilization of the United States is essentially Protestant. Those who prefer other systems, such as Catholicism, for example, are considered bad Americans and are sure to be frowned on by the purists. Protestantism is the only national religion, and to ignore that fact is to view the country from a false angle.

Siegfried was fully aware of the denominational nature of Protestantism, yet still insisted on his main point: "In order to appreciate the influence of Protestantism in this confusion of sects, we must not look at it as a group of organized churches, for its strength lies in the fact that its spirit is national."<sup>27</sup> Sidney E. Mead has recently shown that the fusion of Protestantism with Americanism was especially evident in the later nineteenth century. He has suggested that "during the second half of the nineteenth century there occurred a virtual identification of the outlook of this denominational Protestantism with 'Americanism' or 'the American way of life' and that we are still living with some of the results of this ideological amalgamation of evangelical Protestantism with Americanism."<sup>28</sup> During and just after the first World War there was an intensification of this synthesis through an emphasis on "Christian Americanization," by which was meant growth toward national democratic and spiritual ideals, of which the churches were the best custodians.<sup>29</sup> One feature of this identification was illustrated in the Lynds' comment following their 1925 study of "Middletown": "In theory, religious beliefs dominate all other activities in Middletown."<sup>30</sup>

The religious education movement, which was at the peak of its influence in the later 1920's, clearly illustrated the theme of the ideological amalgamation of religion and culture. Shailer Mathews pointed to its triumphs in 1927 by declaring that "it commands the same sort of enthusiastic following from idealistic young men and women as did sociology a generation ago. The most generally elected courses in theological seminaries, the greatest activity in churches are in its field."

But Mathews warned religious educators that they were tending to neglect the church in their concern for education, insisting that "it is our privilege to teach young people that religion has some other task than that of making good citizens and good neighbors."<sup>31</sup> As H. Shelton Smith was later to document, many religious educators "sought to blend the democratic theory of education and the democratic theory of the Kingdom of God."<sup>32</sup>

In view of this identification, it was inevitable that Protestantism would be deeply and directly influenced by trends within the culture, and that many of them would be accepted and even blessed by the churches. In 1929 the self-styled "puzzled parson," Charles Fiske, indicated that he was not quite as puzzled as he claimed to be when he said:

America has become almost hopelessly enamoured of a religion that is little more than a sanctified commercialism; it is hard in this day and this land to differentiate between religious aspiration and business prosperity. Our conception of God is that he is a sort of Magnified Rotarian. Sometimes, indeed, one wonders whether the social movement and the uplift in general have not become, among Protestants, a substitute for devotion; worse than that, a substitute for real religion. Efficiency has become the greatest of Christian virtues. I hope I may be forgiven a note of exaggeration that is necessary to make my meaning clear when I say that Protestantism, in America, seems to be degenerating into a sort of Babsonian cult, which cannot distinguish between what is offered to God and what is accomplished for the glory of America and the furtherance of business enterprise.<sup>33</sup>

Edwin Lewis of Drew, reviewing in 1934 the course American Protestantism had taken during the previous twenty years, declared:

We borrowed our criteria of evaluation from the world about us—a world gone mad in its worship of mere size, a world that had set itself to create bigger ships, bigger aeroplanes, bigger locomotives, bigger buildings, bigger universities, bigger corporations, bigger banks, bigger everything—except men! . . . And we were guilty of the incredible folly of supposing that "Christ's church was of this world," to be judged by the world's standards, to be modeled on the world's ways, to walk in the world's procession, and to keep step to the crashing discord of its brazen shawms.<sup>34</sup>

In the light of such identification with the culture, Protestantism could hardly avoid a share in the spiritual poverty of the time, or escape wholly from the spirit of disillusionment that swept American life in the 1920's. The American spiritual depression and the decline of Protestantism in the 1920's were intimately correlated.

It was on churches already seriously weakened, already in some decline, that the blow of economic depression fell. When the Lynds returned to Middletown ten years after their first study they found that "the city had been shaken for nearly six years by a catastrophe involving not only people's values but, in the case of many, their very existence. Unlike most socially generated catastrophes, in this case virtually nobody in the community had been cushioned against the blow;



the great knife of the depression had cut down impartially through the entire population, cleaving open the lives and hopes of rich as well as poor."<sup>35</sup> The great knife of depression also cut deep into church life. "Outwardly the churches suffered along with the rest of the nation," wrote Robert M. Miller. "Memberships dropped, budgets were slashed, benevolent and missionary enterprises set adrift, ministers fired, and chapels closed. All this can be demonstrated statistically."<sup>36</sup> The evidence need not be summarized here, but a single illustration of the impact of depression may be in order. In 1927 Shailer Mathews had reported the triumph of religious education; less than ten years later, after depression had done its work, Adelaide Teague Case painted a dark picture.

What shall we say to Christian Education today? Obviously it is in distress. The machinery has broken down. All the denominational boards of education have suffered great losses. The International Council of Religious Education is struggling on with a greatly reduced staff and budget. The Religious Education Association is in abeyance, trying to maintain itself with a handful of volunteers who are holding it together in spite of a staggering debt. Training schools and departments of religious education in universities and seminaries are severely reduced in size; some of them have reorganized or disappeared. The professional leadership is discouraged; directors of religious education are transferring to social work or public education or joining the ranks of the unemployed.<sup>37</sup>

This illustration could be matched by pointing to many other aspects of the churches' programs. Hidden in such a flat statement as "twenty out of thirty-five leading denominations compared in 1934 had reduced their total expenditures by from thirty to fifty per cent and five over fifty per cent" are countless stories of struggles, discouragement, and tragedy.<sup>38</sup>

I believe that this approach to religion in the depression, to distinguish between religious and economic depressions, throws light on many aspects of religious life in the 1930's, but on the following three in particular. First, one of the persistent questions of the depression period was "why no revival of religion?" Some religious leaders, reported Samuel Kincheloe, "actually hailed the depression with rejoicing since they had the idea that previous depressions had 'driven men to God' and felt that the time was overdue for men again to be reminded of the need to let the spiritual dominate the materialistic order."<sup>39</sup> At various times in the American past, depression and revival had been related, classically in 1857-1858. But when the distinction between religious and economic depression is made, it becomes clear that it was an already depressed Protestantism that was overtaken by the economic crisis. Without inner changes it was unable to deal with the needs of the time in a fresh and creative way. The changes that finally came did contribute to conspicuous currents of renewal, but only after the depression itself had passed.

Second, a significant aspect of the religious depression, perplexing to the major denominations, was the mushrooming of the newer and smaller religious groups, the sects. Detailed analyses of particular communities, such as Pope's study of Gastonia, the Lynds' probing of Middletown, and Boisen's samplings of several communities, all document the proliferation of the sects in the depression decade.<sup>40</sup> A number of observers have pointed out that many, probably a majority, of the supporters of sectarian movements were formerly adherents of the older and larger Protestant denominations. That the sects attracted many among the "disinherited" and economically depressed classes has been stated many times.<sup>41</sup> A significant but indirect factor in the rapid growth of the sects in the 1930's would seem to be the internal Protestant depression with its consequent lack of clarity and energy in the churches. Individuals won from older to newer religious bodies often indicated their dissatisfaction with the coldness and formality of the old-line churches.

Third, one of the major shifts of mood which was certainly speeded by the lash of depression was the somewhat precipitous decline of the evangelical liberal theology, which had been so conspicuous a part of Protestant life in the first quarter of the century. There were some signs of the internal disintegration of liberalism even before the first world war.<sup>42</sup> In 1925, Justin Wroe Nixon explained the liberal's dilemma in a forceful article in the *Atlantic*. While the liberals were fighting off the frontal attack of fundamentalism, he declared, they were inadvertently backing toward the humanist position; they were seriously embarrassed by the flank attack of the naturalists and humanists.<sup>43</sup> The latter claimed to speak for a scientifically and naturalistically-minded age far better than the liberals, who were accused of clinging to an unsatisfactory and unstable compromise, could. By the early 1930's, liberals were finding it increasingly difficult, in terms of their optimistic orientation and idealistic heritage, to deal satisfactorily with the realities of depression, the rise of totalitarianism, and the resurgence of barbarism on the world scene. In his famous article of 1933, "After Liberalism—What?" John C. Bennett said emphatically,

The most important fact about contemporary American theology is the disintegration of liberalism. Disintegration may seem too strong a word, but I am using it quite literally. It means that as a structure with a high degree of unity theological liberalism is coming to pieces. The liberal preacher has had a coherent pattern of theological assumptions in the background of his message. He has often had the kind of self-confidence which goes with the preaching of an orthodoxy, for liberalism has been a new orthodoxy in many circles. It is that coherent pattern of assumptions, that self-confidence, which are going. Now many of us are left with a feeling of theological homelessness.<sup>44</sup>



Into the vacuum new theological currents immediately flowed, as interpreters of European dialectical theologies appeared.<sup>45</sup> Benson Y. Landis could report in 1933 that "the economic crisis seems to be breeding a theology of crisis."<sup>46</sup> But one must not press too hard the relationship between the depression and the decline of liberalism. It was not the depression alone, however, but the many crises of the 1930's which together weakened the liberal synthesis and made men receptive to new views. When the *Christian Century* published in 1939 its oft-quoted series of articles on "How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade," many of America's leading theologians told how the fateful events of the decade had led them to shift their position to a neo-liberalism if not a neo-orthodoxy. A characteristic expression of the impact of the decade on the liberals was penned by E. G. Homrighausen. "I saw evidences of man's lostness: the depression, the constant threat of war, the return to brutality on so vast a scale, the loss of the spiritual substance of life that alone gives society structure, the uncertainty and insecurity of life."<sup>47</sup>

Somewhat paradoxically, for the rise of the social gospel had been intimately related to the earlier success of theological liberalism, there was clearly a resurgence of the social gospel in the 1930's, despite the decay of liberalism. The works of Paul A. Carter and Robert M. Miller, previously cited, document this resurgence of social concern abundantly; a hasty examination of denominational social pronouncements in the bleak decade provides convincing confirmation. Hornell Hart reported some years ago on this aspect of religion in the depression in these words:

The most striking increase in religious discussion in magazines has been in the field of Christian ethics. *Readers' Guide* entries under this heading and under "Church and Social Problems," "Christian Socialism," and "Christian Sociology" increased from 17 per 100,000 in 1929 to 140 in 1932, and in 1941 they were still more than twice their 1929 level. The rise and recession of this curve is notably similar to the rise and decline in the amount of unemployment and to other indices of the economic depression.<sup>48</sup>

That there was something of a resurgence of the social gospel I do not doubt, but on the whole the resurgence of social interest in the 1930's is perhaps more to be seen as related to a permanent contribution which the social gospel in its creative days earlier in the century had made to the larger Protestant world: a sensitivity to social issues and an awareness of social need. A Protestantism which had been alerted by such a vigorous social movement could not easily be callous to serious social need. Not a few of those who took leadership in movements to the theological right were also conspicuous for their continued attention to social thought and action.

## II

I have argued that Protestantism entered the period of religious and economic depression as the dominant American religious tradition, closely identified with the culture. But Protestantism emerged from depression no longer in such a position; it was challenged by forces outside the Protestant churches and questioned by some within. Siegfried, who identified Protestantism as the national religion as late as 1927, saw the trend of the times: "The worldliness of this Protestantism and its pretensions to be a national religion reserved for the privileged few have antagonized many of its followers as well as its adversaries. They feel that something is lacking, almost the spirit of religion itself; for the ultimate has been reduced until it embraces little more than ethics."<sup>49</sup> And though the Lynds had indicated that *in theory* religious beliefs dominated all other activities in Middletown, they hastened to add that "actually, large regions of Middletown's life appear uncontrolled by them."<sup>50</sup> In this period, the vast rural reservoirs of Protestant strength were rather rapidly being outmatched by the flooding cities. The Protestantism that threw itself so strongly behind prohibition in the 1920's was one in which the rural tradition was still very strong. Indeed, prohibition itself was in one sense part of the struggle of country against city. The legislative superintendent of the Anti-Saloon League recognized in 1917 that the Eighteenth Amendment had to pass before 1920, for with reapportionment would come, as he put it, "forty new wet Congressmen . . . from the great wet centers with their rapidly increasing population."<sup>51</sup> The final failure of prohibition made it clearer to many Protestants that the familiar American culture in which they had flourished and with which they had been so closely identified was going. The comfortable identification with American cultural patterns no longer seemed so relevant or so helpful.

The beginnings of Protestant renewal, which Herbert Wallace Schneider notes as arising in the "dark 30's" and continuing as an "offensive which has grown steadily since then,"<sup>52</sup> developed in part as religious leaders challenged the identification of Protestantism with American culture and summoned the church to recover its own independent standing-ground. In 1935, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached the famous sermon in which he appealed to Protestants to go "beyond modernism." He exclaimed,

And in that new enterprise the watchword will be not, Accommodate yourself to the prevailing culture! but, Stand out from it and challenge it! For this inescapable fact, which again and again in Christian history has called modernism to its senses, we face: we cannot harmonize Christ himself with modern culture. What Christ does to modern culture is to challenge it.<sup>53</sup>

And in that same year, to cite another example, appeared a book with

the revealing title *The Church Against the World*. It vigorously protested the identification of the church with American culture. Francis P. Miller wrote, "The plain fact is that the domestication of the Protestant community in the United States within the framework of the national culture has progressed as far as in any western land. The degradation of the American Protestant church is as complete as the degradation of any other national Protestant church."<sup>54</sup> What the church should therefore do was stated by H. Richard Niebuhr in these words:

We live, it is evident, in a time of hostility when the church is imperiled not only by an external worldliness but by one that has established itself within the Christian camp. Our position is inside a church which has been on the retreat and which has made compromises with the enemy in thought, in organization, and in discipline. Finally, our position is in the midst of that increasing group in the church which has heard the command to halt, to remind itself of its mission, and to await further orders.<sup>55</sup>

As James H. Smylie has analyzed the theological trend of a steadily enlarging group in American Protestantism, it was "a trend from an irrelevant attachment to society toward a relevant detachment to society without becoming irrelevantly detached from society."<sup>56</sup> The "Christ of culture" motif, which had long been of great significance in American Protestantism, was being challenged from within. From a widening circle of Protestants seeking to return again by one route or another to the independent sources of their faith, there came movements of renewal which marked the beginning of the end of the religious depression for Protestants. There were also other sources of renewal, but this one bears an especial relation to our theme.

I have entitled this paper the "American" religious depression because there was a nationally observable spiritual lethargy evident in the 1920's and 1930's, and because the then clearly dominant religious tradition of the country was in decline. Certainly both Judaism and Roman Catholicism were deeply affected by the economic depression; to what extent they were internally affected by spiritual depression the authorities on those bodies must say. Jewish congregations enjoyed a healthy growth in the 1926-36 decade, reporting a 13.7 per cent increase. Roman Catholicism also grew, but considerably more slowly than in the preceding ten year period. The church had then reported an 18.3 per cent growth, which dropped to 7 per cent for 1926-1936.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this change was influenced both by the cutting off of immigration and by the generally unfriendly attitude toward religion. But neither Judaism or Catholicism was embarrassed by too close identification with the surrounding culture, for both felt their minority situation rather keenly. When George N. Shuster wrote his widely-read work on the Catholic spirit in America in 1927, he began by noting that "twenty or thirty

years ago ambition would have dictated silence about one's mere connection with what is termed the Roman Church. Today prudence still seems to suggest keeping this matter under cover as fully as possible."<sup>58</sup> But during the depression years a significant change took place; Protestantism declined and lost its sense of being the national religion, while Roman Catholicism, reflecting advances made during and after the war years, consolidated by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, rather quickly became more visible on the American scene. It was less than fifteen years from the time that Shuster wrote the words just quoted that the popular historian Theodore Maynard made this claim: "Protestantism—especially American Protestantism—is now so doctrinally decayed as to be incapable of offering any serious opposition to the sharp sword of the Spirit, as soon as we can make up our minds to use it. Except for isolated 'fundamentalists,'—and these are pretty thoroughly discredited and without intellectual leadership—Catholicism could cut through Protestantism as through so much butter."<sup>59</sup> The contrast between the two quotations dramatizes an important religious transition of the depression period. The upshot of that transition which focused in depression years, though it had been long in the making, was summarized by Will Herberg in his book, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*:

In net effect, Protestantism today no longer regards itself either as a religious movement sweeping the continent or as a national church representing the religious life of the people; Protestantism understands itself today primarily as one of the three religious communities in which twentieth century America has come to be divided.<sup>60</sup>

During the period of religious and economic depression, then, the "Protestant era" in America was brought to a close; Protestantism emerged no longer as the "national religion." The test of depression was a severe one; it laid bare certain weaknesses in American Protestantism. But the repudiation of the virtual identification of Protestantism with American culture by an able and growing group of religious leaders freed many Protestants to recover in a fresh way their own heritages and their original sources of inspiration. The depression stimulated many Protestants to seek new and deeper understandings of their own religious heritage, though this "positive" contribution of the depression to religion could probably be appreciated only later. The years of religious and economic depression were years of significant transition for the American churches, for in that period trends long in the making were dramatically revealed, and developments important to the future became visible.

1. *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 63.
2. "The Recovery of the Religious Sentiment," in Vergilius Ferm, ed., *Contemporary American Theology: Theological Autobiographies* (2 vols., New York: Round Table Press, 1932-1933), II, 367.
3. *Atlantic Monthly*, 143 (January-June, 1929), 378.
4. Fennell P. Turner and Frank Knight Sanders, eds., *The Foreign Missions Conference of North America . . . 1926* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1926), pp. 125-47.
5. "Some Conditions in North America that Affect Foreign Missions," in Leslie B. Moss and Mabel H. Brown, eds., *The Foreign Missions Conference of North America . . . 1934* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1934), p. 148.
6. *Research Memorandum on Religion in the Depression* (New York: Social Science Research Council, Bulletin 33, 1937), p. 51.
7. Based on a study of the figures by the Rev. Donald A. Crosby, whose assistance in the research for this paper I acknowledge with thanks.
8. *Current History*, XXXIII (October, 1930), 25.
9. C. Luther Fry, "Changes in Religious Organizations," *Recent Social Trends* (2 vols.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), II, 1046.
10. Stanley High, "The Need for Youth," in Leslie B. Moss, ed., *The Foreign Missions Conference of North America, 1929* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1929), p. 152.
11. "What the Church Has to Say to Business Men About Foreign Missions," in Leslie B. Moss, ed., *The Foreign Missions Conference of North America, 1928* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference, 1928), p. 85.
12. *Home Missions Council Annual Report . . . 1928* (New York: Home Missions Council, 1928), p. 80.
13. Kincheloe, *Research Memorandum*, pp. 133 f.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 51; *Recent Social Trends*, II, 1055.
15. *The U. S. Looks At Its Churches* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1930), p. 58.
16. H. C. Weber, *Evangelism: A Graphic Survey* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 181 f. I have had the opportunity of seeing charts plotting the "evangelistic index" and summarizing membership trends prepared by the Rev. Harold Edgar Martin; in general they all show decline beginning about 1925 and not showing significant upturn until the middle 1930's.
17. *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), p. 70, quoting Ellis J. Hough, "Terrors of the Protestant Ministry," *Presbyterian Advance*, XL (Jan. 30, 1930), 18.
18. *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, p. 47.
19. *The Confessions of a Puzzled Parson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 191.
20. *Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p. 2.
21. "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's," *American Historical Review*, 64 (1959), 833. See also the perceptive article by Henry F. May, "Shifting Perspectives in the 1920's," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 43 (1956), 405-27.
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## ANNOUNCEMENT

A new feature is planned for this journal under the title, **ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS**. The purpose is to inform readers about conferences, research, and major enterprises of publication of interest to church historians. Items may be sent in as announcements of forthcoming events, descriptions of work in progress, or reports on results. Deadlines are March 20, June 20, September 20, and December 20. Members are invited to send brief statements (subject to necessary editing) to F. A. Norwood, Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois. Items of personal nature and individual book notices should not be sent.