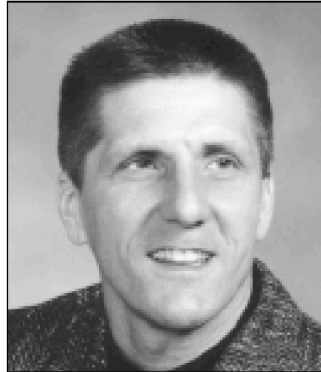


# Reflections on the Future of the Protestant Left

MARK HULSEHER

Ed. Note: Last year, Mark Hulsether, a professor at the University of Tennessee, published a detailed study of Christianity and Crisis magazine, using its 52-year life to discuss the developments and conflicts within progressive Protestantism. This editor served on C&C's editorial advisory board, as did several contributors and readers of RS. It was an important magazine, and we thought the readers of RS should know about the book. We asked Gary Dorrien, a frequent contributor to these pages and a keen observer of the Protestant left, for a review. We were too late. His review had already appeared in the Christian Century. There it ignited a controversy that played out in the letters to the editors page for several months. The themes were familiar to those of us on the democratic left although the language is different: identity politics vs. class struggle, intellectual rigor vs. popularization, mushy liberalism vs. intellectual vanguardism, infighting vs. uniting against a common foe, apostasy, coalition building and with whom, and above all, what is to be done? We asked Mark Hulsether to reflect on the future of the Protestant left in light of that controversy and present his remarks here. —M.P.



In my book *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993*, I advanced two cautiously hopeful arguments about the prospects for an activist tradition of left-liberal Protestantism. First, the book uses transformations in this liberal Protestant journal of opinion as a case study in the ongoing relevance and vitality of a broad tradition of social critique that used C&C as an arena for debate from its 1941 founding by Reinhold Niebuhr, through its participation in the various social movements of the 1960s, to its role as a key arena for debating liberation theologies in the 1970s and 1980s. I attempted to write in a way that could build bridges across generations within this tradition, as well as between the religious left and the secular academic left. Second, a chapter on the nuts and bolts of C&C's institutional history presented evidence that its closing in 1993 was not inevitable. Although reduced support from its key backers at Union Theological Seminary and ecumenical organizations like the National Council of Churches brought C&C's last organizational configuration to a dead end, it retained a solid subscriber base and might have had a viable future in a different form.

To bolster these arguments, I quoted an article in *Dissent* about

C&C's closing. It argued that voter apathy about Democrats did not imply that all social activism is pointless. Similarly, a crisis in liberal Protestant institutions "does not mean the end of liberalism among Protestants. There are plenty of people out there staffing soup kitchens, involved in urban ministry and peace and justice activities.... Did C&C collapse because it was too anchored to dying institutional structures? It tried to bridge a space between what was and what is being born. The bridge couldn't bear the weight, but the space must still be crossed."

I expected these arguments to attract criticism, since my interpretation of C&C's debates over the years is a window on conflicts among a huge cast of characters from neoconservative, New Deal liberal, and various liberationist camps. C&C contributing editors over the years spanned a spectrum from Michael Novak on the right to Cornel West and Beverly Harrison on the left. Its writers constituted a *Who's Who* of people in between: Karl Barth, Robert Bellah, George Kennan, Harvey Cox, Margaret Mead, Noam Chomsky, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Manning Marable, Rosemary Ruether, Paul Tillich, and so on. Because I tilt toward leftist, multiculturalist, and feminist positions when analyzing the debates they waged in C&C, I expected cool reviews from people who agree with Max Stackhouse's assessment of C&C: "boring, predictable, and filled with empty leftist clichés." Sure enough, *First Things* complained about my "blatant bias."

What I did not expect was to get caught in a crossfire between Gary Dorrien and a group of C&C editors, all of whom share my broad support for C&C's left turn after the 1960s and are treated sympathetically in my book. After the *Christian Century* published Dorrien's positive review of my book in June 1999, more than a dozen former board members and contributing editors signed a hostile response. This in turn provoked several more letters, not ending before eight months had passed. Although some of the disputed issues hold limited interest outside C&C's former inner circle, the flap serves as a sort of barometer of perceptions about the larger Protestant left-liberal tradition for which C&C was a key representative voice. Unfortunately, a reading based on this "barometer" suggests that all is not well with the

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book's more optimistic visions of hope for the Protestant left.

The most discouraging thing about the editors' letter was its suggestion that Dorrien and I were aiding and abetting neoconservatism. This complaint apparently stemmed from some combination of my reporting about neoconservative attacks on C&C and my arguments about the limitations of mainstream Niebuhrian liberalism as a resource for the left. This supposed "invocation" of neoconservative "charges" led the editors to protest: "Are we really to imagine that Niebuhr. . . would have enjoyed a cozy role in the councils of the Reagan administration?" This question appears to assume that Protestant social thinkers fall into two basic camps: neoconservatives who betray Niebuhr and liberals who are faithful to him. In this two-sided war one must take sides, and if anyone questions whether Niebuhr was in certain respects too conservative, such a person must be driving Niebuhr into the arms of neoconservatism—even if (as the editors granted) neither Dorrien nor I "belong to the neoconservative camp."

If this is, in fact, the underlying logic of the above question, it is not helpful. If we must sort C&C writers into camps, we need at least three: neoconservatives, liberals, and liberationists (themselves significantly divided). My arguments about old-time Niebuhrian liberals and liberationists are complex, since I map the blend of conflicts and continuities among them, which vary from decade to decade and issue to issue. I support liberationist arguments about the limitations of classic Niebuhrian positions, through showing in concrete and unambiguous detail how they unfolded with a bias toward white, male elite standpoints. At the same time I argue that some liberationists have been excessively sweeping, ungenerous, and historically uninformed in their criticisms of people whose work they now build upon, such as John Bennett, C&C's top leader during the 1950s and 1960s. This leads into my efforts to build bridges, both through analyzing how current debates unfolded and by making a case that liberals and liberationists should spend less time fighting each other and more time fighting neoconservatives. However, I insist that a working alliance cannot be based on discounting the critiques of feminists and multiculturalists, but only on presupposing them and moving forward. If Protestant debate remains stuck in a binary opposition—liberal Niebuhrians versus neoconservatives, with no feminists, multiculturalists, or other radical critics of liberalism in sight—I must withdraw most of my arguments about hope for the Protestant left.

It is also demoralizing that the *Century's* discussion unfolded with such disproportionate fascination about C&C's closing, so much so that casual readers may have gained an impression that my book is primarily an institutional study of C&C's death. I have long feared that the book would be interpreted this way, because I have met too many people who, upon hearing that I was writing about C&C as a study in the fortunes of liberal Protestantism, have jumped to the conclusion that my purpose must be to trace a decline of liberal institutions linked to excessive radicalization. In fact, only one of twelve chapters treats C&C's institutional history, and it argues against such an interpretation.

In this connection, one of the more interesting letters in the

*Century's* exchange was a query from Theodore Erickson that largely pressed the *Century* to move left into the vacuum vacated by C&C—to become a more hospitable place for Christian feminists, critics of globalization, and so on. Although I also endorse this idea, I do not expect to see widespread support for it at the *Century*, and this is as good a way as any to explain why C&C was important while it lived and

leaves a significant gap now. Part of the explanation for this situation is the perception by some people at the *Century*—roughly comparable to the perception of centrist Democrats like Bill Clinton about a spectrum of possible allies on the left—that there is a stench of defeat and decline attached to such a left turn, bound up with painful polarization and neoconservative condescension. However, a key question about the future of liberal Protestantism is which religious tendencies will capture the interest of liberal baby boomers and their children, who have tended to drift away from mainline churches that they consider bland and vaguely repressive. The question I would press—in C&C if it still existed—is whether there is an equally damaging aroma of apathy attached to the *Century's* centrist liberalism, which hampers efforts to capture these energies.

Of course the question of why C&C folded is worth discussing, especially if considered in light of questions about possible replacements for it. Dorrien boiled his diagnosis down to three factors in his *Century* response to the C&C editors. The first was C&C's relative lack of resources and elite allies during the Reagan era and beyond, compared to Niebuhr's heyday. Controversy about this point is misplaced, because everyone agrees that this was the most important factor. A major purpose of my book is to trace such shifts in the allies and social context of the Protestant left in concrete detail. Maneuvering within this new context is the key problem for the religious left today.

The second problem Dorrien flagged, provoking a vehement reaction from the C&C editors, was C&C's declining "intellectual rigor" during its last few years. We must return to the question of who judges this rigor, but at one level this diagnosis should be equally uncontroversial. During C&C's struggle to survive in the 1980s, it clearly moved closer to a publishing model like *Sojourners*—shorter articles less engaged with academic debates—as compared to its historic niche, which overlapped more with scholarly religious journals and journals such as the *Nation*. In no way do I disparage the value of a "*Sojourners* strategy" nor the sincerity and hard work of the C&C leaders who followed it. I simply insist that it weakened C&C's traditional base among academics. This strategy also made it harder for C&C to imagine shifting responsibility to an editorial collective of academics—which had been C&C's survival strategy for the majority of its career. Of course it is unclear

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whether such a path really could have saved C&C or—more important today—could be adapted for a successor. However, it is a strategy followed today by umpteen scholarly journals with fewer resources than C&C commanded at the end.

Third, Dorrien claimed that neither I nor the C&C editors paid enough attention to a “lack of Christian content” in the later C&C. Here I must side with the editors. At every stage of C&C’s career it published substantial amounts, *both* of social analysis indistinguishable from writing in the *Nation*, and of writing that did what Dorrien called for—wrestled with how best to conceive Christian discipleship in the current social context. Its major change was not in the relative proportions of these kinds of writing but in its paradigms for understanding what *counts* as Christian content. Who judges this? From what standpoints? For example, is analysis of gender and sexuality a relevant priority for theology and social analysis? In its early years C&C said no, while the later C&C not only said yes but engaged in extensive debates about *how* to say yes—debates that at times received flak for abandoning Christianity but in fact were seriously engaged in rethinking Christianity.

On balance, C&C’s engagement with liberationist approaches increased its critical consciousness, and in any case was a separate issue from its efforts at popularization during its final years. C&C’s best work after its liberationist turn remained as intellectually rigorous as in earlier years. Judged by the priorities of left, feminist, and multicultural approaches, it made *more* valuable contributions to intra-Christian faith and praxis. It is because of these contributions that I—like Dorrien and the C&C editors—mourn its loss.

In light of my experience of studying C&C, my conclusions about the prospects for the Protestant left are somewhat contradictory. Although the left is unquestionably demoralized, fragmented, and out-organized by neoconservatives, its basic analyses still seem to me sound when stated at their strongest, whether for consumption in academic circles or popular ones. There is a powerful tradition still available to tap. Nothing about

C&C’s institutional defeat suggests that a journal like it could not be revived, albeit within a very different social matrix than the early C&C enjoyed. However, the reception of my book so far—although a small matter in and of itself—does strike me as symptomatic of deeper problems.

In several places that touch on the question of hope for the Protestant left, my book uses the phrase “remains to be seen.” I first borrow it when discussing a skeptical newspaper reporter who taunted C&C with a comment that the effectiveness of its radicalizing critiques “remained to be seen.” Later I evoke the phrase to express my fear that my book might fail in its goal of peacemaking across generations because “I have tried to bridge so many gaps that I am left standing, not with feet planted solidly on both sides, but in mid-air over a chasm. Probably I remain grounded enough in feminist, multiculturalist, and other radical critiques to rub salt in old grievances of moderates and neoconservatives, yet it remains to be seen how my kind words for John Bennett’s pragmatism will play on the left.” Still, I concluded, “I cling to a modest hope that the bridges will hold.”

I’ll stand by that last comment. There is no end in sight to the underlying conditions that helped contribute to this “friendly fire” among former C&C allies. Insofar as this episode represents broader trends, I cannot help but feel some stress weighing down my most optimistic hopes for the Protestant left, since my hopes are premised on a working coalition among liberals and liberationists to counteract the ongoing fire directed at us by neoconservatives. Still, the post-mortem on C&C in *Dissent* was correct to say that “there are plenty of people out there. . . . The bridge couldn’t bear the weight but the space must still be crossed.” I see no reason why the bridges can’t hold, at least for limited traffic. It just remains to be seen whether they actually will.

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Mark Hulsether’s Web page address is <http://web.utk.edu/hulseth/default.html>.

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