

closing pages less as a shield for persecuted minorities than as a sword wielded by white Christian nationalists, I am not sure how “fun” readers will find *Sincerely Held*, but the book will certainly be useful and enriching for any serious student of the politics of religion in the modern United States.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640723001099

***Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States.* By Gene Zubovich. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. viii + 391 pp. \$45.00 cloth.**

Ecumenical Protestant clergy played a leading role in creating the mid-twentieth-century American liberal order of racial integration, respect for human rights, and an internationalist foreign policy to promote democracy under the auspices of the United Nations. Rights-based liberalism is therefore to a significant degree the creation of an ecumenical Christian Left that has now been largely eclipsed by an evangelical Christian Right.

Gene Zubovich’s *Before the Religious Right* is a study of how American ecumenical Protestant clergy came to embrace a liberal political vision and how they transformed American politics when they did so. It is also a study of how they failed to persuade members of their own churches to become converts to this cause and why the disconnect between clergy and laity ultimately led to the collapse of the ecumenical religious Left and the rise of a more conservative religious politics.

Though many historians have described twentieth-century American liberalism in secular terms as the creation of politicians, academics, journalists, economists, grassroots activists, or public intellectuals (with the role of church leaders barely mentioned), Zubovich demonstrates that ecumenical Protestant clergy often preceded liberal political leaders in their embrace of progressive causes, and he argues that their moral leadership pushed their political allies to the left and helped shape liberal policies. In 1932, the Federal Council of Churches issued the “Revised Social Ideals of the Churches,” which called for unemployment insurance, federally subsidized retirement pensions, legal recognition of the right of workers to engage in collective bargaining, and other measures that President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration did not adopt until three years later. Similarly, ecumenical Protestants began drawing up plans for a new international world order in 1940, five years before the United Nations was created, and they declared racial desegregation a moral imperative in 1946, shortly before President Harry Truman publicly embraced the cause. Zubovich demonstrates that in each case, the close relationship between ecumenical Protestant church leaders and the ecumenical Protestant church members who served in the federal government facilitated ecumenical Protestant clerical influence on both national policy and American liberal ideology.

Zubovich’s account of how ecumenical Protestants pushed the national political agenda to the left on economics, foreign policy, and civil rights is insightful, but his analysis of why ecumenical Protestants came to embrace these causes is perhaps even more pathbreaking.

Zubovich argues that ecumenical Protestant church leaders entered the twentieth century committed to democracy and the Social Gospel, and they were deeply influenced by Wilsonian internationalism; yet, they were also chastened by their experiences in World War I, which they came to believe had been a mistake to endorse. Given these ideological commitments, they found it easy to believe that a democratically elected government had a duty to rein in the excesses of unregulated corporate capitalism and that a democratically constructed world order offered a solution to the problems of war and great power rivalry. Ecumenical Protestants' commitment to international democracy led them to embrace decolonization and, by extension, African American civil rights at home.

For a while, ecumenical Protestants enjoyed a close partnership with liberal political leaders in Washington, but in the 1950s, ecumenical Protestants' criticism of American actions in the Cold War began to cause tensions in this relationship, and after the 1960s—when ecumenical Protestant church leaders criticized the Vietnam War and joined African American civil rights activists in engaging in civil disobedience—it was further strained. At the same time, politically conservative lay members of ecumenical churches began denouncing the liberal political activism of their clergy and laid the groundwork for new conservative alliances with evangelicals. The Religious Left has not disappeared, but its influence has diminished.

Zubovich's book is based on extensive research in denominational archives, religious periodicals, and the publications of the denominational leaders he profiles. While the narrative focuses largely on the ideas of the white men who occupied most of the formal leadership positions in Protestant denominations and seminaries in the mid-twentieth century, Zubovich also gives extensive coverage to African American church leaders such as Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays, as well as a small number of ecumenical Protestant women such as the Methodist human rights activist Thelma Stevens, and he demonstrates that these minority voices helped push Protestant denominations toward more socially conscious positions, especially on race. As early as the late 1940s, many white ecumenical Protestants began to replace a color-blind racial ideology with a new concern about structural racism that was influenced by what they learned from African American Christians such as Mays.

Although there have been several studies of the political activism of the National Council of Churches and the civil rights work of liberal white Protestant ministers in the mid-twentieth century, *Before the Religious Right* is by far the most comprehensive, detailed, authoritative study of American ecumenical Protestant politics that has yet been published. This is the definitive account not only of how ecumenical Protestant church leaders shaped American liberalism but also how they came to embrace these causes. It challenges a widespread popular view that equates Christian political mobilization with the politics of the right or that assumes that human rights liberalism in the United States had nonreligious origins. It is almost certain to become a standard addition to graduate student reading lists in the field, because it is essential reading for any scholar seeking a better understanding of twentieth-century Protestant politics and the trajectory of modern American liberalism.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640723001038