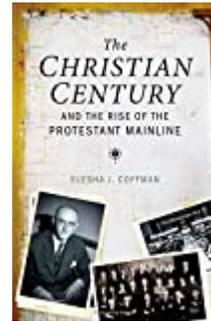


Elesha J. Coffman. *"The Christian Century" and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 288 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-993859-9.



Reviewed by Aaron Davis (Kansas State University)

Published on H-AmRel (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley (Vanderbilt University)

Examinations centered upon the rise and fall of America's largest Protestant denominations over the course of the twentieth century have been appearing with greater frequency in the last decade. These studies began to appear as far back as when the decline of theologically liberal churches' membership numbers became widespread in the last third of the twentieth century. While some scholars have explored the implications of dwindling church membership upon American society, others have pointed to events that brought about this halt in rapid growth. In *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline*, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary assistant professor of church history Elisha Coffman offers an insightful and important contribution to historians' understanding of the time period leading up to this era of decline. In exploring the early history of *The Christian Century* magazine, Coffman outlines the place of theologically liberal Protestant churches and their members between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century—a crucial period in Protestant church history and American social, religious, and intellectual history.

Coffman's monograph, which grew from her Duke University PhD dissertation, uses the history of a flagship Protestant magazine to probe deeper into currents

in America's religious life. In arguing that *The Christian Century* had a profound impact on its readers, but a much less impressive effect on American Protestantism, Coffman ultimately gets at a larger question: "How did the mainline become mainline?" (p. 4). Coffman succinctly traces this term, "mainline," to its roots in the nineteenth century and explores its evolution to its current state as a frame of reference for a particular set of denominations. Moreover, Coffman's history of *The Christian Century*, and by extension, the mainline, offers a previously unexplored avenue of inquiry into a large swath of leading American Protestant denominations. Rather than approach the subject matter as a set of ideas, or set of denominations, Coffman details mainline church history through the concept of the term itself.

The Christian Century gives a great deal of attention to the *Century's* editor, Charles Clayton Morrison (1874-1966). It was Morrison who purchased the obscure Disciples of Christ periodical, which began as the *Christian Oracle* in 1884, and transformed it from a moribund publication to a leading magazine among many Protestant Americans between 1908 and 1947. In following Morrison's editorial decisions and the rise in popularity of his magazine, Coffman provides the reader with an account of the *Century's* fight to claim the mainstream cen-

ter of Protestant Christianity for the theologically liberal churches that fell into the mainline category.

Coffman's contribution to the growing scholarship on theologically liberal Protestant Christianity in the twentieth century cannot be overstated. *The Christian Century* provides commendable insights to conclusions in recent works that consider liberalism in America's religious history, such as David Hollinger's *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (2013) and Molly Worthen's *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (2013). Coffman's erudite study also pulls from a wide range of sources. In addition to archival holdings at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, and the University of Chicago, Coffman also uses observations from G. K. Chesterton, significant theological works, US Census Bureau statistics, and popular publications such as *Time*, *Commonweal*, and *Newsweek* alongside the most current secondary sources available in fleshing out her compelling examples. One omission from this list of sources that may have further bolstered the book's overall thrust is the number of relevant holdings at the Billy Graham Center Archives in Wheaton, Illinois. The L. Nelson Bell Papers and boxes of files on *Christianity Today* contain invaluable correspondence on matters directly pertaining to *The Christian Century* in the years Coffman

examines.

Any minor quibble over sources does not detract from the tremendous work that *Century* represents. In this monograph, Coffman's identification and discussion of the three major strands of Protestant Christianity, neo-orthodoxy, evangelicalism, and theologically liberal Protestantism, or the mainline, accomplishes much for accurately describing the fundamental change that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s on the landscape of American religious history. It also accounts for the serious challenges that Charles Morrison, his *Century* magazine, and theologically liberal mainline church leadership faced in the wake of Neo-Orthodox and evangelical expansion.

Ultimately, this book provides a better understanding of what this collection of theologically liberal churches meant in the first half of the twentieth century. Coffman's work is clearly written and highly accessible. It represents a fresh perspective on a well-studied area of American religious history that appeals to the well-informed, general reader as well as graduate students and historians who specialize in the era. Perhaps best summarized in the book's early pages, Coffman concludes that the mainline was many things: a set of denominations, a mode of religiosity, a social network, and, accurately stated, an attempted religious establishment (p. 6).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amrel>

Citation: Aaron Davis. Review of Coffman, Elesha J., *"The Christian Century" and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45473>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.