



Denominations and Denominationalism: Past, Present, and Future

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Evidence for the decline of American denominationalism, particularly mainstream denominationalism, virtually throws itself in our faces. The evidential litany might include:

- the growing religious pluralism of North America
- the decline over the last half century in the salience, prestige, power, and vitality of Protestant denominational leadership
- the slippage in mainline membership and corresponding growth, vigor, visibility, and political prowess of conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist bodies
- patterns of congregational independence, including loosening of or removal of denominational identity, particularly in signage, and the related marginal loyalty of members
- the emergence of megachurches, some with resources comparable to small denominations and many with the capacity to meet needs heretofore supplied by denominations (training, literature, expertise)

Denominations—like their American counterparts, the free press, capitalism, and democracy—have evolved over time, changing their character to meet new contexts. Perhaps the current traumas of mainstream Protestantism are the birth pangs of yet another denominational style.

- the coalition of such megacongregations and/or parachurch organizations into quasi-denominations
- the growth within mainline denominations of caucuses and their alignment into broad progressive or conservative camps, often with connections to similar camps in other denominations and/or through religious action entities like the Institute of Religion and Democracy
- widespread suspicion of, indeed hostility towards, the centers and symbols of denominational identity—the regional and national headquarters

One could go on and on. Denominationalism looks doomed.¹ It may be. However, viewing the sweep of American history, what impresses this longtime observer is how much denominations and denominationalism have changed, how resilient they have proved, how significant these structures of religious belonging have been in providing order and direction to American society, and how such enduring purposes find ever new structural and institutional expression.²

To grasp something of the long history of American denominations and the collective pattern (denominationalism), four perspectives help. First, denominations and denominationalism shift gradually from strategies of expansiveness to efforts at consolidation. Second, the separate cyclical phases yield distinct stages or styles of denominational governance and cohesion, identifiable denominational periods. Third, each stage evidences significant cultural adaptation. Fourth, certain stages, particularly the more expansive, open the denominational system to new partners, new denominations whose energy, creativity, success, and aggressiveness negotiate their admission to the system of denominationalism.

The latter perspective points to important realities of denominationalism: that it has never been inclusive of the religious impulses in North American society, that there have always been institutional outsiders, and that denominationalism has defined itself—sometimes violently—against those marginalized. This observation points also to a fifth perspective—highly important and presupposed

¹On that judgment, see William M. Newman and Peter L. Halvorson's *Atlas of American Religion: The Denominational Era, 1776–1990* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000).

²The analysis in this essay draws on perspectives that I have developed over an academic lifetime of reflecting on denominationalism, much of it brought to focus on United Methodism. The views presented here rely on others' scholarship, the elaborate documentation for which can be found in, and is not therefore duplicated from, the following works of mine: *Marks of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming); "Denominationalism in Perspective," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 79 (Fall 2001) 199–213; "Culture Wars and Denominational Loyalties," *Quarterly Review* 18 (Spring 1998) 3–17; "Institutional Forms of Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988) 1:31–50; "Denominationalism: A Theological Mandate," *The Drew Gateway* 47 (1976–1977) 93–106. See also: Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church IV* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), and my several essays therein; Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*, United Methodism and American Culture, I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), especially my "Introduction," 1–20; Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), especially Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," 74–98; Russell E. Richey, ed., *Denominationalism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

but not developed here—that denominationalism invites theological-ethical assessment, as H. Richard Niebuhr provided so eloquently in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) and in *Christ and Culture* (1951). The following definition differs markedly from that of Niebuhr.

A DEFINITION³

Denominationalism presents the denomination as a *voluntaristic ecclesial body*. The denomination is *voluntary* because it presupposes a condition of legal or de facto toleration and religious freedom, an environment within which it is possible willingly to join or not join and where there is space to exist (alongside or outside of any other religious establishment if such persists). Typically, the denomination exists in a situation of religious pluralism, a pluralism of denominations.

“The denomination exists in a situation of religious pluralism. It is a voluntary church, a body that concedes the authenticity of other churches even as it claims its own.”

The denomination is *ecclesial* as a movement or body understanding itself to be a legitimate and self-sufficient, proper “church” (or religious movement). It is a voluntary church, a body that concedes the authenticity of other churches even as it claims its own. It need not, however, concede that authenticity indiscriminately; it need not and typically does not regard all other denominations as orthodox.

The denomination is an *ecclesial body or form*, an organized religious movement, with intentions and capacity for self-perpetuation, with a sense of itself as located within time, and with awareness of its relation to the longer Christian tradition. It knows itself as denominated, as named, as recognized and recognizable, as having boundaries, as possessing adherents, as having a history.

In these several regards, the denomination differentiates itself from reform impulses that may take similar structural form but construe themselves as belonging within a religion; from the church, which does not regard itself as voluntary or as sharing societal space with other legitimate religious bodies; and from the sect, which, though also voluntary, does not locate itself easily in time, recognize boundaries, tolerate other bodies, or concede their authenticity.

The denomination, then, is an *ecclesial creature of modernity*, a social form emerging with and closely akin to the political party, the free press, and free enterprise. With these other institutions, the denominations and related expressions of voluntary religion produce and sustain the democratic state. Like these other institutions, the individual denomination fits within, contributes to, and borrows from a larger organizational ecology. We term that organizational ecology “denominationalism.” As individual papers and magazines comprise the free press, individual

³This whole section is drawn from my essay “Denominationalism in Perspective,” 201–202.

businesses comprise free enterprise, individual parties comprise representative democracy, so individual denominations comprise denominationalism. These four creatures of modernity have tended to evolve together and to influence one another. Indeed, the fact that the denomination has resembled the corporation for the last century should not be surprising. It has resembled the current business form of the day and also the current form of the political party and of the press.

STAGES AND CYCLES

The following stages of denominational formation work imperfectly with respect to any particular denomination but help us discern broad movements and rough chronological development: plantation, ethnic voluntarism, purposive missionary association, confessional order, corporate organization, post-denominational confessionalism. Neither my denomination, Methodism, nor Lutheranism tracks this entire pattern, coming in as we do in significant numbers after one or more of these phases have run their course. But American religious movements have a way of replicating earlier phases and catching up with the dominant trends.

Reformed churches—Congregationalists and Presbyterians—better illustrate all the stages. Of particular significance was the way in which the dynamic Reformed plantation phase in North America reflected from the start the two impulses that would give American religion its cyclical character. Puritanism put a premium on conversion, heart religion, communions of the regenerate—patterns that would contribute to and later be known as pietism. Puritanism also prized confessions, law, order, pure doctrine—patterns already known as orthodoxy. Puritanism brought that combination of expansiveness and consolidation to bear on the social and political order and did so with the confidence of being part of an elect “nation,” with millennial urgency, and with supple covenantal cultural theories. Later plantations, arriving after colonial governments were in place, typically lacked the Puritan opportunity to imprint their principles so fully on the social and political order, and not infrequently found themselves having to come to terms with the Puritan success in so doing.

Later plantations—including the German Lutherans—which filled the American landscape with religious difference, groped their way towards being voluntaristic ecclesial bodies, and made genuine denominationalism possible—found themselves struggling to make their communities religiously vibrant with expansive strategies (that were or looked pietist) but also to find resources for order (orthodoxy). This second stage, which I term ethnic voluntarism and associate with the labors of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, we often label the First Great Awakening, a period in which religious, cultural, and linguistic vitalities produced communities of Baptists, Moravians, Presbyterians, and Lutherans (German Lutherans in particular). Much of this organization came from the ground up, as neighbors formed congregations, and congregations reached out to one another and across

the Atlantic for resources of legitimacy, order, stability, leadership, purpose, and community. Church structure was extremely modest and focused on internal problem solving.

In the third stage, awkwardly labeled purposive missionary association, upstart Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians set the evangelical pace, racing to bring new people into their communions across the expanse of the new nation. The revivalism of this stage, though stylistically of a piece with what preceded and followed it, invited religious communities to open their doors to those outside the cultural-linguistic family. Dramatically symbolizing this missionary inclusivism, denominations began concerted efforts to convert Africans, slave and free, and less coordinated efforts to embrace Native Americans. Religious bodies redefined themselves as American, some doing so immediately after national independence, others more gradually. And they saw their purposes in relation to social and cultural challenges of nation building, some having long struggles with language and culture, epitomized perhaps in the agendas and career of the Lutheran Samuel Schmucker. To carry out such missionary purposes, denominations began colleges, founded papers and magazines, and structured themselves for expansion.

*“corporate organization and professionalization proved
as apt in the religious sphere as in the economic”*

The fourth stage, confessional order, roughly coincided with the middle of the nineteenth century and had much to do with slavery, sectional crisis, civil war, and reconstruction. During this period denominations responded to the turmoil in American society by seeking churchly order. Often drawing on the deep wells of their distinctive traditions, sometimes enjoying the stimuli of trans-Atlantic conversation, occasionally reacting to the confessional energies of new immigrant populations, denominations sought to put their ecclesial houses in order. Such efforts produced discord, even division. When schism occurred, each new denomination found confessional, theological, liturgical, or ecclesial purpose in its separate identity. Among Lutherans, this stage might be seen in relation to the work of the two Krauths, Charles Philip and Charles Porterfield. Their agendas, mirrored in complex ways by the Americanizers, typified much of Protestantism.

The fifth and sixth stages are trickier to date but not to epitomize. The fifth, which I term corporate organization, derives its agendas from the socio-economic-cultural-political-military expansionism that swept the United States and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. U.S. participation, modest in the arena of colonial empire in comparison with the British and French, loomed increasingly large religiously and economically. Corporate organization and professionalization proved as apt in the religious sphere as in the economic, achieving the efficiency, resourcing, communication, rationalization, and mobilization requisite for world and national missionary enterprise. So denominations

reconstituted themselves, adding corporate, board, and agency structures to care for most of their work, reserving matters having to do with doctrine and clerical orders for the traditional or confessional polity.

The sixth stage, in the midst of which we now seem to find ourselves mired, might also be characterized in relation to the late twentieth-century critiques of centralized power and bureaucracy that drew energies from the left's agonies over race and war and the right's over taxes and social policy. The litany of denominational woes with which I began should indicate something of the institutional transformations that we now experience and which seem to me to represent another effort at collective consolidation. At the same time that the mainline denominations struggle to find the internal order, purpose, and unity that will staunch losses, reclaim loyalty, and reenergize program, some of the leadership of evangelical denominations (clearly excepting Southern Baptists) seems to be opening itself towards the mainline and a broadened Christian witness to the society and the world. We seem to be, I think, in yet another period of denominational transformation.

SUMMARY AND POSTSCRIPT

Looked at over the sweep of American history, what we now sometimes proclaim to be denominational death throes may instead be those of birth—to a new religious personhood that may differ markedly from what we now know. We have, indeed, gone through periods of expansionism and consolidation before, and those impulses mix and interpenetrate in curious and complex fashion. We have indeed seen distinctive denominational patterns, even identities, in these separate periods. One way of putting that is to say that a Lutheran today would be more at home in a Methodist or Presbyterian congregation than in a Lutheran congregation of an earlier period.

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Each of the stages or periods has evidenced social-cultural adaptation—sometimes more constructive, sometimes more derivative. Looking backwards and perhaps not too closely, one may conclude with Richard Niebuhr that “the denominations represent the accommodation of religion to the caste system. They are emblems, therefore, of the victory of the world over the church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the church's sanction of that divisiveness which the church's gospel condemns.”⁴ Niebuhr is certainly on target in identifying the way in

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929; New York: Meridian, 1957) 21, 25.

which the denominations conform to social realities and, as we have also noted, to the agendas of American society as a whole. We could, in fact, say more about American denominational collusion in cultural imperialism than was obvious to Niebuhr when he wrote. And yet, having conceded that, one cannot but also be impressed with the contributions that denominations make to social order and social reconstruction, the prophetic roles that they play, and their capacities for self-critique and self-renewal.

One current dimension of this self-probing, clearly a contested and difficult one, points to our fourth early generalization, namely, the openness, in certain stages of the denominational system, to new partners, new denominations whose energy, creativity, success, and aggressiveness negotiate their admission to the system of denominationalism. I have noted that one such boundary currently being tested is found between the evangelical and the mainline denominations. Another is between Christian denominations and Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and other religious communities. What are Christians to make of the growing religious pluralism of North America?

We have noted that denominationalism as a system, that is, the collectivity of denominations, functions with an unstated but crudely operative ecclesiology. One could argue, though space has not permitted it here, that the denominational system has closely approximated the limits of American tolerance. Denominationalism and the experiment of American religious freedom have interacted in complex ways and have never been inclusive of the range of religious impulses in North American society.

There have always been institutional outsiders. Sometimes, these outsiders do not adhere to the canons of denominationalism and religious freedom. They do not organize and structure themselves as voluntaristic ecclesial bodies. Sometimes, their outsider status derives from their rejection by existing denominations. Sometimes, denominationalism has defined itself against those marginalized, occasionally violently, frequently with the blessing of those in political power. The early denominational system functioned with paradigms drawn from Puritanism, treating Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples as outsiders. The evangelical system of the nineteenth century defined itself against Rome. Racism and anti-Semitism persisted well into the ecumenism of the twentieth century.

The questions before religious and political leadership today are: Who participates in the American experiment? Whose chaplains will be recognized? Which groups will administer faith-based programs? Who belongs? For the civil realm, the questions relate to the constitution, law, and public policy. For the religious community, the question is ecclesiology. Conservatives recognize that reality. Those of us, like myself, who belong in the progressive camp should not duck the ecclesiological challenge. Who we are as Christians, where the church is, what inheres in its mission in the world—such questions have much to do with whom we take to be our neighbor. Denominationalism, conjointly with the courts and the First

Amendment, has identified the neighbor. The issues that denominations and denominationalism now face are important not only for the United States, but for the world. ⊕

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