Journal of Law and Religion (2023), 38: 3, 495–498

Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States.

By Gene Zubovich. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. Pp. 408. $45.00 (cloth); $45.00 (digital). ISBN: 9780812253689.

Isaac Barnes May

PhD, University of Virginia; JD Candidate, Yale Law School, USA
isaac.may@yale.edu

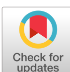
doi:10.1017/jlr.2023.29

In the United States, religious affiliation is typically associated with adherence to the political right. Indeed, there is a voluminous and rapidly proliferating body of scholarship that focuses on evangelicalism and Christian nationalism in the United States. Though the religious left was a powerful force in American political and cultural life for much of the twentieth century, that facet of US history has attracted far less attention from academics. Gene Zubovich's *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States* is a much-needed history of liberal Protestantism. Zubovich shows the dramatic influence that the Protestant left had in shaping a liberal political vision and offers a "corrective to evangelical-centered narratives that predominate in modern American religious history" (12). Zubovich makes a compelling case that any narrative of twentieth-century political developments is incomplete without understanding the role that Protestant liberals had in shaping the United States' course both internationally and domestically.

Zubovich focuses on what he calls "ecumenical Protestants" a term he uses synonymously with the "liberal Protestants" of the title (1). This term includes smaller religious Protestant groups and is intended to be a more expansive and inclusive category than the Protestant mainline, which is often understood to embrace only the so-called Seven Sisters, the large denominations that shaped American civic and political life. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, these ecumenical Protestants embraced new ideas about human rights, transforming American politics around race, economics, and the role of the United States abroad. Making a compelling argument for the importance of this movement, Zubovich declares that "[e]cumenical Protestantism was at the heart of mid-century liberalism's rise and fall" (309).

Much of the history in *Before the Religious Right* focuses on institutions, particularly the Federal Council of Churches and its successor, the National Council of Churches. Between a quarter and a third of the US population belonged to a religious denomination affiliated with these organizations, and Zubovich correctly asserts that around mid-century, the prestige and influence of the Federal Council of Churches and National Council of Churches exceeded even what is suggested by these lofty numbers (3–4). Zubovich covers an earlier period than does Jill Gill in *Embattled Ecumenicism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the*

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.



https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2023.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Trials of the Protestant Left (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), a history of the National Council of Churches during the Vietnam conflict. Together, the books provide a comprehensive picture of these important organizations. Denominational social action organizations also play a critical role in Zubovich's narrative. From the footnotes, it is clear that Zubovich did considerable research in institutional archives, including the Federal Council of Churches' papers at the Presbyterian Historical Society.

Zubovich tells the story chronologically. The first part, comprised of five chapters, begins in the 1920s and shows how the language and ideas of human rights developed out of an ecumenical Protestant quest for global order and engagement with international affairs. Emphasizing the need for a world government—or at least a heavily regulated international order—ecumenical Protestant leadership was critical to mobilizing the nation for World War II and creating the United Nations. In these chapters, Zubovich also describes how racism came to be understood as a worldwide evil and a human rights problem that the United States needed to address. In the second part of the book, chapters six through nine, Zubovich focuses primarily on domestic politics in the United States. In these chapters, he details Protestants' efforts to navigate the Cold War and the travails of McCarthyism, efforts to combat segregation, and intense conflicts that arose due to ecumenical Protestant efforts to find a more humane economic order that would offer an alternative to both capitalism and communism.

Zubovich positions the book as contributing to international relations scholarship and cites William Inboden's *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) as foundational for his own efforts. Many of the key players and debates will be familiar to those who study the political history of American diplomacy in the mid-twentieth century; Reinhold Niebuhr and the debate between Christian realists and pacifists appear in the book as key players before the Second World War, there were conflicts within the Federal Council of Churches about whether to recognize China in the late 1940s, and ecumenical Protestants dealing with decolonization struggled to figure out balancing of their anti-colonialist sympathies with anti-communism. One of the central figures discussed is John Foster Dulles, a Presbyterian layman who was an important figure in the Federal Council of Churches' international efforts. Zubovich's work particularly nuances the treatment of Dulles's involvement with the Federal Council of Churches in Andrew Preston's *Sword of Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012), arguing that Dulles was often less decisive in shaping the Federal Council of Churches' policies and attitudes than has been previously understood (118–19). Zubovich provides a remarkably clear account of these Protestants' role in creating the postwar international order.

Zubovich devotes extensive attention to ecumenical Protestantism's engagement with efforts for racial justice and civil rights. Starting in the late 1940s, the Federal Council of Churches denounced segregation on both theological and pragmatic grounds. Ecumenical Protestants also opposed the internment of Japanese Americans. Zubovich's account is useful because it clarifies that ecumenical Protestants not only engaged as political actors, lobbying and advocating on these topics, but also changed and used theology in these arguments. One of the more remarkable victories of this movement was marginalizing overtly white supremacist and racist theology in ecumenical institutions, winning a moral victory over advocates of segregation (224–25). This changed the terms of the debate: prominent supporters of segregation increasingly argued for the practice for supposedly prudential reasons rather than explicitly Christian ones.

In discussing the measures Protestants took to challenge segregation, Zubovich attends to their choice to use legal avenues. He briefly observes that the Congregationalist Council for Social Action filed amicus briefs on cases, including *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948), which invalidated racially restricted housing covenants, and *Takahashi v. Fish and Game*

https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2023.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Commission, 334 U.S. 410 (1948), which held that a Japanese resident of California could not be denied a fishing license simply because he was ineligible for citizenship (218). Zubovich considers at length how the Federal Council of Churches overcame internal conflicts to file an amicus brief in *Sweatt v. Painter*, 339 U.S. 629 (1950), a case that successfully challenged racial segregation in law schools. Zubovich writes that "when the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision announced the beginning of the end of Jim Crow in the United States, ecumenists were ecstatic and saw the court case as a culmination of the responsible work they had been carrying on for a decade" (228). It should be noted, though, that the book is not a work of legal history, the legal cases are not the focus, and the extent and impact of Protestant legal efforts are difficult to gauge from the sketch provided. No single work of history realistically can or should aspire to be everything for all audiences, and it is to Zubovich's credit that he illuminates one future direction for research into the legal aspects of the civil rights movement.

Before the Religious Right ultimately chronicles the beginning of ecumenical Protestant decline, roughly contiguous with the emergence of politically active conservative evangelicalism. Zubovich emphasizes in particular one factor in this process: the widening divide between laity and clergy, notably how wealthy laymen in positions of power were alienated by the liberal stances of clergy members on economics and racial justice. Zubovich makes clear that the choice of ecumenical Protestants to favor progressive causes in the face of both elite and often popular disapproval was "partly responsible for [ecumenical Protestants'] sudden loss of status in American public life, which would be ceded to evangelicals and conservative Catholics" (308). Yet Zubovich also contends that ecumenical Protestants brought lasting changes. Following N. J. Demerath, Matthew S. Hedstrom, and David Hollinger, he holds that in their decline, liberal Protestants were able to introduce their lofty ideals into popular culture successfully. Zubovich does not offer a jeremiad lamenting secularization, but he is attuned to the political polarization that has resulted from the marginalization of ecumenical Protestants as a cultural and political force capable of being a counterweight to conservative religion.

By portraying the conflict between ecumenical Protestants and evangelicals as essentially a fight between the political left and the political right, Zubovich tends to downplay the existence of more radical theological and political groups that often saw themselves as outside the ecumenical fold. Unmentioned is the fact that the Federal Council of Churches and later the National Council of Churches barred Universalist, Unitarian, and liberal Quaker membership in the organizations for theological reasons, which had the effect of often filtering out leftist political perspectives from ecumenical circles (in later years, the National Council of Churches would also bar the Metropolitan Community Church). Groups like the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation existed in a tense relationship with mainstream ecumenical Protestant organizations. Zubovich's definition of ecumenical Protestants is expansive enough to include some of these voices; he lists Quakers as among "ecumenical Protestant groups" at one point (127). He is also careful to mention that ecumenical Protestants were not always at the forefront of activism and that those on the "margins of Protestantism" would develop direct action tactics that became pivotal in the civil rights movement (220–21). While Zubovich's framing of history is persuasive, it would have been useful to explicate the limits of ecumenical Protestant organizations. They were never all-inclusive and tended to erect barriers for those further on the political or theological left that wanted to join them.

It also would have been helpful to further flesh out the relationship between ecumenical Protestants and the Soviet Union. As Zubovich discusses at length, critics regularly accused the Federal Council of Churches and National Council of Churches of being infiltrated by communists. This discourse was infused with a Cold War paranoia, and Zubovich is right to be critical of "Red-baiting attacks" (293). Yet he rushes past information that complicates

https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2023.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this narrative; in a section on rightwing attacks on the Methodist Social Action Committee in the 1950s, for example, Zubovich casually mentions that "[h]aving been closely tied to Harry F. Ward's pro-Soviet policies during the 1930s, the organization transformed during World War II, refocusing on the problem of racism while maintaining a leftist approach to economic policy" (292). This downplays the relevance of the organization's founding and the first decade under Ward, a figure whose controversial career has been well documented in the scholarship of David Nelson Duke and Gary Dorrien. Ward was a champion of Stalinism, even lauding the purges of the Kulaks. At one point, Zubovich chronicles professor of missions Edmund D. Soper's late 1940s praise of the Soviet Union's nationalities policy, including the Soviet treatment of the Jews, which he extolled as a model for the future of American race relations. Zubovich does not allow this to pass without comment and briefly notes that Soper missed rising antisemitism in the USSR and the "forced expulsion of Germans, Tatars, and other nationalities" (161–63, quotation at 162). More directly addressing the problem of ecumenical Protestants' occasional admiration and support for the Stalinist USSR could have strengthened Zubovich's contention that accusations of widespread communist sympathies among ecumenical Protestants were largely baseless.

Ultimately, *Before the Religious Right* is an impressive addition to scholarship that contributes to understanding of the link between religion and politics and documents the relationship between liberal Protestant institutions and the creation of the liberal political order in the United States. This historical narrative is critical to understanding the history of the New Deal, the creation of the United Nations, desegregation, and the Great Society. The contemporary left may now be trending in more secular directions, and the right is seen as publicly tied to Christian identity. Zubovich provides a critical window into a period when that was not the case, where taking a position based on Christian belief was commonly done by political actors of all kinds. One hopes that *Before the Religious Right* will find an audience not just with scholars but with anyone who wants to understand how religious groups have shaped American political life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2023.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press