

Democratic Tendencies: Liberal Protestantism and the Growth of American Pluralism

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Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015)

David Mislin, *Saving Faith: Making Religious Pluralism an American Value at the Dawn of the Secular Age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015)

Trygve Throntveit, *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

In a recent collection of essays assessing the thought of William James in transatlantic perspective, Berkeley historian emeritus David Hollinger opened his contribution by recounting two memorable exchanges:

The sermon at William James's funeral on 30 August 1910 was preached by the Reverend George A. Gordon, a name recognized today only by religious history specialists, but in 1910 a pulpiteer so prominent that he was sometimes described as "the Matterhorn of the Protestant Alps".... Gordon, a close friend of James, was the minister of Boston's Old South Congregational Church. When the great philosopher died on 26 August, his widow immediately selected Gordon to perform the service. Mrs. James made clear to Gordon why she wanted him. You are "a man of faith," which "is what [William] was." About this she was firm, apprising Gordon that she wanted at this funeral service "no hesitation or diluted utterance" in speaking about faith.

Mrs. James had good reason to say these things. Her late husband had been candid about his feelings of spiritual solidarity with Gordon. "You and I seem to be working ... towards the same end (the Kingdom of Heaven, namely)," James had written to his clergyman friend not long before, although [he claimed Gordon did] this "more openly and immediately" than [he did].¹

¹ David A. Hollinger, "William James, Ecumenical Protestantism, and the Dynamics of Secularization." In *William James and the Transatlantic Conversation: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Martin Halliwell and Joel D. S. Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31.

James's statement of solidarity is striking. In an era marked by the tendency to identify American Protestantism almost exclusively with its evangelical wing, one might be tempted to ask how it could be that the cosmopolitan post-Christian James could so closely align the meaning and end of his own work with that of a Protestant "pulpiteer" such as Gordon. The temptation is understandable, but regrettable. It is understandable due to the preeminence of evangelicalism in post-Reagan America, and to the comparative neglect by historians of the wing of Protestantism Gordon represented, namely liberal Protestantism; it is regrettable because it tells of a forgetfulness of the central role liberal Protestantism has played in the development of the American moral tradition. Probably no historian in recent times has done so much to recall scholarly attention to the role of liberal (or "ecumenical") Protestantism as Hollinger himself, but a considerable imbalance remains. "We now have an extensive and increasingly helpful literature on evangelical Protestantism in the twentieth century," Hollinger observes in the title essay of *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, "but studies of ecumenical Protestantism remain fewer in number, narrower in scope, and lower in professional visibility."²

Happily, three recent books addressing different aspects of the history of Protestant and post-Protestant liberalism in the United States tell of an increasing commitment on the part of historians to redress this imbalance, and to enable a fuller understanding of the role liberal Protestantism has played in the advent of a politics and ethics that genuinely values pluralism. Amy Kittelstrom's *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition*, Trygve Throntveit's *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*, and David Mislin's *Saving Faith: Making Religious Pluralism an*

² David Hollinger, "After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity." In *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 21.

American Value at the Dawn of the Secular Age all bring extensive research, deep insight, and nuanced judgment to bear on the enormous but frequently overlooked influence of liberal Protestant and post-Protestant thought on the cultural and political landscape of the United States.

Kittelstrom's narrative reaches back to the founding of the republic and runs into the early twentieth century, tracing the liberalization of the American ethical and religious tradition via an "American Reformation" (the term is Sydney Ahlstrom's) to the appearance of a "religion of democracy." Kittelstrom takes as her title this phrase William James coined and used in conversations and correspondence, and James is in many respects the *primus inter pares* of her gallery of seven worthies.

Throntveit's study maintains an even tighter focus on James as heir and post-Protestant transformer of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. Throntveit concurs with Kittelstrom that James's religious investigations helped to refine his philosophy and, indeed, his quest for an "ethical republic" (the phrase comes from James's 1891 lecture "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life")—no surprise there, since James himself once described "religion" as "the great interest of my life" (cited in Throntveit, 39). But Throntveit's contention that "religious faith is not the lynchpin" (4) of James's moral philosophy signals an interpretive parting of ways with Kittelstrom. For, according to Throntveit, it is due to James's ostensible prioritization of ethics over religion that James, "well over a century ago, was surprisingly well-equipped to confront the problems facing a secular, pluralistic democracy in today's interdependent world" (7). This is also supposed to account for why James's pragmatic pluralism proved so influential across the twentieth century for secular progressives such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Louis Brandeis,

Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Richard Rorty, among others. Consequently, on Throntveit's telling, while a Jamesian "religion of democracy" may well have emerged from liberal Protestantism, this new pluralistic outlook quickly gave rise to further democratic vistas, many of which relegated religion and bore little continuing resemblance to the Protestant establishment that helped to shape them.

Despite the seemingly inexorable traction of secularization, however, many of James's contemporaries—individuals such as James's clergyman friend George A. Gordon, mentioned above—continued to work out their progressivism in and through the institutions of Protestant Christianity. David Mislin's book tracks this institutional strand of the Protestant establishment, showing how ecumenically minded clergy and laypeople alike made common cause not simply across Protestant denominations (especially Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Free Baptists) but also, increasingly, with modernizing Roman Catholics and progressive Jews. Together, these establishment Protestants met their anxieties about growing cosmopolitanism and declining religious commitment by affirming the free use of reason, advocating higher criticism in biblical scholarship, affirming the truth of evolutionary theory, embracing the Social Gospel and, perhaps most significantly, by expanding their understanding of religious faith. As a result, Mislin shows, "by the early twentieth century, some of the nation's most prominent clergymen had entirely rejected the long-standing claim that Protestantism—or, indeed, particular Protestant denominations—had a monopoly on true religion. Instead, these influential liberals began to celebrate the religious diversity of the United States" (7–8). Mislin's volume thus complements Kittelstrom's and Throntveit's by elucidating the often-overlooked fact that the embrace of religious pluralism across the

nineteenth century and into the twentieth did not simply emerge out of liberal Protestantism, but also animated the work of religious individuals who continued to work within the institutional structures of liberal Protestantism. Both of these trajectories are important, and together they enable us to recognize that the legacy and prospects of liberal Protestantism are variegated enough not to be captured in any single narrative reconstruction. Kittelstrom and Throntveit both pattern their histories in terms of the dynamics of secularization, or de-Christianization. But secularization manifests here not on a Comtean model of freedom from religious belief, but rather as the gradual emergence of a new civil religion—a “religion of democracy.”

Many today find the very idea that Christian commitment has shaped liberal political values counterintuitive; in the wake of the polarized twentieth-century, phrases such as ‘godless liberal’ and ‘the Christian right’ just ring out louder in political discourse and the cultural imagination. But there has long been a religious left as well, and through careful scholarship Kittelstrom shows how seven of its representatives—John Adams, Mary Moody Emerson, William Ellery Channing, William James, Thomas Davidson, William Mackintire Salter, and Jane Addams—played an important role in the formation of the American moral tradition. In a study that uses a “representative men”—and women—methodology (a nod to Ralph Waldo Emerson), William James is for Kittelstrom *most* representative, since of “all the inner lives depicted” in her study, James’s is arguably “the most illustrative because he more than anyone tried to gather up the threads and values spun by his ancestors and to weave them into the new cloth of the modern era” (3–4). One might rightly question the suitability of tracking the transformations of an

American ethos through just seven biographical arcs, but in fact Kittelstrom's chapters are not isolated cameos; her representatives are arguably best conceived as living nodes in her reconstructions of over-lapping sets of historically influential conversations.

On the face of it, Kittelstrom's recognition of the intimate relationship between religion and politics in America is nothing new. As George Washington famously maintained in his Farewell Address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."³ And as Alexis de Tocqueville four decades later contended, "religion in the United States avails itself of democratic tendencies."⁴ But Kittelstrom connects the religious commitments of her representative intellectuals to the emergence of civic liberalism in a way not generally recognized. She charts a path from classical liberalism ("the political commitment of a society to replace coercion with consent") to modern liberalism ("the moral commitment of a society to the collective needs of all its members, regardless of their differences") by steering a course between the powerful "myth of orthodox American Christianity" on one side, and the equally powerful myth of the "American Renaissance" on the other (3). The former (perpetuated by evangelicals and secularists alike) "equates religion with Christianity, Christianity with supernatural belief, and Christian belief with a particular faith in the special saving grace of Jesus through his blameless death and resurrection." The latter looks to Ralph Waldo Emerson as the father of a distinctively American cultural and literary movement ostensibly purged of the dogmas and superstitions of a

³ Quoted in John Witte, Jr. and Joel A. Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, fourth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 37.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Phillips Bradley (London: David Campbell, 1994) vol. 2, chap. 5, 20–28.

religious past, despite the fact that Emerson was himself “an exemplary fruit” of the American Reformation (4–7).

On Kittelstrom’s telling, the formation of American democratic ideals can be traced back to the liberal wing of New England Congregationalism on the eve of the American War of Independence. In fact, Kittelstrom dates the identifiable beginning of the movement very specifically to a sermon preached in 1749 at Boston’s Old West Church, the family church of John Adams. That was the year the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew (incidentally, the coiner of the phrase, “No Taxation without Representation”) invited his friend and colleague Lemuel Briant to address his congregation. Briant preached powerfully on “The Absurdity and Blasphemy of Depretiating Moral Virtue.” This sermon served up a powerful *sed contra* to the “orthodox” Calvinists’ insistence on the utter inefficacy of moral effort. Liberal Congregationalists such as Briant and Mayhew downplayed the conservative focus on salvation from sin through Christ’s vicarious atonement, and began to speak instead of the salvation of humankind through aspiring to the model of Christ as supreme moral agent and as teacher of the golden rule. The Christian faith of founding father and third president of the United States was forged at Old West Church. John Adams “spoke the language of the American Reformation,” Kittelstrom relates, and he “translated it into legal and political terms as he learned his craft” and agitated for the cause of American independence (50). This was obviously a cause many came to share, but it was liberal Congregationalists—“the first people in the world to call themselves liberals” (5)—who first agitated against the tyranny of the British crown. Without them, according to the judgment of Adams himself, the

transformation of hearts and minds necessary to the success of the revolution could never have come to pass.

Boston and environs remained the intellectual hub of the young republic for at least another century following independence. Across the nineteenth century, New England Congregationalists founded colleges, inaugurated an American literary tradition, frequently travelled to Germany for theological education, and commissioned untold numbers into a mission field that increasingly prioritized establishing schools and providing medical assistance over converting souls. Liberal Protestants also mediated higher criticism of the Bible from Germany, evolutionary theory from Britain, and philosophical and literary Romanticism from both.

On Kittelstrom's reading, this social activism and enthusiastic embrace of new ideas effected a great transformation across the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. She chronicles a history of gradual secularization of American political attitudes from post-Puritan Protestantism to post-Christian progressivism with Jane Addams as the model practitioner of the democratic universe William James in particular sought to theorize. I use the term 'secularization' advisedly here. Kittelstrom largely avoids the term, preferring instead to speak of the transformation of what goes by the name 'religion.' She characterizes secularization only in passing as that "which measures value by the merely natural or material rather than the ultimate or divine and is widely associated with modernity" (6). Arguably, that statement describes *secularism* as an ideology better than *secularization* as a process, and the latter term better characterizes the historical dynamics through which the social-political influence of religious institutions in trans-Atlantic cultures has gradually migrated from the center to the

margins. Yet in any case, I think Kittelstrom is right to conceive the figures and transformations she depicts not as antagonistic or even indifferent to religion. She ably narrates the birth of a new progressive faith—what James called an “American religion” (199)—as it gradually “pulled away from its berth in the American Reformation” and “became linked to the concept of democracy as a set of ideals capable of guiding practice, as indeed a kind of religion, and therefore one that depended on the taste and character of all its practitioners” (258).

This characterization of the Jamesian democratic ethos as a “kind of religion” is obviously debatable, however. For example, whereas Kittelstrom claims that “there is nothing James and his [intellectual] kin cared for more than religion” (4) and takes James at his word that his *Weltanschauung* and lived ethos manifested a “religion of democracy,” Trygve Throntveit seeks to differentiate ethics and religion and contends, “religious faith is not the lynchpin of James’s ethics” (4). Throntveit characterizes James’s “quest for an ethical republic” not fundamentally in terms of lived religion but rather as a political vision (open to religion but not grounded in religion), and he assesses James’s legacy in terms of its influence on such important political theorists and actors as Jane Addams and John Dewey, of course, but also Du Bois, Bourne, Brandeis, Croly, Lippmann and even (indirectly) Woodrow Wilson (109). Throntveit thus recounts the story of American progressivism differently than Kittelstrom does, but he too identifies William James as that intellectual tradition’s most generative thinker.

Throntveit’s central thesis is that “James’s pragmatism was primarily a moral philosophy with profound implications for politics”—James was “questing” for an ethical

republic, as Throntveit's title puts it (2). The term "quest" is apposite. James's moral and political philosophy remained ever under construction; he never penned a treatise on moral philosophy, and neither did he ever outline any definite political theory. Nevertheless, Throntveit demonstrates how across James's lectures and publications he sought to defend a dynamic conception of moral life neglected by the more explicitly articulated deontological ethics of Kant and neo-Kantians, as well as by the utilitarian ethics of Bentham and Mill, among others. "In short," Throntveit summarizes, "James thought the idealists ignored the significance, and utilitarians the existence, of the uniquely personal and frequently dynamic ideas that shaped what most people recognized as their moral lives" (88). James's ethics, by contrast, was "deliberative," and manifested four virtues: (1) the uncertainty entailed in acknowledging we know no final truth "until the last man has had his experience and said his say"; (2) the fallibilistic experimentalism of exercising personal and social freedoms; (3) the historical wisdom that potentially comes from such experimentation; and (4) the sympathy that redounds to the larger republic through "imagining foreign states of mind" (102–4). James's quest, then, was an ethical one neither by fidelity to some recognized moral law, nor by virtue of maximizing happiness, nor even by making clear progress toward some putative 'kingdom of ends,' but rather simply by the democratic process of exercising human freedom jointly in the attempt to achieve an inevitably new and preferably better social equilibrium.

William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic is a historically sensitive and substantive study of Jamesian moral philosophy, and as a recommendation of a Jamesian political sensibility probably no scholarly work has made the case more convincingly. Concerning James's religious outlook, however, the book is somewhat less

subtle than it might have been. One might bat this quibble away as beside the point, since on Throntveit's reading James's religious investigations played only the auxiliary role of helping to "refine" his pragmatism. Yet insofar as Throntveit claims as one of the scholarly contributions of his study the "insight" that "religious faith is not the lynchpin of James's ethics, either in his own understanding or from the standpoint of internal consistency" (4), some interrogation is appropriate here. Throntveit expressly contrasts his interpretation that "James's ethics does not depend on religious appeals" (4) with the conclusions of other James scholars such as Bernard Brennan, John Wild, James Kloppenberg, George Cotkin, and Michael Slater, so the claim is not uncontroversial. But what exactly does the claim entail? Quite obviously, James was no classic theological voluntarist who would claim that whatever is good is so because God wills it. But neither did he separate religion and morality as tidily as Throntveit claims he did. If the ostensive independence of religion from morality is simply supposed to mean that James did not make belief in a transcendent deity a condition for acting ethically, then Throntveit is surely correct. But none of the interpreters Throntveit contrasts his reading with argues that position either, so he seems to be implying some further notion of the independence of morality from religion here. An answer to this question depends, of course, upon what one takes both "ethics" and "religion" to mean. Throntveit characterizes the former in its "most fundamental sense" as "a practical guide to conduct proceeding from an apprehension of the good" (85). Concerning the latter, he cites James's famous definition from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to*

whatever they may consider the divine" (73). Yet while Throntveit provides a good discussion of ethics throughout, he gives short shrift to exploring how James's expansive understanding of both "religion" and "the divine" animate his conception of human flourishing. It is astonishing how baldly Throntveit answers the question that opens the final paragraph of his chapter on religion: "Did James believe in God? No" (81). But this ready response only answers the question of whether James believed in the God of classical theism. We know that he did not. And yet Throntveit seems already to have forgotten his subtler elucidation ten pages earlier that "Religion," for James, "means conceiving the world as responsive to our ideals," and that "God," moreover, "signifies whatever feature of the universe makes for such responsiveness" (71). Since pragmatically it would be meaningless to act according to an apprehension of the good if one did not conceive the world as responsive to our ideals, the relationship between religious belief (in the expansive Jamesian sense) and ethical conduct (again, in an expansive Jamesian sense) seems somewhat more intimate than Throntveit wishes to maintain. Likewise, the confidence with which Throntveit discounts the possibility that James himself might have affirmed the reality of God (once more, understood in an expansive sense) seems unjustified.

Expanded historical horizons and enlarged theological conceptions were part and parcel of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. As James observed in "Reflex Action and Theism" (written in 1881 for an address at the Unitarian Ministers' Institute), "The word 'God' has come to mean many things in the history of human thought, from Venus and Jupiter to the 'Idee' which figures in the pages of Hegel. Even the laws of physical nature have, in our positivistic times, been held worthy of divine honor and presented as

the only fitting object of our reverence.”⁵ As it happens, this is the very address that Kittelstrom quotes from when making her point that “the God in whom James came to believe was very different from the deterministic deities of Calvinism and ‘scientism,’” just as the “religion of democracy” that he came to affirm was very different from inherited conceptions of religion, yet “a kind of religion” nonetheless: “‘A power not ourselves,’ he described the divinity in which he had faith, ‘which not only makes for righteousness, but means it, and which recognizes us’” (184). Kittelstrom’s judgment that this vague but earnest affirmation remained at the very heart of James’s total outlook on life seems correct. Accordingly—and in view of both Throntveit’s expansive picture of James’s ethics and Kittelstrom’s reconstruction of his expansive view of religion—it follows that if James’s ethics does not depend upon some external set of religious beliefs for support, this is because his ethics is already an inclusive religious appeal of sorts. And Throntveit does not miss this Jamesian tendency to use the term “religion” capaciously, since he too cites instances where James speaks of “the religion of democracy” (142) and of democracy as “a kind of religion” (133).

A Jamesian question here might be to ask what difference it makes whether we think of democracy as “a kind of religion” or not. The downside of this seeming conflation might be that, from an early twenty-first century perspective, conceptions of ‘democracy’ so little resemble what we think we mean by ‘religion’ that it makes little sense to use the term to characterize Victorian-era progressivism. But that risks anachronism. And besides, the meaning of both ‘religion’ and ‘democracy’ is perhaps as often contested as it is agreed, at least in the details. Neither Kittelstrom nor Throntveit

⁵ William James, “Reflex Action and Theism.” In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, edited by Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 97.

ever provides a precise definition of either term. James never defined his understanding of democracy precisely either. He did propose a provisional definition of religion in *Varieties* (see above) but, insofar as it “arbitrarily” focuses on the experiences of individuals “in their solitude,” on its own it is unhelpful for understanding how democracy could be “a kind of religion.” If James had truly conceived religion *only* as that which he specified as individual experience in *Varieties*, he could not *also* have spoken of democracy as “a kind of religion,” since democracy is always social. Yet, notwithstanding the absence of formal definitions, James clearly affirmed an expansive post-Civil War conception of democracy affirming that the life of a nation should accord with the preferences of its citizens. President Abraham Lincoln’s vision of a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” that “shall not perish from the earth”⁶ cast an enduring vision that no detailed deliberation over, say, the specific advantages and limitations of majoritarian or consensus models of democratic government ever could. This is not to say that James eschewed deliberation—far from it. As Throntveit says, “practically understood, democracy means *deliberation*, a course of conduct suggested and justified to individuals by their daily experience” (99). But James’s own deliberations tended more toward considerations of “democracy as a social idea” than “political democracy as a system of government,” to use John Dewey’s distinction.⁷ And with Dewey, James would surely agree that “the idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best.”⁸ James likely also would have approved Dewey’s 1888 formulation in which he cast the idea of democracy in visionary

⁶ “The Gettysburg Address.” In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 7, edited by Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 21.

⁷ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: H. Holt, 1927) 143.

⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 143.

terms: “Democracy and the one, the ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity are to my mind synonyms. The idea of democracy, the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, represent a society in which the distinction between the the spiritual and the secular has ceased, and as in Greek theory, as in the Christian theory of the Kingdom of God, the church and the state, the divine and the human organization of society are one.”⁹ Such an idea of democracy is clearly an updated, naturalized, and expanded reformulation of inherited religious notions of human flourishing (which in 1934 Dewey would again reformulate in *A Common Faith*).

If, then, Throntveit is right that religion was not the “lynchpin” of James’s quest for an ethical republic, then that is only because the metaphor is the wrong one. Religion as James conceived it generally was not some isolatable component that kept the figurative wheels on the cart; it was an expansive and inclusive term he and many others reformulated to gesture to what was vital and ultimate. The benefit of recognizing this influential tradition in nineteenth-century progressivism as a “kind of religion”—even though the *idea* of a “religion of democracy” would always remain wider and fuller than any actual democratic system of government—is that this designation seemed the most apt one to the historical actors who used it to express their ultimate vision. Such reformulations are precisely what need to be interpreted rather than explained away, since the expansion of what ‘religion’ means was a key strategy of many liberals in the nineteenth century for reconciling the challenges of modern culture with inherited discourses and values.

⁹ John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy.” In *Pragmatism: A Reader*, edited by Louis Menand (New York: Vintage, 1997) 204.

In *Saving Faith* David Mislin elucidates this point about ‘expansion’ expressly and convincingly. He focuses not on James and post-Christian religious thinkers, however, but rather on liberal Protestant clergymen and other Christian activists working within the institutions of American mainline churches between 1870 and 1930. It is Mislin’s important contribution to show how the transformation of American culture toward the sort of pluralism and multiculturalism chronicled by Kittelstrom and Throntveit was also partly enabled by the theological innovations of ecumenical Protestants like James’s clergyman friend, George A. Gordon, together with Gordon’s fellow Congregationalist ministers Washington Gladden, Henry Ward Beecher, and Lyman Abbott, the Presbyterian James Henry Snowden, Episcopalian Leighton Parks, Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch, and Methodist Francis McConnell, among many others. Mislin shows how

Amid the clamor of arguments that science had undermined the foundation of religion, that other faith traditions disproved the uniqueness of Christianity, and that religious practice was incompatible with a sophisticated modern life, these liberals began to expand their conception of belief. They proclaimed that one could maintain religious faith while harboring significant doubts. They affirmed that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam were valid religions that offered valuable teachings. Perhaps most significantly, they emphasized their many points of commonality with Catholics and Jews. They abandoned centuries of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism and looked to their Catholic and Jewish neighbors as critical partners in their campaign to ensure a future for religion in American life. (7)

Key to this expansion of the concept of faith and the affiliated affirmation of pluralism, according to Mislin, was the recognition of the importance of questioning and doubting as part of a larger religious temperament. The Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard had identified “objective uncertainty” as a central feature of the dynamics of faith in the first half of the nineteenth century, although his writings were only slowly coming to be

known in English-speaking countries by the turn of the century. Already prominent in the Anglophone world, however, was Alfred Lord Tennyson's evocative notion of "honest doubters," and Mislin depicts how liberal Protestants appropriated Tennyson's phrase to baptize uncertainty as a completely normal feature of healthy spirituality. Of course, James too offered a defense of maintaining religious commitment in the face of doubt, and it is perhaps tempting to assume his liberal Protestant contemporaries were only uncomfortably following his lead. But Mislin (in his single brief mention of James) turns this around: "The depiction of faith and unbelief in [James's] "The Will to Believe" mirrored discussions taking place in Protestant churches" (34). The consequence of this committed doubt was (1) to relativize the absoluteness of specific doctrines that had accrued across the millennia since Jesus lived, but nonetheless to prioritize the significance of the "person of Jesus" whose life and teachings inspired these doctrines, and (2) to understand "revelation" as a progressive, unfinished process admitting new insights even in modernity (29).

Mislin tracks the way this new openness translated into the rise of ecclesial and academic networks for the comparative study of religion, and encouraged liberal Protestants to recognize overlapping values and insights in other religious traditions (although still generally assuming Christianity manifested truth in a superior fashion). The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, was the most spectacular manifestation of this new interest. With delegates from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the Parliament began to shift conceptions of Christian missions, helped liberal Protestants begin to contextualize religious pluralism in terms of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and forced them to address their own denominational

divisions. In response to critiques from secularists on one side and from conservative evangelicals on the other, these liberal Protestants discovered a new sense of commonality both with modernizing Roman Catholics and with progressive Jews. The growing sense of shared (usually middle-class) cultural identity in America fostered not just an expansive understanding of religious faith but likewise a notion of an “expansive kingdom of God” in which similarities were affirmed as more important than differences (63ff).

In many cases this new sense of solidarity yielded practical consequences. For in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century Protestants, Catholics, and Jews cooperated as never before to found such new institutions as the National Divorce Reform League, the temperance-minded Citizens’ Reform Association in Buffalo, New York, the anti-Marxist Labor Temple in New York City and, perhaps most notably, the interfaith cooperation in the chaplaincies of the armed forces as World War I broke out. Heartened by the promise of such collaborative efforts (however tentative), some liberal Protestants even began to campaign for the reunification of Protestantism and Catholicism. Mislin sees in this fantasy of reunion an important test case for assessing the limitations of progressive understandings of religious unity and diversity. Despite the fact that the campaign for Christian unity failed almost as soon as it began, it nonetheless proved instructive for many of its champions who in place of institutional unity discovered “a new cause in the idealization of a truly pluralistic society” (139). And this progressive vindication of religious difference in turn translated into the “goodwill movement” of the 1920s, which resulted in the establishment of such interfaith initiatives as the Committee on Goodwill between Jews and Christians (hosted by the Federal

Council of Churches), the Amos Society (founded by Jewish intellectual Isidore Singer), and the American Association of Religion in higher education (whose board consisted of four Protestants, four Jews, and four Catholics). Together, these and other goodwill enterprises helped to shift long-established assumptions about America as a Protestant culture to an appreciation of a larger Judeo-Christian heritage. Moreover, the American Association of Religion showed further inclusiveness by appointing on its board four additional representatives for “minority groups not specifically included in the three great religious groupings” of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and this too according to Mislin attests to the massive cultural transformation underway in American attitudes toward religious diversity and, increasingly, such other manifestations of human difference as race and ethnicity (151).

Saving Faith performs an invaluable service, and does it very well. In the twenty-first century, the manifestations of religious commitment attracting widespread attention have been fundamentalist, intolerant, reactionary, and often violent; the stark contrast with the broadminded, secularized values of diversity and multiculturalism virtually suggests itself. Yet Mislin’s work effectively cautions against facile dichotomizing between “religious” intolerance and “secular” pluralism. For (like Kittelstrom and Throntveit, but with a different focus) Mislin shows how the value of pluralism so often assumed to be the achievement of the de-Christianized second half of the twentieth century in fact has an important prologue in the liberalizing religious tradition of the preceding decades.¹⁰ Additionally, if one peril of the profession in intellectual history is

¹⁰ In this connection, see also Hollinger’s *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*: “Our narrative of modern American history will be deficient so long as we suppose that ecumenical Protestantism declined because it had less to offer the United States than did its evangelical rival. Much of what ecumenical Protestantism offered now lies beyond the churches, and hence we have been slow to see it” (48–9).

that the institutional settings of the figures addressed sometimes fades far into the background, then Mislin's further contribution is that his account of how religious pluralism became an American value does so by attending to the role of men and women working within and across ecclesial denominations. *Saving Faith* thus aptly counterbalances studies that focus more on religious individuals than on religious institutions.

The Religion of Democracy, *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*, and *Saving Faith* all contribute to a fuller understanding of the various ways in which the varieties of religious liberalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped make pluralism an important value in contemporary American society. That this transformation has until recently "largely escaped the attention of historians," as Mislin claims, makes these volumes doubly welcome, although one might wonder whether this says more about who within the profession has been paying attention to whom; the work of Sydney Ahlstrom, Scott Appleby, Gary Dorrien, Matthew Hedstrom, William Hutchinson, Bruce Kuklick, Martin Marty, Amanda Porterfield, Sally Promey, Leigh Schmidt, and James Turner, among many others, should serve as a reminder that excellent scholarship has long been carried out by scholars working specifically in American religious history. No history can say everything, however, and these three recent offerings present their materials in fresh, deeply textured, and usually persuasive ways. But it might nonetheless prove constructive by way of conclusion to suggest a couple of areas for further enquiry opened up by these studies.

First, it might prove fruitful to explore the transformations worked by liberal Protestants from a broader, transatlantic perspective. To be sure, Kittelstrom notes that the conversations of American liberals “always reached across the Atlantic” (8), and Throntveit and Mislin also gesture at points to interactions with the European scene. But all three books could have paid more attention to the specific ways in which the developments chronicled here echoed (and reciprocally spoke to) the emergence and growth of liberal Protestantism and post-Christian religious liberalism in Britain and Germany particularly. For example, Mislin quotes from an article in an 1897 issue of *The Outlook* lamenting that skeptics would deny the existence of “any power not ourselves that makes for righteousness” (27). This of course repeats the formulation (mentioned above) that Kittelstrom quotes James using in 1881 to characterize the divinity in which he had faith. It escapes notice, however, that both references are virtually direct quotations of the liberal English poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, who in his 1873 *Literature and Dogma* sought to “recast religion” and conceived God as “*the enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness*” (Arnold’s emphasis).¹¹ Arnold himself adopted Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s term “Aberglaube” to speak of “belief beyond what is certain and verifiable” (yet distinguished it from “superstition” in a more superficial sense), a move James clearly followed in his discussion of “over-beliefs” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹² Like so many other eminent Victorians—and just a small sample would have to include John William Colenso and F. D. Maurice, together with Benjamin Jowett, Aubrey Moore, and the other contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (1860), and Mary Ann Evans (a.k.a. George Eliot who, in addition to exploring

¹¹ Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1873), 13, 89.

¹² Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, 112.

religious elements in her fiction, translated radical philosophical-theological works by Baruch Spinoza, David Friedrich Strauss, and Ludwig Feuerbach)—Matthew Arnold was responding to the monumental transformations in biblical interpretation and general theological outlook emerging from the universities of Berlin, Tübingen, and other German institutions of higher education. Likewise, in more or less mediated ways, the American thinkers addressed by Kittelstrom, Throntveit, and Mislin were also deeply influenced by, for example, the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and his followers, the higher criticism of F. C. Baur and his students, and were at the same time reacting against the ostensive atheism of Strauss and Feuerbach, among others. To Mislin's credit, he notes that Newman Smyth, Charles Augustus Briggs, George Coe, and Alfred Williams Anthony all studied in Berlin, but his narrative focuses exclusively on what they thought and did upon their return to the United States, and not at all upon what they studied and learned in Germany. Undoubtedly, liberal Protestantism took a different shape on American soil than it did in Europe, but some further contextualization with regard to these developments in the German and British contexts would help clarify which elements of this story are largely consonant with the larger history of liberal Protestantism and, by contrast, which features should be viewed as characteristically American.

A second recommendation for further enquiry opened by each of these studies is to explore the legacy of that strand of the American Reformation that did not turn so resolutely to a post-Christian religion of Democracy. All three authors recognize that the de-Christianization of American culture does not mean liberal Protestants all went to bed on the eve of a secular age and awoke the next day as post-Christians. Yet the narrative

arcs of Throntveit's and Kittelstrom's studies, in particular, imply a kind of secularist supersessionism. Kittelstrom rightly notes that religious liberals were "ubiquitous in American public culture across the nineteenth century, yet always a numerical minority." So what happened to them? Kittelstrom answers, "It is tempting to claim they became Democrats in the twentieth century, but by then the American Reformation was over and the conversation changed" (10). No doubt many of them did become Democrats, and certainly the conversation expanded. But instead of concluding that the American Reformation was therefore a spent force, one might recall the Protestant notion of a church "always reforming"—*semper reformanda*—and thereby stay alert to the transformations of liberal Protestantism into the twentieth century (as Mislin does up to 1930). The affirmation of "pluralism"—the key theme in all three studies—is surely central to these ongoing transformations. So central, in fact, that "by the middle of the twentieth century," as Mislin notes in his epilogue, the "emphasis on pluralism stood at the heart of mainline American Protestantism" (65). This is not to deny that in the second half of the twentieth century the advocacy of pluralism by secular humanists eclipsed the voices of mainline Christians. But it is to suggest that liberal Protestantism, despite its diminished social base and accommodating outlook, showed (and still shows) more vitality in its post-hegemonic form than historians often assume. If one doubts that this is the case, then simply read the transcript in *The New York Review of Books* of a recent conversation between two Congregationalists—one a sitting president and the other a winner of the Pulitzer Prize—entitled "President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa."¹³

¹³ The conversation was conducted in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 14, 2015. "President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa." *The New York Review of Books*, Part I, Volume LXII,

We still await a monograph that will narrate the story and assess the significance of post-hegemonic liberal Protestantism in America. But when it appears, it will no doubt build on these important contributions. All three studies are ably researched, richly textured, well written, and frequently insightful; historians and general readers alike will find them invaluable in taking account of the newly acknowledged significance of religion in modernity. Mislin's book will likely come as the greatest revelation to readers not already working in historical theology or at least familiar with the institutional history of liberal Protestantism. Throntveit is persuasive that moral philosophy is omnipresent in James's writings, even when his express topic is psychology, metaphysics, or religion, and sees in this moral philosophy enduring resources for political theory and practice. And Kittelstrom shows convincingly how her seven progressive intellectuals are anything but "godless liberals"—quite the contrary, their democratic vistas were at one and the same time "a kind of religion."

Number 17 (November 5, 2015) pp. 4–8 and Part II, Volume LXII, Number 18 (November 19, 2015) pp. 6–8. See also David A. Hollinger, "The Accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment: An Old Drama Still Being Enacted," in *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, 1–17.