

Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America

by Martin E. Marty

(Dial Press; 295 pp.; \$8.95)

Clyde A. Holbrook

Religious movements seeking to justify themselves by dwelling on their past heroic achievements relegate low points to the status of aberrations and herald high points as revelations of the true "essence" of the tradition. Not so this book. Here the emphasis is on American Protestantism's failure in realizing its original purposes. What began as an effort to build on the American continent an "empire" of righteousness was imperceptibly transformed into the idea of a nation merely influenced by Protestant evangelicalism and, in these latter days, one in which Protestantism, in some quarters, has become a sanctifying agency of our national culture.

Marty, as a white Protestant historian, writes with a compassionate wit about this transition, at the same time suggesting that a kind of penitence is overdue for what has been done in the name of Protestant Christianity. The book reflects the contemporary mood of self-criticism in American civilization and will, no doubt, set on edge the teeth of those who sentimentally summon the nation back to the faith of the Protestant forefathers, "which has made this nation great." On the other hand, Marty's analysis may be acclaimed as a vindication of those who have long since given up on the Protestant component and prefer to blame the ills of America on their favorite whipping boy, "the Protestant ethic." This repudiation of a Protestant past, however, does not receive unequivocal support from Marty's circumspect reading of two centuries of religious and social history. A decline from early evangelical hopes is documented, but American culture still draws from a deposit of Protestantism that affects

all of us, regardless of ethnic and religious origin and experience.

This volume in a projected Bicentennial History series entitled *Two Centuries of American Life* is conceived along the broad lines suitable to such a comprehensive series. Marty has arranged his work in topical form without swerving from the chronological line. In this way, he treats the confrontations between Protestants and Indians, blacks, Jews and Catholic immigrants, as well as the problems of territorial expansion, denominational growth, urbanization and theological strife as intersecting units without losing the focus upon the continuing theme of Protestant experience.

A crucial interpretive theme employed by Marty is the conflict between the symbols of the post-millennial tradition represented by Jonathan Edwards, who believed that the latter-day glory was to begin in America, and those of the pre-millennial type, such as Dwight L. Moody, who saw the Lord's glory appearing only after the national tribulation of judgment upon a corrupt civilization. "The Edwardseans," Marty writes, "with countless variations, have been the more optimistic transformers of society, without neglecting the individuals; the Moodyites have been the more pessimistic, concentrating on rescuing the individual and then turning him loose, if he will, to help some other persons in the society."

If we take Edwards as a focal figure in the interpretation of Protestantism, an alternative but closely related theme suggests itself. What happened in American Protestantism was a declension from Edwards' towering theological objectivism in which divine sovereignty judged as well as saved the structure of society

and individuals and therefore could not be harnessed in a utilitarian manner to the American venture. After Edwards, a predominantly utilitarian notion of God became wedded to the success of Protestantism and in turn became the spiritual guarantor of national policies. In this way, Protestantism lost its critical, prophetic thrust and merged with the cultural ethos. This alternative scheme simply indicates that the complexities of the Protestant experience can be read in more than one way.

Among the lessons to be drawn from Marty's narrative is that Protestants of every stripe have had to learn to live with a religious and cultural pluralism that defies the old symbols of a covenantal theology, once assumed to be dominant. The antique hope of welding this nation into a Protestant, or even Christian, unit is a cause long since lost.

Yet, the resources of Protestantism's variegated heritage can still have enormous influence in the future if Protestantism's genius for reinterpretation of root ideas is exercised by leaders as resourceful as it has had in the past. It may well be, as Marty suggests, that formal theology has seldom won wide acceptance among the clergy and laity, yet it is precisely in hewing out fresh theological positions responsive to, but not overwhelmed by, the unique American situation that those who take up this difficult task will not only transform Protestantism's vision of itself but also contribute richly to America's self-understanding. The condescension with which Protestantism has sometimes addressed America is dead, or soon will be; also dead may be Protestantism's abject dependence upon European theological models. The matrix in which a new theology will work is a rapidly changing one, in which racial tension, poverty, foreign policy and ecology will be as much a part of the theological enterprise as the reformulation of Protestant convictions and doctrine. In fact, as Marty's study shows, something like this has been going on from the very beginning of the Protestant experience in the new world.

Among the book's limitations is its slighting of the positive contributions Protestants have made to the solution of racial problems involving both Indians and blacks. Marty suggests that Protestantism has an inbred affinity for rural and small-town life, as though this tendency was essential to the nature of Protestantism itself. In treating theological trends, the author bypasses the influence of the more radical empirical theologies of H. N. Wieman (he gets one reference) and D. C. MacIntosh in the 1930's and '40's, although these significant thinkers represented a uniquely American version of religious thought. The great crises of the Civil War and two world wars are not dealt with specifically, although tendencies before and after these events are carefully treated. The alienation of labor from the Protestant churches is insufficiently discussed. Pointed, pertinent quotations spice the book; but context and documentation are missing, thus denying the pedant the means to check Marty's reading of the sources. There are chapter notes for books consulted, but they do not identify the passages cited.

These limitations notwithstanding, the book is fascinating reading. It is swift paced, searching in its analysis, and, if it be not frivolous to say so, entertaining even when it hurts.

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Youth and Dissent by Kenneth Keniston

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 403 pp.; \$9.95)

Todd Gitlin

Kenneth Keniston has a deserved reputation as one of the keenest observers writing about the dissident young in America. In a time when social theory decomposes at least as rapidly as social institutions, Keniston's *The Uncommitted* (1965) holds up as a classic—an almost cinematic portrait of the increasingly familiar alienated college student and his parental types and a full-fledged analysis of the social matrix of explicit alienation as well. His discussions there of the stresses on the “technological ego” and the consequences of the languishing of utopianism in America still stand as marvelously seminal evocations of some central discontents of this civilization.

Keniston's *Young Radicals* (1968), on the other hand, should have failed, and somehow didn't. From a tiny and unrepresentative sample of the radical movement, Keniston distilled a contrasting family map and an analysis of potential political traps and opportunities. Much of his analysis and cautions still hold up. What is remarkable in this second book is not what Keniston did not anticipate (he holds no monopoly on faulty predictions) but what he did—the emergence of youth as a “stage of life” in the developmental sense of his mentor, Erik Erikson; and the pressures on aging, full-time activists to find ways of combining radicalism with work and family. Along with his use of Erikson's supple psycho-historical method, and despite the limits of his research procedure, some remarkable intuition operates in Keniston's work.

The earlier works, then, generate great expectations for Keniston's new book, expectations which will be disappointed. Having been both an “uncommitted” and a young radical, I suppose I was looking to Keniston to be my fortune-teller. An ab-

surd anticipation, of course, but I was nonetheless disappointed. Keniston's sensitivity to the future emerging within the present seems to have slackened. Moreover, the future of the “new opposition” hinges substantially—though not, of course, totally—on external political developments about which he chooses not to speculate.

Youth and Dissent is a collection of mostly unrevised, previously published essays. There runs through it, as Keniston notes, an “increasing awareness of the inadequacies of the structures of liberal thought, which I was brought up to take for granted, and my increasing sense of a need to re-evaluate and go beyond traditional liberalism.” But the trajectory of this progress is like a journey through a maze, proceeding by fits and starts, marked by dead-ends and false beginnings.

Most of the territory in the first essays was more amply covered in his earlier books, particularly *The Uncommitted*. In subsequent essays, Keniston performs variations on his main themes: the development of the “protest-prone” personality in a protest-prone culture; the divide separating the experience and worldview of the activist and that of the alienated, of the “politico” and of the “hippie”; the centrality of violence as modern spectre, replacing sex as the prime material of repression. There is much here to learn from as well as to take issue with, and Keniston always writes lucidly. As X-rays of the counter-culture, these essays are among the most penetrating.

Yet there are significant omissions. The absence of comparisons between dissident youth in America and in other industrial nations is a major deficiency. The student is still “he”; the women's liberation movement,