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**Andrew Preston. "Peripheral Visions: American Mainline Protestants and the Global Cold War." *Cold War History* 13:1 (2013): 109-130. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2012.707648.  
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Reviewed by **Mark Thomas Edwards**, Spring Arbor University

Andrew Preston's survey of mainline Protestant internationalism is a thoughtful, articulate, and timely compliment to his magisterial treatise on the American way of holy war and diplomacy, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith* (2012).<sup>1</sup> "Peripheral Visions" can be read in two ways: First, as praise for those persons of faith who sought to see, and help others see, beyond the militaristic, unilateralist lens of U. S. Cold War policy; and second, as a chastisement of a long list of historians the author names who have narrowed popular and academic views of Christian anticommunism. Preston thus makes common cause with Dianne Kirby, Heather Warren, John Nurser, Phillip Coupland, David Hollinger, Jill Gill, Caitlin Carenen, and others attempting to situate American and world Protestant ecumenism where it rightly belongs, in the history of foreign and international relations.<sup>2</sup> Preston is convincing in his claim that, "in the late 1940s and the 1950s, this group of religious Americans not only represented the first serious challenge to containment, they also anticipated the global nature of the Cold War

<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 481-95.

<sup>2</sup> See Dianne Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005); Phillip M. Coupland, *Britannia, Europa, and Christendom: British Christians and European Integration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, April 2013); Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011); Caitlin Carenen, *The Fervent Embrace: Liberal Protestants, Evangelicals, and Israel* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

and the dominant transnational concerns of the post-1960 international system” (113). Once again, he has made an admirable and much-welcome contribution to the ongoing religious turn in American diplomatic history.

Preston’s subjects are what he calls “mainline” Protestants. The term is basically synonymous with ‘ecumenical’ throughout the essay, where “mainline” churches mean those affiliated with the Federal Council of Churches (FCC)—which was subsumed by the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 1950—and the World Council of Churches (WCC). Theologically speaking, the “mainline” notion was and is a fiction, given the equivalent liberal and conservative factions and large moderate middle that have historically made up FCC/NCC Protestants. Preston is nevertheless correct in noting the common “progressive internationalism” (113) of the ecumenical leadership. As he chronicles, ecumenists at home and abroad sought an intentional “middle ground” between the “militant Christian anti-communism” of a John Foster Dulles and Billy Graham and the “absolute Christian pacifism” of the Catholic Workers and A. J. Muste (112). Mainline Protestant internationalism had first taken shape during World War I and the interwar years. In terms of broad impact, it peaked during the “Just and Durable Peace” campaign of World War II and the writing of the U. N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Ecumenical Protestant efforts to “export a global Social Gospel” (11) of human dignity and self-determination during the 1950s and 1960s—translating into support for international control of nuclear technology, decolonization, increased foreign aid to Asia and Africa, diplomatic recognition of China, and detente—at points resembled a kinder, gentler modernization theory: less guns, more butter. Nevertheless, Preston concludes with a discussion of how the ecumenical leadership’s persistent transnationalism led them rather early and wholeheartedly to adopt Global South perspectives on world order. The NCC and WCC constituted a non-aligned movement, or “third force” (126), of recovering white European imperialists before the actual Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) took shape in conversation with those very same ecumenists.

Preston is at his best and most original when examining the “contradiction between ecumenical tolerance and Christian evangelism” (118). The reemergence of a fiercely nationalistic new evangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s created the need for an imagined Christian counterweight, which in turn led many American scholars to downplay or ignore completely those historical elements of ecumenical Protestantism that do not fit neatly into a liberal narrative of openness to global cultural hybridity. In fact, as Preston notes, ecumenical leaders always struggled with how to reconcile their ethical universalism and theological particularism. For many liberal and mainline American Protestants, “Christian exceptionalism” (118) remained the order of the day—and here Preston might also have mentioned the NCC’s inaugural slogan, “the building of a Christian America in a Christian world.”<sup>3</sup> Such confessional commitments complicated

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<sup>3</sup> On the NCC’s slogan, see Michele Rosenthal, *American Protestants and TV in the 1950s: Responses to a New Medium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 39.

ecumenical politics as well. As Preston observes, the FCC/NCC constituency found it hard to sacrifice all their redeemer nationalist pretensions on the altar of faith-based internationalism. In their minds, “the United States was both the problem and the solution” (118). Preston’s insights should not be taken as an arbitrary airing of the mainline Church’s dirty laundry but rather as a starting point for more sympathetic, sober estimates of Protestant ecumenism as a whole. One wishes that Preston and others will continue to interrogate how such contradictions have both helped and hindered the movement at specific times and places.

Preston’s essay itself represents a historiographical middle ground between past neglect of mainline Protestant peripheralism and a (hopefully) future comprehensive knowledge of ecumenism’s several expressions. It anticipates numerous new and important directions for the study of religion and diplomacy. First, Preston should be applauded for bringing the FCC/NCC into some of the main narrative threads in diplomatic history, but much more work needs to be done. The American ecumenical leadership was always ‘global’ in nature, shaped by members’ upbringing in transnational Christian agencies such as the WCC, the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), and the International Missionary Council (IMC). More multi-archival attention must be given to these neglected movements as well as more effort to writing their histories within the broader contexts of globalization, transnational civil society, and so on. That attention and effort should furthermore seek to break down historiographical walls between the West and the ‘Rest’ by researching indigenous but interconnected Protestant ecumenical developments in Asia, Africa, and South America. Only then will we be able to evaluate fully the ‘Church Universal’ that both excited and eluded mainline Protestants throughout the twentieth century.

Second, the so-called ‘clergy-laity gap’ needs to be interrogated in more specific ways. As Preston suggests, the mainline critique of U. S. foreign policy “alienated politicians and policymakers and angered the laity, regular church members who were nowhere nearly as liberal as their clerical leaders” (117). Preston is on very safe ground here, as others have documented such divisions in American Protestant ranks.<sup>4</sup> Still, there is a need for novel ‘on the ground’ types of global studies that interrelate policies, pastors, and pews and that document the production, dissemination, and reception of religious commentary on world affairs. Such work might force religious and diplomatic historians to become conversant in the tools of sociology, ethnography, and cultural anthropology.

All this will be in vain, however, unless the ties that bind ‘significance’ and ‘influence’ in so much of political and diplomatic scholarship can be loosened. Put simply, can persons and groups be considered worthy of note on grounds other than that they got laws passed, changed, or overturned? That is a problem implicit throughout Preston’s essay:

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<sup>4</sup> See Alfred O. Hero, Jr., *American Religious Groups View Foreign Policy: Trends in Rank-and-File Opinion, 1937-1969* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1973).

Who cares if mainline Protestants followed or critiqued U.S. policy if their actions yielded no direct public policy fruits? The response must be that the continued growth of cooperative over competitive transnational spaces—such as ecumenical Protestants preached in response to Cold War bipolarity—matter profoundly in and for American and world history. Religious ‘activists beyond borders’ should occupy a central place in present and future studies of cultural internationalism, but only as their chroniclers offer new and more explicit ways of determining what is important outside of statecraft-as-usual. In other words, the pressing question for post-secularization theory scholars is no longer if religion matters but why..

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