



# **The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism (George H. Shriver Lecture Series in Religion in American History)**

*Martin E. Marty*

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For 350 years, Protestantism was the dominant religion in America--and its influence spilled over in many directions into the wider culture. Religious historian Martin E. Marty looks at the factors behind both the long period of Protestant ascendancy in America and the comparatively recent diffusion and diminution of its authority. Marty ranges across time, covering such things as the establishment of the Jamestown settlement in 1607, the 1955 publication of Will Herberg's landmark book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, and the current period of American ethnic and religious pluralism.

For centuries, American Protestantism dominated in three main ways, says Marty: in the sheer numbers of its committed practitioners (spread across some two hundred denominations), in the Protestant leanings of nonadherents, and in the influence of the Protestant ethic in activities as diverse as business and art. To discover what is particularly "American" about Protestantism in this country, Marty looks at Protestant creencias, or beliefs, that complement or supplement pure doctrine. These include the notion of God as an agent of America's destiny and the impact of the biblical credos of mission, stewardship, and vocation on innumerable nonreligious matters of daily life. Marty also discusses the vigencias, or binding (though unwritten) customs, of Protestantism. They include the tendencies to interpret matters of faith in market terms and to conflate biblical and enlightenment ideology into "civic faith."

Challenges to Protestant hegemony came and went over the centuries, says Marty, but never in such force and to such effect as in the twentieth century. Among other factors contributing to the rise of pluralism and to schisms between mainstreamers and Fundamentalists, Marty lists changes in immigration laws, U.S. Supreme Court decisions on school prayer, the women's movement, and Vatican II.

Today, our Protean spirituality is the topic of everything from sermons to bumper stickers. All in all, this is good, reassures Marty, for to debate our spirituality is to sustain the life of a functioning, thinking, believing republic. Those who pine for some golden age of Protestantism are misled by nostalgia or resentment. The real work to be done by Protestants now is to serve, partner, and cooperate where they once managed, controlled, and directed.

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