



What counts as ‘Christian’ is never given but always achieved. This historicist insight, which sounds simple but is vigorously contested by many Christian believers, is essential to understanding the relation of religion to academic freedom in the United States. Threats to the independence of universities come overwhelmingly from evangelical Protestants who believe they speak for divine authority – for an authority outside of human history and thus not subject to cultural give-and-take. The defense of American academia in the third decade of the twenty-first century is led by an alliance of secularists with liberal, ecumenical Protestants. These ‘other’ Protestants – the liberals – understand that their own version of Christianity is the product of centuries of human striving. These history-accepting Protestants are often called ‘mainline’, but this label is misleading.

Why is the term *mainline* misleading? How does the acceptance or denial of historicity affect the contrasting political behavior of the two families of Protestants? How has the conflict between these two religious families affected the history and current situation of higher education in the United States? Of what significance is the recent sharp decline of religious affiliation in the United States?

This essay addresses these questions.

*Mainline* caught on about 1960 as a term for the ecumenically inclined, theologically liberal family of Protestant churches because of their class position. These Protestants were predominantly middle class and relatively prosperous. Their dominations were the ‘classical’ American Protestant groups: Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Northern Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed, Quakers, and a smattering of smaller Reformed and Anabaptist confessions. The term *mainline* was misleading, first because it was not a religious marker of any kind, and second, because shortly after the label became current it was rendered crashingly anachronistic by the decisive decline in size and social influence of this family of churches, and the simultaneous rise of a rival family of Protestant churches, traditionally called ‘fundamentalist’ but since the 1940s preferring to be known as ‘evangelicals’<sup>1</sup>.

Distinguishing between these two families is far from an exercise in arcana. It is essential to an understanding of the religious matrix of both the current controversies over higher education in the United States and the deeper paradox of an increasingly secular American society saddled with an increasingly Christian politics.

The distinction between the two families became a huge reality in the early twentieth century. The most highly educated of Protestant preachers and lay leaders encouraged the people in the pews to absorb the findings of modern science and to accept the demographic diversity of an immigrant-based society

<sup>1</sup> For an account of how the ecumenical-evangelical divide has developed in modern America, including how the term ‘mainline’ achieved currency, see David A. Hollinger, *Christianity’s American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), esp. 2-5.

and of the world beyond. These reformers were often called ‘modernists’, and were opposed by ‘fundamentalists’. The fundamentalists were especially exercised by the ‘Higher Criticism’, the historical approach to scripture that, by emphasizing the human role in the creation of the Bible, seemed to undermine its authority. Isaiah written by different authors living centuries apart from one another? Some of Paul’s letters not written by Paul? Genesis not written by Moses at all, but rather was an amalgamation of ancient texts written at different times during the consolidation of the Hebrew people and later awkwardly cobbled together? Anathema!

Fundamentalists were also outraged at the willingness of the modernists to downplay the goal of conversion in foreign missions, and to accept non-Christian faiths as worthy of respect. Less important, but more widely publicized in secular media, was the disagreement over evolution. Darwinism’s threat to a literal reading of scripture was real, but it was the sacred text, after all, that provided the alleged basis for resisting the Darwinian revolution in natural history. That’s why the historical approach to the Bible was such a big deal. What most animated opposition to ‘modernism’ was not evolution, but the critique of missions as culturally imperialist, and, above all, the apparent weakening of the authority of the holy scriptures by which evolution could be judged and missionary activity authorized. Fundamentalism developed not out of its own dynamic, but as a reaction to the initiatives of liberalizing Protestants<sup>2</sup>.

This conflict continued down through World War II, but its terms were altered when Fundamentalist leaders decided to appropriate for themselves the label, ‘evangelical’. Traditionally, this word applied to any Christian group trying to spread the gospel, but it appealed to theologically and culturally conservative Protestants who were looking for a more marketable label for themselves and who, in 1942, founded the National Association of Evangelicals. Adding to possible confusion of labels, the liberals stopped calling themselves ‘modernists’ and by 1960 were commonly called by the religiously irrelevant term, ‘mainline’<sup>3</sup>.

‘Ecumenical’ became the preferred term for the liberal family of American Protestants because it invokes a religiously salient feature of this family’s operations: a willingness to cooperate with people and groups espousing a variety of theological orientations and even secularists as well as practitioners of non-

<sup>2</sup> The classic study of how the Fundamentalist movement of the 1920s developed as a revolt against the modernizing, historicizing initiatives of liberals is George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Two books essential to an understanding of the ecumenical Protestantism of the mid-twentieth century decades are Gene Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), and *Good and Mad: Mainline Protestant Churchwomen, 1920-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). For the longer history, see David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Christian religions. Evangelicals drew a much tighter circle around the faith, and in the post-war decades created a formidable collection of sectarian institutions designed to counter the ecumenical seminaries, magazines, trans-disciplinary organizations, and radio and television networks.

While ecumenical leaders urged their rank and file to repudiate their provincial heritage, evangelical leaders called on their followers to take pride in their strictly bounded communities. In a characteristic utterance, the liberal theologian and historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith declared that «the life of human beings is cast in a multicultural context», where no single community, especially white American Protestants, could count themselves inherently superior to other communities<sup>4</sup>. It was in this spirit that ecumenical intellectuals helped to lead the major universities of the mid-century decades, including Harvard, Berkeley, Chicago, Princeton, and Yale, while evangelicals clustered at Wheaton, Biola, and a variety of other colleges committed to a literalist and deeply anti-historical interpretation of scripture and to the unique saving power of Christian belief. What counted as ‘academic freedom’ in mainstream American academia was understood in evangelical circles as intellectual slavery to secular norms<sup>5</sup>.

This was the ecumenical-evangelical divide as the United States entered the 1960s and experienced a series of striking events that diminished the influence of the ecumenicals, placed the evangelicals in a position of unprecedented power, and culminated in the Republican Party’s attacks on universities that have become so conspicuous a feature of the second presidential administration of Donald Trump.

Central to this cascade of events was the decision of the ecumenical leadership to vigorously oppose the Vietnam War, to support to the Black movement for Civil Rights, to demand the diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China, and to offer increasing sympathy for feminist initiatives challenging traditional family structures and practices. In all cases, this generated fierce opposition from evangelicals and the increasingly adamant charge that the liberals were substituting politics for religion.

Some ecumenical churchgoers switched to evangelical churches. But a much larger exit was prompted by the opposite feeling that the ecumenical leaders were not moving fast enough and far enough in progressive directions. Young people by the millions decided not to affiliate with the churches of their parents, finding communities in the secular movements of the 1960s and following decades. During the last third of the twentieth century, membership in all ecumenical denominations decline by at least a quarter, and in many cases

<sup>4</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Christianity’s Third Great Challenge, *Christian Century*, April 27, 1960, 505.

<sup>5</sup> An incisive analysis of how evangelicals understood academic freedom is found in Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2014), 2, 110.

more. Secularization, so long the norm in the societies of western Europe, had finally taken hold in the United States<sup>6</sup>.

Evangelical churches flourished as safe harbors for people who wanted to be counted as Christians without engaging two challenges that the ecumenical leaders insisted had to be faced: the challenge of a demographically diverse society and the challenge of a scientifically informed culture. The popular evangelist Billy Graham exploded into the American religious scene in the 1950s just when the ecumenical leaders were becoming more outspoken than ever about the evils of racial injustice and the need for a gospel that was consistent with modern science. But what did Graham mean by ‘accepting Christ?’.

It could mean remaining within the confines of the inherited culture depicted in Norman Rockwell’s *Saturday Evening Post* covers<sup>7</sup> while simply promising to be better at it. To be better, that is, at living up to that culture’s self-image. Practicing the Golden Rule, being faithful to one’s spouse, eschewing pornography and same-sex intimacy, avoiding the abuse of alcohol and drugs, extending a helping hand to less well-off neighbors, praying on a daily basis, and supporting the essential of the American economic and political order until its injustices were corrected by changes in the human heart were not necessarily signs of God’s grace. But these behaviors were expected of those who came to Graham’s altar. That was enough.

It was far from enough for ecumenical leaders. But as the National Council of Churches and its affiliated denominations continued their campaign for a more cosmopolitan Protestantism, and while millions of younger generations in those denominations became post-Protestants, Billy Graham’s kind of religion turned out to work very well for politically conservative corporate interests looking for political tools by which to weaken the regulatory regime put in place by the New Deal. Let religion be focused on individual moral behavior and churchly practice, and not fuss with government policy, argued the many wealthy individuals who cemented a link between conservative religion and conservative politics. By bankrolling evangelical magazines, schools, seminaries, and media, anti-regulation donors brought evangelicalism from the margins of American life to its center. Hence the safe harbor: conservative political money enabled evangelical leaders to reach more and more Americans. No longer ‘poor country cousins’, evangelicals learned that they did not have to be mainline, so to speak, to be mainstream. In the meantime, the decline of the

<sup>6</sup> Of the many studies of the coming of European-style secularization to the United States, see David Voes & Mark Chaves, Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?, *American Journal of Sociology* (March 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Painter Norman Rockwell was famous for representing warm, community affirming scenes in which average Americans showed respect and affection for one another. From the 1930s through the 1960s, *The Saturday Evening Post* was one of the most popular of American magazines, patronized as ‘middlebrow’ by many intellectuals but read faithfully by millions of Americans.

ecumenical churches deprived the nation of what had long been the most important bulwark against the influence of evangelicals<sup>8</sup>.

In the process of courting the evangelicals, the Republican Party was gradually overtaken by evangelicalism's anti-intellectualism and its Manichean tendencies<sup>9</sup>. Since these evangelical traits have fuelled the attacks on academia of our own time, it is important to understand how the evangelical client captured its Republican patron.

A pivotal step was the Republican adoption of the notorious 'Southern Strategy'. Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan all understood the potential of voters uncomfortable with school integration and with federal protections of the voting rights of African Americans. Reagan began his 1980 presidential campaign by extolling states' rights in Mississippi, while virtually standing on the graves of three civil rights activists murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1964. Shortly after his Mississippi speech, Reagan famously and cleverly told a Texas convention of the National Association of Evangelicals: «I know you can't endorse me, but I endorse you». For Reagan, evangelicalism, states' rights, and the mantra 'government is the problem' all worked harmoniously.

A portentous fact is that the states with the greatest preponderance of voters Reagan was trying to reach were also states with the highest percentage of evangelical Protestants and with the lowest levels of education. Hence the Southern strategy was also, by implication, a religious strategy and an educational strategy. Many evangelical Protestants were and are college graduates, to be sure, but as late as 1970, 18 percent of the pastors serving congregations affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention had no schooling beyond high school. In 2020, 22 percent of clergy serving white evangelical congregations had not completed college, compared with 8 percent of those serving 'main-line' ecumenical congregations<sup>10</sup>.

Decade by decade, the evangelical client's grip on its patron became stronger. Once the party's dependence on evangelical voters – about 80 percent of whom were voting Republican even prior to Trump's first presidential campaign – became pronounced, the culture of those voters had to be honored, at

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the ecumenical-evangelical conflicts during the era of Billy Graham, see Hollinger, *Christianity's American Fate*, esp. 86-89, 102-105.

<sup>9</sup> There is now a rich literature on the culture of American evangelical churches. See especially Kritin Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020), Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It By Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Democracy* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2024), and Katherine Stewart, *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Mark Chaves *et al.*, *The Clergy in America: A Report from the National Survey of Religious Leaders* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2025).

least up to a point. Evangelicalism's weak commitment to modern standards of epistemic plausibility became a fuzzy boundary of Republican discourse<sup>11</sup>.

Some well-educated Republican leaders had little interest in evangelical habits of thought and feeling but simply preferred a corporate-friendly, more-authoritarian-than-not political order, yet as each election came and went evangelicalism proved to be too powerful an instrument to go unused. Already by 2016, before Trump achieved control of the Republican Party, that party's abandonment of those 16 coastal states was so far advanced that of the 32 senators representing those states, only Susan Collins of Maine and Patrick Toomey of Pennsylvania were Republicans. By prioritizing White Southern evangelicals and their counterparts in the Middle West and in the mountain states, the party gradually abandoned most of the states with highly educated electorates.

Evangelicalism also brought into the Republican Party a Manichean sensibility that fostered sharp polarization and made the Republicans in both houses of Congress less willing to compromise with Democrats. When the Christian supremacist Senator Josh Hawley in 2017 asserted that the 'ultimate authority' of Jesus Christ had to be established in 'every sphere of life', including the government of the United States, there was nothing the least bit novel about it. Generations of preachers had encouraged the faithful to see themselves as a morally superior community, required by God to either separate themselves from a sinful society or to take it over and subject it to Christian authority. At the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, the fundamentalist leader Harold Ockenga delivered an apocalyptic address calling on the faithful to make war against the New Deal and a variety of secular and liberal forces in the nation<sup>12</sup>.

Donald Trump himself spoke in exactly this idiom. Here is one Manichean and classically apocalyptic utterance delivered in 2023 before an audience of evangelicals: «This is the final battle. With you at my side, we will demolish the deep state. We will expel the warmongers from our government, we will drive out the globalists, we will cast out the communists, [...] we will throw off the sick political class that hates us, we will rout the fake news media and we will liberate America from these villains once and for all»<sup>13</sup>.

In other Bible-related effusions before evangelical audiences, Trump promised to restore Christian hegemony so resoundingly that evangelicals would never have to vote again in order to advance evangelical priorities. Only a Christian-supremacist understanding of what 'truth' actually is could deny that Trump reverses the old Quaker slogan of speaking truth to power and speaks

<sup>11</sup> David A. Hollinger, 'The Evangelical Capture of the Republican Party and Its Implications for Academia', *Social Research* (Summer 2025), 525-553.

<sup>12</sup> For Hawley, see Katherine Stewart, 'The Roots of Josh Hawley's Rage', *New York Times*, January 11, 2021; for Okenga, see Matthew Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 287.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Moran, 'Donald Trump Shares Chilling "Final Battle" Video for Supporters', *Huffpost*, May 31, 2024.

power to truth. Theologically liberal versions of the faith, like those of the ecumenical churches, have never paid much attention to the Manichean themes in the Bible. But the Republicans, by developing evangelicals as clients, catapulted evangelical ideas from the margins of American public life to its center.

This evangelical capture of the Republican Party has greatly influenced the atmosphere in which universities operate. Education, especially liberal arts education, has become a threat to the Republican Party. The Republican vested interest in an electorate with limited education makes excellent sense when we consider what education can do in several of the policy domains of interest to Republicans. Education enables individuals to more easily recognize indicators of global warming; to appreciate the value of vaccines; to understand the past's disabling legacy for descendants of enslaved Americans; to grasp the evidence that Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election; to recognize how much of human life opens up for women when they have reproductive choice; to understand how tariffs affect consumer expenses; to follow the details of what happened in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021; to confront the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Zionist militias in 1948 as a basic part of modern history; and to accept a host of other realities that 'low-information voters', as the press calls them, often deny, especially when encouraged to do so by confident voices claiming to speak from, or on behalf of, the voter's own identity group, often carrying out purposeful campaigns of disinformation. Education helps people see through the lies Trump told throughout the 2024 campaign and encourages skepticism toward the QAnon conspiracy ideas that appeal to many evangelicals.

Can higher education be largely reduced to technical-vocational functions? If that happens, universities would be less able to generate critical perspectives on public affairs<sup>14</sup>. When President Richard Nixon and, later, the Republican then-Senator and Vice President J. D. Vance identified 'professors' as an enemy, they were not talking about professors of electrical engineering or nursing. They understood that it was the humanities and social sciences that represented a threat to the cultural norms they defended. Vance often revealed himself to be Christian supremacist, even to the point of telling the press in 2025 that he hoped his non-Christian wife would eventually convert to his own Catholic faith.

Knowledge about nature, history, and society as developed and taught in the liberal arts can threaten the truth claims learned in churches and families. Especially does the study of history, sociology, political science, literature, and philosophy promote critical reconsideration of inherited religious ideas and tribal customs. The Republican right knows that traditional research and teaching, entirely apart from ideological overreach, are an obstacle to their ideal America.

<sup>14</sup> There are many discussions of the Republican campaign to take command of universities; see, e.g., The Administration Intends to Capture Higher Education for Ideological Purposes, *New York Times*, November 23, 2025.

All this has happened during years that religious affiliation in the United States has sharply declined, yielding the paradox of an increasingly secular American society saddled with an increasingly Christian politics.

The most dramatic and widely discussed sign of increased secularity is the rapid decline in numbers of individuals declaring a religious affiliation of any kind. As recently as 1990, only 8% of Americans told pollsters that they had no religious affiliation. The other 92% included a few Muslims and Buddhists but was overwhelmingly Protestant and Catholic. But that percentage increased until the 2020s, when nearly one-third of the population gave that answer<sup>15</sup>.

The pace and extent of this change is astonishing in a nation which has long been an exception to the secularizing trend in other industrialized countries of the North Atlantic West. The character of the change is sometimes denied, often through the insistence that many of the individuals who have left the churches are ‘spiritual but not religious’. While anecdotal evidence gives this claim some credibility – although just what is meant by ‘spiritual’ is rarely specified – the best of the social scientific surveys report that only about one-fourth of the self-proclaimed ‘nones’ regarded spirituality as important to them. Moreover, the non-religious population is more indifferent to religion than atheistic, a fact even more disturbing to many apologists for religion because it implies that religious ideas are not regarded as even worthy of refutation. Only about 5% of Americans identify as atheist. Hence the remainder of the nearly one-third of Americans who are not religious affiliated are even farther from religious engagement than the god-denying atheists<sup>16</sup>.

The remaining ecumenicals are indeed allied with secularists in the defense of pluralist democracy and academic professionalism, but their numbers are small and their institutions are uncertain in their direction. The struggle to defend both academic freedom and pluralist democracy is increasingly led by secular Americans.

Another result of the massive exodus of the ecumenicals from the edifice of American Christianity is that evangelicals now control that edifice. What is now popularly recognized as ‘Christian’ in the United States is evangelical Protestantism and the most conservative of its Catholic allies. If we can speak of Christianity as a global project with national franchises, there is no doubt that the American franchise of this project is firmly in the hands of evangelicals<sup>17</sup>.

This reality has important consequences for that global project itself. Christianity is the most successful hegemonic project in the modern history of the

<sup>15</sup> <<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe>> is one of many methodologically respected reports by survey researchers of the growth of religious non-affiliation in the United States.

<sup>16</sup> The most complete and authoritative study of religious non-affiliation in the United States is Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> This matches the pattern of right-wing seizure of the European franchise of the global Christian project; see the excellent study by Udi Greenberg, *The End of the Schism: Catholics, Protestants, and the Remaking of Christian Life in Europe, 1880s-1970s* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2025).

North Atlantic West, so its sharp decline in the most powerful of the nations in which it has long persisted cannot fail to be counted as a world-historical event. Its meaning is further clarified by the heavily evangelical and Pentecostal character of Christianity in the Global South.

What, then, is Christianity? Many of the most careful observers of the practices and beliefs of Christians in the Global South are struck with how different the Christian project looks in Uganda and the Philippines from the way it looks in East Anglia and Flanders and Venice. Is the Christianity of the Global South a ‘third church’, comparable to historic Catholicism and Protestantism? Be that as it may, what is not in doubt is how different are the shapes taken by the Christian project from continent to continent and century to century. It all depends on who gets control of the local franchise.

Christianity has been a movement of sensibilities, impulses, ideals, perceptions, loves, hatreds, and programs that are brought into it and are processed by distinctive groups who manage to build a critical mass of people willing to recognize them as Christian. Even Christianity’s original, movement-defining documents – coming to more than 30,000 verses, routinely cherry-picked for particular purposes – are themselves of disparate ancestries in the ancient Mediterranean world. The purposes credibly advanced in the name of Jesus of Nazareth are not infinite, but they are staggering in their diversity and range.<sup>18</sup>

Most persons speaking on behalf of evangelicalism continue to insist that their version of Christianity is the true one. They inherit a tradition according to which the books of the bible are to be understood as ‘the word of God’, and not just the constructions of God’s message by faith-affirming human beings of antiquity. Their persistence in this denial of history marks the huge divide between evangelicals, on the one side, and ecumenicals and their secular allies on the other. Ecumenical Protestants have long since accepted modern scholarship’s discoveries about the actual history of the books of the bible, which is in keeping with their willingness to try, in each generation, to create a version of the gospel that will deal with changing times. This ecumenical-evangelical divide in religion connects neatly with the common demand of evangelicals in the age of Trump to ‘make American great again’ in the sense of going back to the way things were before feminism, multiculturalism, racial equality, and other modern innovations took hold.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Among the finest studies of the actual history of the Bible and its uses is John Barton, *A History of the Bible: The Story of the World’s Most Influential Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). See also the many volumes of Bart D. Ehrman, including *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> An indispensable study of evangelical denial of history is David Congdon, *Who Is a True Christian? Contesting Religious Identity in American Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024). For a detailed account of evangelical ideas about the authority of the bible, see Worthen, *Apostles*, passim.

