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Jeffrey Haynes

A world awakening

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Introduction

Far from only isolationists, the late- and post-war period (1942–1949) saw a surge in evangelical internationalism whose effect on what we would come to call global peace and order, the very foundation of many international organizations like the United Nations, has been enduring. The question of that evangelical perspective and influence is the subject of this chapter. I argue that this perspective was not always coherent and ran the gambit of pacifism, isolationism, activism, humanitarianism, and military adventurism (Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, 2019). If today’s sociologists and political scientists struggle with the integrity and impact of evangelicalism on political questions, this is for good reason (Kidd, 2019): it has long been a thin alliance of thicker political-theological traditions, which have disagreed, and continue to disagree, on a wide range of prudential, political questions.

I show this, first, by looking at the rise of neo-evangelicalism in the late- and post-war period, an alliance that had only barely begun to emerge. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded during the war (1942), in part in counterpoint to, but still with significant overlap with, the Federal Council of Churches (FCC). But even in this context, it is difficult to clearly separate evangelical from non-evangelical. Second, I investigate evangelicalism in what Heather Warren calls some key Theologians of a New World Order, including such mainline/evangelical hybrids as Reinhold Niebuhr and neo-Orthodoxy. Third, I argue that John Foster Dulles and the FCC should count as at least a part of evangelicalism, a Council now long considered mainline, but borrowing, enlisting, and incorporating voices and perspectives that cannot simply be expunged from the evangelical record. Finally, I look at conservative evangelical anti-globalism in the late- and post-war period. In the process, I describe not merely the split...
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between the newly minted NAE and FCC but also the divisions within those divisions (that is, dispensational theology versus presuppositional apologetics), informing the final argument that evangelicalism has always been a highly politically pluralistic movement. The rationale I offer for this, in part in the opening but most persuasively I hope in the conclusion, is that evangelicalism is too thin of a theological reed to sustain thick social and political theories in the world, and as such, we should expect diversity from what is an essentially a loose alliance of deeper, sometimes competing, often disagreeing, Christian-religious traditions.

What was evangelicalism in the late-war order?

Evangelicalism, and its many definitions, is an industry unto itself (Miller, 2020; Joustra, 2019), but this does not mean that there is no history or no meaning to the term (Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, 2019). While it is true that evangelicalism is diffuse, there is no headquarters or specific leadership and underneath its umbrella many subgroups flourish, I contend there are several ways to capture the term definitionally.

The first, historical, draws us back to Europe in the late 1700s, where a decentralized movement within Protestantism emerged around the revivals of such figures as John Wesley and George Whitefield. These were often trans-denominational revivals, at once a factor of the personalities that drove the revivals (a not uncommon feature of evangelicalism), and the broad, ecumenical spirit which tried to recapture certain essentials of the Christian faith. George Marsden argues that one of the ways to understand this new expression of the Christian faith is through the lens of “spiritual free enterprise” (Marsden, 2015). These movements arose at the same time as market economies became dominant and favored the innovations of charismatic personalities, enterprising leaders, and more diffuse – less hierarchal – competitive, spiritual experiences. Mark Noll argues in The New Shape of World Christianity that these traits of early evangelicalism also explain, in part, its effectiveness in the emerging market economies of the developing world (Noll, 2009).

Aside from historical and sociological forces, the theological tether, if it can be called such, that is often invoked is David Bebbington’s “quadrilateral,” include biblicism, activism, conversionism, and crucicentrism (Bebbington, 1989). The four-part emphasis does not preclude other Christian traditions that might have each of these four elements, but it is the special emphasis on each of these four parts that give evangelicalism its particular identity: a priority on Scripture as the inspired and authoritative Word of God, the atoning work of Jesus Christ as central to sinner’s salvation, the need for personal conversion to that good news, and finally the call to spread that news, in many forms.

Yet, as interesting as some of these signposts are, it remains a little unclear how such a set of identifying markers, historical, sociological, theological, would make for a meaningfully coherent approach to global peace and order in the post-war world. Indeed, why and how would we draw lines between evangelical activism and mainline outlooks and activism in that period?

At least part of the answer is that we would not, or at least, we would draw less dramatic lines between what we today would call evangelical and mainline, and more dramatic lines between what in the 1940s would have been the main point of debate and distinction: fundamentalism and modernism. The founding of the Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947 is illustrative here, whose history and project Marsden tells with the simple title, Reforming Fundamentalism (Marsden, 1987).

Fuller’s founding president, Harold J. Ockenga, saw his task as recovering an evangelical tradition that “had been ruined by the rise of modernist or liberal theologies” at work in America’s mainline churches and seminaries (Marsden, 2015). Ockenga himself was a mainline
Presbyterian animated by a need to combat modernism but suspicious of separating evangelicalism from the broader American mainstream, including its major denominations. He himself founded the NAE in 1942, along with a movement Marsden describes as “evangelically oriented anti-modernists who typically called themselves fundamentalists” (Marsden, 2015). Ockenga used the term “new evangelicals” for the movement associated with the NAE and Fuller, and in part because of the later work of Billy Graham, the term took on new life. Ockenga’s opening convocation address at Fuller Seminary in 1947 on “The Challenge to the Christian Culture in the West” laid out an ambitious project of intellectually rebuilding this tradition.

Charles Fuller, the other founder of Fuller, represented another, less academic strand. Though Fuller had great respect for college education, left to himself, argues Marsden, it is likely that he would have simply founded another Bible institute, like Moody or Biola, not a major seminary. His was a tradition marked more by George Whitefield and Dwight L. Moody, more entrepreneurial in nature, and subject to broader populist rather than academic tendencies (Marsden, 2015).

In these two men of extraordinary industry, we have at least two meaningfully related but distinguishable strands, what Dennis Hoover calls a more cosmopolitan internationalism and a more rooted populism (Hoover, 2009). While it would be inappropriate to separate them completely, it is appropriate to note, amongst these early prominent post-war evangelicals, their different emphases in understanding their traditions. Neither implied a strict separation between mainline and evangelical. Indeed, Ockenga saw as the challenge of his day not mainline Christianity, but rather modernism, for which he worked to develop a new evangelicalism to restore the mainline churches (see also Henry, 2019). Even the NAE was less a project of separation, in Ockenga’s mind, and more a project of restoration of what evangelicalism should be. The accidental schismatic attempting of a project of internal reform is also, perhaps, a broader Protestant theme (Payton, 2010; Gregory, 2012).

How, then, to think about evangelicalism in this period and its influence on late- and post-war order? There are, I suggest, three main ways to approach this issue.

First, in the moment under study, evangelicalism and the new evangelicalism were emerging against modernism within the mainline, not over, against, and in separation with mainline Christianity. Professed “evangelical” Christians found themselves in mainline churches, just as professed evangelical denominations found themselves part of what would perhaps only later come to be seen as mainline movements. To argue, then, that there were evangelicals, on the one hand, and mainline Christians on the other, is to commit a kind of historical (and possible contemporary) anachronism: those categories simply did not exist at that time in the way they do today. At least one influential evangelical, that is, the founder of the NAE, would not have considered such a separation consistent with his position. When we talk about “evangelical” voices, then we must not overlook voices that were in the mainline, since the boundaries between evangelical and mainline did not drive between institutions in the post-war period in the way in which some assume they do today.

Second, much diversity can be noted inside even the newer evangelicalism of the Fuller Theological Seminary. Both Fuller and Ockenga offer compatible but nonetheless meaningfully different emphases on the kind of activism and institutions that were most needed. Ockenga called for higher-level intellectual and cultural engagement with the trends of the day, Fuller for the activist “gap-men” between laity and clergy, in activist service of the church. Fuller Seminary itself is testimony that such visions overlap in a significant way, but they are not identical, and we can expect such differences in approach to be larger still when not addressing the focus of a seminary but global peace and order.
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Finally, we should perhaps expect this diversity. Ockenga was unapologetically reformed/Calvinist, and Fuller was a Baptist, and neither was anxious to abandon their specific, “thick” theological traditions in favour of a “thinner” evangelical identity. “A theology that only features the shared evangelical convictions,” in the words of another Fuller president, Richard Mouw, “leaves a movement that can easily be blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Mouw 2015, 51; see also 2016, 2019). Evangelicalism needs the diversity of its thick theological traditions underneath its thin umbrella commitments, and such thickness is where issues of theological ethics and especially political ethics are worked out. Evangelicalism simply does not have the political and philosophical capacity to coherently argue for one perspective regarding political, much less global, order.

In the next section, we will review what such diversity looked like in practice in the post-war period, focusing on both modernism and activism.

Theologians of a new world order: the neo-orthodox turn

The work of Reinhold Niebuhr is an example of the lack of agreement in evangelical definitions in the post-war world. Heather Warren writes that “contrary to the charges of fundamentalists and evangelicals,” Niebuhr was not, in fact, “simply liberal, either theologically or politically” (Warren, 1997, 4). Nor, Preston comments, in facing criticism from that opposite liberal corner, was he “afraid of the Way of Jesus,” advancing only “apostasy, brazen and shameless” (Preston, 2012, 303).

It is true that Niebuhr represented and advanced a theological approach that fell afoul of both modernism and liberalism, and, to a degree, evangelicalism (certainly fundamentalism). Niebuhr’s political revisions came following theological ones, developed by European theologians like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, after World War I. Such views were sharply critical of liberalism’s belief in human progress and the Social Gospel that emerged. Niebuhr argued against the Social Gospelers, that it was not enough to repair the systems and institutions of society. The problem lay deeper in the human heart.

This theology made Reinhold Niebuhr an object of contempt among his formerly fellow modernist Protestants. The focus of their anger came because of his change of mind, as many did, on the doctrine of internationalist pacifism. One former student of Reinhold Niebuhr complained that he had let his “basic point of view justify [him] in taking unchristian positions” and doubted his views were “even Christian” (Preston 2012, 303). The Rev. Albert Edward Day of the First Methodist Church Pasadena, on learning of the launch of Christianity and Crisis, promptly wrote a check for $25 to its liberal rival, Christian Century.

Though vilified by liberal pacifists, it is still hard to make Reinhold Niebuhr fit into an evangelical box. Niebuhr remained committed to empirical, scientific inquiry (against Biblical inerrancy), to ecumenical and inter-faith cooperation, and he never broke with the FCC, evidenced by the influence he was able to exert upon its efforts for a “Just and Durable Peace.” He remained a member of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians and was pro-labor and pro-civil rights (Preston, 2012, 304). He was, in many theological and social respects, a modern man.

But his Augustinian recovery of sin and its social and political effects quickly put him out of step with the modern persons with whom he had previously enjoyed close, liberal fellowship. His first full attack on liberalism was in Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927). He charged the liberal tradition with moral complacency and sentimental individualism, arguing such religion was “salt that has lost its savor” (Warren, 1997, 43). For the sake of civilization in general, religion needed to confront, not accommodate modern culture. The FCC named that book one of the best of the year.
When Reinhold Niebuhr felt that the mainline *Christian Century* no longer offered a meaningful enough forum for non-liberals, he participated in launching *Christianity and Crisis*. Its inaugural issue came out in February 1941 and focused on how the crisis affected the “whole social order,” calling for new, remedial post-war arrangements. The third editorial in the issue focused on “The World After the War,” laying the foundation for five “great problems” that needed addressing, including tempering sovereignty to resolve international issues (Niebuhr 1941, 4–6; Warren, 1997, 97).

Niebuhr’s significance is in part because of how this neo-orthodox theology influenced others, especially the FCC and its then-head John Foster Dulles. In February 1940, Dulles echoed the concerns of Niebuhr in his address (“The Churches and the International Situation”) at the Federal Council conference, arguing against absolute state sovereignty, and for a new international political system, including novel international cooperation on currency and free trade arrangements (Warren, 1997, 99). Reinhold Niebuhr’s pivot away from pacifism was therefore not unlike that of John Foster Dulles. Dulles’ preliminary thoughts would be captured more robustly still in the “Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace” of the FCC (1943).

**A just and durable peace?**

The FCC, the main Protestant body of advocacy in the early twentieth century, and an ecumenical association of thirty-two denominations (including evangelical ones), had fought for years the drift towards America’s involvement in the Second World War. Much of its membership had a hybrid pacifist and isolationist political theology, one which was seriously critical of the force of arms and more critical still of adventurism in European wars. The effect of Pearl Harbor, therefore, was salutary.

By 1942 the FCC had organized a petition to support the war signed by nearly a hundred of the nation’s leading Protestant figures, and a year later, even declared that peace could only come through total military victory (Preston, 2012, 368). The Catholic hierarchy in America, initially quite hesitant about the war, followed suit. It seemed, for a time, that Christian America had reached a détente on the question of internationalism and war.

But all was not quiescent in Christian America as it may seem. Indeed, writes Andrew Preston (2012, 373),

> "The war should have been a time of unbridled, triumphalist nationalism. Given that the United States achieved victory on two fronts on two separate continents a world apart, all without suffering any physical damage itself, and given how wealthy the nation emerged after fifteen years of war and Depression, it would not have been a surprise had Americans treated world events as a total vindication of their way of life. And of course, many if not most Americans felt exactly this way, and celebrated accordingly. But many others did not, and most of those who questioned that the war provided confirmation of America’s goodness or disagreed that it had come at a worthwhile cost were religious Americans. Religious belief is often a source of dogmatic moral certainty, but it can also cause profound doubt and self-reflection, even among the most devoted. This seems to have been the case during World War II, for a sizable number of religious Americans did not support the war."

Aside from the war, several issues stood out as troublesome to American Christians: the draft, the Allied strategy of total war and unconditional surrender, Japanese internment, and the use...

The shift to an apocalyptic, atomic-weapons-informed politics was one that fueled more, rather than less, Biblical reflection. For evangelical fundamentalists like Carl McIntire, the atomic bomb “makes seem more real the Biblical statements of the earth’s destruction” (McIntire, 2008, 132). Fortune magazine predicted that the bomb would cause a “religious awakening” and a “reaffirmation of Christian values” across America (Boyer, 1985, 212).

So, in a sense, the geopolitical terrain also shifted the religious–political terrain.

It was within this moment in history that the FCC advanced its ecumenical agenda of a communion of nations with striking, even startling, success. This American-led Council was in fact so successful that its leader reported with characteristic flourish and a little exaggeration that, “If it were not for the churches of this country, there probably would not be a United Nations today” (Preston, 2012, 408). Whole segments of the FCC’s report found their way into the consultation at Dumbarton Oaks (1944) and finally into the San Francisco conference (1945), at which the United Nations Charter was adopted (Erdmann, 2005).

That leader was appointed in 1940 when the FCC established the Commission on a Just and Durable Peace. This was yet another Presbyterian, John Foster Dulles. Like Woodrow Wilson, Dulles grew up as the son of a Presbyterian minister. Like Wilson, Dulles experienced the Presbyterian culture as a young undergraduate at Princeton, where, in fact, Wilson was president during his time (see Thompson, 2015). Dulles chose international law, arguing, “I could make a greater contribution as a Christian lawyer and layman than I would as a Christian minister” (Preston, 2012, 385). His foreign policy credentials certainly helped. His grandfather and his uncle had both been secretaries of state, and through their connections, the young Dulles attended both the Second Hague Peace Conference and the Paris Peace Conference itself.

So, when Dulles addressed the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work Conference in Oxford in 1937, he was ready to make a passionate legal, not merely religious case, for the ending of war. The solution, he argued, was not merely to outlaw war by “mere declaration” but to provide other, more productive outlets for human energy (Preston, 2012, 387). He called for the dismantling of inviolable sovereignty (just as Reinhold Niebuhr did in 1940). He called for a federal world model. He called, in short, for the resurrection of a powerful League of Nations. In every respect, writes Preston (2012, 387), his worldview was that of an “ecumenical internationalist.”

Dulles put his Christian faith at the center of this internationalism. If such peace was to be “just and durable,” he argued, it would also have to be Christian, or at least based on Biblical principles and could be applied more broadly (Preston, 2012, 388). He argued that international order without Christian ethics would lack a moral foundation. This was the substance of his argument against fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union (Dulles, 1940).

Like much of Christian America, Dulles was not a pacifist, yet he had serious doubts about the war until the attack on Pearl Harbor. But while that attack may have encouraged Dulles’ support for the US entering the war in 1941, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended that support. War, as the atomic age made plainly clear, had become so total and so destructive that it could no longer be tolerated.

Under Dulles, the FCC’s main goal was to arouse Christians to their responsibility for world peace (Erdmann, 2005). This entailed drawing up an “ethical, peaceful world order that was both
workable and palatable to most Americans” (Preston, 2012, 390). The audacity of a religious
group drawing up this kind of candid social and political framework is almost unintelligible to
the contemporary mind, but churches did it. The FCC’s Commission to Study the Bases of a Just
and Durable Peace met in New York in March of 1941, and a week after had printed 450,000
copies of a handbook.

When Roosevelt and Churchill published the Atlantic Charter in August of 1941, with its
list of eight common principles, Dulles complained that it was both “tentative and incomplete”
(Preston, 2012, 391). Challenged to provide a plan of greater depth and specificity, he did so.
The FCC launched a major book at the Rockefeller Center’s RCA Building in March 1943:
*Six Pillars of Peace*, which, in Dulles’ estimation, captured essential elements of Christian inter-
nationalism. These were:

1. An international organization, which makes all further principles possible;
2. Economic justice through coordinating and limiting the domestic laws of states;
3. Political reform to allow permanent forums for treaty negotiations;
4. Decolonization;
5. Disarmament;
6. The protection of individual freedoms, especially religious and intellectual liberty.

(*Erdmann, 2005, 249–250*)

*Six Pillars* was an enormous political success. As a result, the FCC met with the US president
and a range of secretaries and took part in events at both Dumbarton Oaks and in San Francisco,
where the foundations for the United Nations (UN) were laid. Pope Pius XII issued his own
program, *Six Conditions of a Just Peace*, which dovetailed with both the Atlantic Charter and
the FCC’s *Six Pillars*. The world took notice, and so, indeed, did the American public. The pub-
licity generated by the FCC through its sermons, pamphlets, and lobbying was noted by many
Americans. In a Gallup poll in 1941, “international freedom” and “reform based on toleration
and Christian principles” were the two most popular solutions for war. In April 1945, thanks
in part to the FCC, some polls recorded as high as 90 percent approval ratings in the United
States for the establishment of the UN. And when the Commission did attend the San Francisco
Conference, it proposed nine items for the UN Charter, of which four – a statement on moral
aims; codification of international law; decolonization; and a declaration of fundamental human
rights – were accepted (Thompson, 2015). Andrew Preston writes that “rarely had religious lob-
bying been so effective, or so consequential” (Preston, 2012, 408–409).

Finally, as I have sought to show, while the Niebuhr-inspired neo-orthodoxy of the post-war
FCC did have a decisive influence on the UN and its approach to peace and diplomacy, it is
also true that many evangelical Christians were less than impressed by this approach. Protestant
fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals were fierce critics. M.G. Hatcher, a fundamentalist
Baptist preacher from Iowa, argued, “Scripture does prophecy,” that the establishment of a world
government, “will make it possible for the World Dictator, the Anti-Christ, to take over control”
(Preston, 2012, 402). The UN was, in his mind, a first step to creating a “reign of suffering and
terror as the world has never known.” In addition, Rev. William L. Blessing equated the “God-
denying, Christ-rejecting, Holy Ghost-blaspheming, Bible-hating atheistic” FCC with the same
“anti–Christ world order” of the UN (Preston, 2012, 403). Finally, Rev. Dan Gilbert mounted
a protest against the evils of the UN, which he considered parallel with those of the FCC. The
FCC’s organizational structure, he argued, ignored the great company of Bible-believers who
were denominationally tied to the organization, robbing them of their autonomy. This, he said,
is exactly what the UN would do to Americans (Preston, 2012, 404).
Conservative evangelical anti-globalism

I have saved what might be regarded as a more “traditional” evangelical story for last, in part to challenge the historical record on what counts as “evangelicalism” (Thompson, 2015). It can be plausibly argued that the neo-orthodoxy of Reinhold Niebuhr represents a part of American evangelicalism, seen today in contemporary evangelical magazines such as Providence (in the tradition of Christianity and Crisis) and Christianity Today. Just as the energetic internationalism of John Foster Dulles and the FCC represents a part of American evangelicalism, it is the case that they were neither wholly separate from nor always opposed to American intervention or Christian internationalism, more generally.

However, the shorthand for evangelicalism in foreign affairs has, of late, come to mean more of a kind of Christian nationalist anti-globalism, generically summarized in President Donald Trump’s brand of “America First” (Whitehead and Perry, 2020). This too predates the current president and deserves consideration in shaping evangelical approaches to global peace and order, both before and after the war. I use the term “anti-globalism” rather than “anti-internationalism” to make the point that, especially in this account, conservative evangelical hostility was aimed mainly at globalist, federal, state-to-state institutions, not toward missionary activism abroad generally (Thompson, 2015, 27–47). These were, in other words, not proponents of anti-internationalism across the board but of anti-federal political globalism. The two can overlap, but the sentiments are not identical.

The origins of evangelical anti-globalism in the United States are therefore most obvious in debates around the League of Nations and later resurface in common themes. Markku Ruotsila argues that “the League of Nations controversy set the parameters for all subsequent conservative evangelical commentary on modern internationalism” (Ruotsila, 2007, 171). Indeed, the League project, in his words, was “spawned by modern internationalism” and its notions of immanentist progress. The League was poorly regarded by many conservative evangelicals partly for theological reasons and partly because of guilt by association. That is, the League idea was advanced by the “wrong sort of Christians,” rather than always being disagreed with for doctrinal or theological reasons (Haidt, 2013).

The Senate’s rejection of the US joining the League in 1920 was therefore a win for conservative evangelicals, who had fought against its adoption on their own Biblical grounds. But what was won in the Senate was not won on the home front in American churches. Every single nationwide ecumenical organization, with the exception of the World Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA), had thrown its support behind the League. What some might call an early pattern in American conservative evangelicalism began to develop: they won the issue of the day, but they lost the culture and eventually their own churches.6

During the interwar period, the fracture became apparent. Politicization and polarization split conservative evangelicalism, diluted its impact, and eventually created the force of “New Evangelicals” (for example, Ockenga) who re-emerged from isolation, vigorously political, and anxious to engage the major issues of their day. Liberal internationalists, for example, argued for disarmament and the establishment of a World Court in the 1920s and 1930s, issues that some conservative clergy also supported (Ruotsila, 2007, 173). That number would only grow after the birth of the atomic age, when it became clear, to liberal and conservative evangelicals alike, that the nuclear age confronted the church with a question of not only the justice of war but the survival of the human race (see Swallow Prior, 2015).

William Bell Riley, sometimes referred to as the “grand old man of fundamentalism,” argued that these causes were “contrary to God’s plan” because “not once has the Word of God been considered as providing a basis for [their] procedure” and “not once has the
leadership of Christ been recognized” (Riley, 1939, 18-19). Such attempts at progressive peace were all deeply enmeshed in a kind of exclusive humanism, argued Riley, an apostasy which put human dogma and “man-made programs” for a lasting peace at the center of history, not the cross of Christ. The WCFA denounced the League as “atheistic” and “Bolshevistic” arguing such plans for disarmament and a World Court would produce nothing but the “Antichrist’s world empire” (The Christian Fundamentalist, 1929). This did nothing to dilute liberal Protestant (and some evangelical) enthusiasm for a League structure, and conservative evangelicals fought disarmament and the World Court as harbingers of a resurrected League, what would be the UN.

Thus, when the FCC published its “Just and Durable Peace” and made an ecclesial case for a new UN, conservative evangelicals saw the resurgence of just the monster they had feared. Worse for many conservative evangelicals was that many Christian denominations, which had opposed the League initially, now joined Dulles and the FCC in enthusiastically endorsing his so-called Six Pillars of Peace. The United Lutheran Church, one such example, even joined as delegates to the UN’s founding conference (Bachmann, 1997, 234).

There were many specific complaints against the UN and its proposed Charter.

First, conservative evangelicals denounced the Charter for its lack of references to God. Debates over such a reference had been defeated by delegates from various countries, and meetings, which in the past might have been opened in prayer, were not. Arguments which, in 1919, were more anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic in tone were, admittedly, diluted, but criticisms of a pagan plan decentered from the providence of God and unjustifiably confident in the progressive, moral making powers of humankind were a parallel to criticisms of the League.

Walter A. Maier, a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod broadcaster, rejected what he called all “anti-Scripture programs” whether those of “atheist communism” or “godless politicians” who believed in “world control” refusing to take its root from the Word of God. How, he begged, “can we expect anything God-pleasing from international leaders who hate our Savior?” (Maier, 1949, 51–61).

Maier’s criticisms led to a related but distinct second concern. This was about more than the absence of God; it was about whether pluralistic projects proceeding from non-Christian roots could, or should, ever succeed. “Only Christian civilization was capable of making the world better,” and there could never be such a universal Christian civilization until “non-Christian and anti-Christian leaders of the UN were converted out of their evil ways” (Ruitsolia, 2007, 178). Efforts at reform, no matter how well-intentioned, which proceeded apart from the foundation of Jesus Christ and the Word of God simply could not be entertained. They would lapse into the worst sin and misery, a false revelation from the gods of progress and exclusive humanism.

Such an apologetic was not uncommon among reformed presuppositionalists. According to Ruotsila,

it was apologetics, more than any other single influence except dispensationalism, that helped perpetuate Christian anti-internationalism beyond the cold war, when the so-called culture wars seized the imagination of many on the political right who until then had fought communists and their alleged UN allies.

(Ruotsila 2007, 179)

Dispensationalists feared the coming of the Beast of the Christian book of Revelation, whose markers they found in the nascent world state of the proposed UN, and whose resistance they therefore owed not merely to prudential politics but to the true king, Jesus, whose thousand-year reign was yet forthcoming (referred to as premillennial rapture theology). A good example,
on the other hand, of presuppositionalism can be found in the work of Cornelius Van Til, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Van Til based his arguments on a kind of Calvinist theology, arguing that “mutual understanding across the bridge of fundamentally different premises (or presuppositions) of Christians and nonbelievers” was ultimately impossible (Ruotsila, 2007, 179). The founding point for any Christian thought must be God, and this belief is so fundamental that it created divergent epistemologies, making it not only unlikely but impossible for moral and political alignment on key questions. On the one hand, the sphere of politics, founded by God, rooted in the Scripture, was contrasted with exclusive humanistic autonomy, the latter of which was, in his opinion, clearly at the root of the new UN system. This, he said, would produce an inevitable “head-on collision” between the two if they stayed true to their presuppositions (Van Til, 2008, 179–218).

These arguments influenced many, including the New Evangelicals, though it was perhaps most apparent in what would be called Christian Reconstructionist, or Dominionist, movements. One of its leaders, Rousas John Rushdoony, inspired by a kind of Calvinism and the dominance of Christian beliefs in American government, called “any discussion of the United Nations … inevitably a religious discussion, for the principles which that organization embodies are not merely political or economic but inevitably religious.” Rushdoony argued disapprovingly that the UN had developed a “new religion of humanity,” a combination of modernism, rationalism, and liberalism (Rushdoony, 2001, 113–132).

Third, the argument of conservative evangelicals was that such a progressive plan could not but end in tyranny. Riley argued that the UN was the “present popular plan of taking the world over, church included, placing all in the hands of a few mortals, for remaking.” The UN, like the League, was just “another term for the unification of ideals and thrones that must pave the way for the coming of the Antichrist” (Ruotsila, 2007, 179).

Louis Bauman, a leading Brethren evangelist, wrote of the UN as an “impending world state” and a “great godless organization, ostensibly to obtain ‘international peace and security’ just preceding Armageddon.” The UN was “man’s supreme attempt to bring ‘on earth peace, good will among men,’ without the partnership of Him whom Almighty God has ordained as ‘The Prince of Peace.’ It would fail on the rock of its godlessness” (Bauman 1950, 13–15). Carl McIntire, author of two books on the subject—The Modern Tower of Babel and Servants of Apostasy—wrote that the UN was “organized in hell for the sole purpose of aiding and abetting the destruction of the free world” (McIntire 1949, 9–15; 2007, 196–199).

Rushdoony argued that the values of the UN would necessarily invoke “socialistic as well as totalitarian” mechanisms. The UN’s new “humanistic culture [was] aimed at destroyed all others by means of the imperialism of world law and world police,” a “crusading missionary organization” with a “false and deadly faith” which was dedicated to using the powers of the state to “save man.” In 1978 he called the UN the “anathema to all real Christians” (Rushdoony, 2001, 113–132).

Fourth, the charge of inter-faith relativism, where all faiths teach sufficiently similar truths, loomed large, especially in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration was the product of a wide variety of religious and non-religious actors, including Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and atheists. The idea behind the Declaration, in the words of the Catholic philosopher of state and society Jacques Maritain, was to produce a code of rights that the world could agree upon, “provided nobody asks us why.” Yet while Maritain’s enthusiasm was for people supporting rights for their own reasons, conservative evangelicals saw this as relativist proof of process: that all beliefs could produce the same practical result. The idea that “any religion” could produce the fruit of social and political stability, as though divine revelation was present in all world religion, was anathema. It was a mixing of pagan and Christian faiths.
Even Christianity Today, the flagship journal of the New Evangelicals, warned such a code of rights could lead to a “totalitarian superstate” which presumed to be “the origin of all rights” (Christianity Today, 1957, 22). For Riley, such peace and order was offered by liberal Christianity, political liberalism, and Soviet communism, each part of a piece of exclusive humanism from which was emerging the anti-Christian world empire (Riley, 1939, 177).

Conservative evangelicals’ main arguments against the post-war order were rooted in both dispensational theology and presuppositional apologetics, but no less powerful for it. Each of these arguments continued to exert real influence over evangelicals, writ large, over the decades to come and caused real schism amongst evangelicals themselves on issues of an international and political character. The language, quoted at length here, is instructive. It is very hard, in the face of dispensational theology and presuppositional apologetics, to occupy a dissenting evangelical position, as those who quietly sided with Dulles and the FCC, or embraced neo-Orthodox perspectives on global order, did. Yet they did exist, and continue to exist, as part of the story of evangelicalism and global peace and order. That their existence is uneasy should follow naturally from this account.

Conclusion

The question with which we began was that of whether American evangelicals were isolationists or internationalists, and I have consistently used the case of debates around the post-WWII international order as a practical case to illustrate their differences. This case serves us well, if hardly exhaustively, because it was at both this moment that new/neo-evangelicalism was taking shape, providing us a crucial window into the diversity of the movement, but also the practice of American evangelicals in major questions of international affairs.

Surveying the diversity in the movement called evangelicalism, I have argued that there are meaningful evangelical minorities present in both the neo-orthodox turn of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the hugely successful but more mainline efforts of John Foster Dulles and the FCC. The modern forms of the so-called “Christian Right” have some of their roots in conservative evangelical anti-globalism, and as such, are often invoked as a shorthand for evangelicalism generally, but this is not the whole (or correct) story. Conservative evangelicalism has indeed been a force to be reckoned with, but even here, cohesion is not always obvious, and evangelical conservatives are not the entirety of the movement. In fact, to read some conservative evangelicals today, in contrast to their stated nemeses of liberal modernists in the FCC of the post-war era, it might be surprising to know how receptive some were to various issues, including nuclear disarmament, international peace, human rights, and world courts (Swallow Prior, 2015). This may be because it is clear that the UN was not an embryonic world state or even a well-functioning international body capable of adjudicating crucial global issues. But it may also be that evangelical positions, both conservative and liberal on global and political issues, vary because evangelicalism itself is an unsettled, thin identity, which binds together very diverse demographic, socio-economic, racial (see especially Tisby, 2019), and theological constituencies. If this was true in the post-war era, it is no less true today, and so terms like “evangelical” deserve more careful consideration when applied to complex, unsettled questions of political and social order.

Notes

1 Dispensationalism is a Christian tradition that interprets scripture as providing discrete periods, or dispensations, with different governing principles. Dispensationalists disagree on the number of stages (anywhere from three to eight). The typical scheme runs to seven stages, and includes a future, literal
A world awakening

1,000-year reign of Jesus Christ (referenced in Revelation), preceded by a Great Tribulation in which there is a rapture of the faithful. Presuppositionalism, on the other hand, teaches that faith is the basis for all rational thought, and only reason/action that begins with the specificity of divine revelation can conform to the patterns of creation and law as God intends. While many Christians agree that fides et ratio (faith and reason) depend upon each other, more radical presuppositionalists believe that rationality unaided by divine revelation cannot discover truth and can only ultimately fuel idolatry.

2 David Bebbington’s famous quadrilateral is defined by (1) biblicism: the belief that the Bible is the true and trustworthy Word of God; (2) crucicentrism: the belief that Christ alone atones for sins on the cross; (3) conversionism: the belief that human beings need to be converted into a relationship with Jesus Christ; (4) activism: the belief that the Gospel is not a mere matter of right belief, but of action and effort inspired by that belief.

3 Moody was a preacher and revivalist in the late nineteenth century, whose namesake has been taken in the Moody Bible Institute (MBI). He believed it was imperative that a generation of “gap-men” between the laity and the clergy was essential to do activist, evangelical work. Biola was such an example, standing for the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, intended to train just such “gap men.”

4 By modernism, these thinkers did not mean what we might today call secularism. They meant by modernism a more liberal approach to the Bible and its authority but would not have suggested that modernism meant abandoning the Bible altogether. Kapic and McCormack write,

Modern theology emerged … at the point at which church-based theologians ceased trying to defend and protect the received orthodoxies of the past against erosion and took up the more fundamental challenge of asking how the theological values resident in those orthodoxies might be given new expression, dressed out in new categories for reflection.  

(Kapic and McCormack, 2012, 3)

5 The Federal Council of Churches is today The National Council of Churches. It continues to advocate and think about issues of international peace, including publications to that effect.

6 The same could, for example, be convincingly argued about conservative American evangelical activism around the Scopes-Monkey Trial of 1925. The WCFA, an opponent of the League, also fought this trial, and technically they won the trial, as the teaching of evolution continued to be banned in most American states. But what they won in court, they lost in the culture, and eventually in their own churches.

7 Christian reconstructionism is an influential, conservative Christian movement in the United States that advocates theonomy and a restoration of biblical laws (especially Mosaic laws) in the public sphere. Christian Dominionism is the name for a larger group of Christian political ideologies that believe nations should be governed by the understandings of biblical laws generally (not necessarily exact Mosaic laws).

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