

Practicing Protestants

Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965

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Introduction

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Christian practice has always defied singular definition, particularly in the diversity and competition of America's religious marketplace. From the earliest days of colonial settlement, a Christian practice without controversy would have been difficult to find. The sacraments were, of course, among the most obvious points of contention: Were there seven of them, two, or none? Did the Lord expect the faithful to receive the communion elements while kneeling or sitting? Was baptism a rite reserved for adult believers only? Did full immersion in a river reenact the gospel or mock devotion? Then there was the calendar and the right ordering of Christian time: Was the Sabbath the only genuine feast day, and how was it to be hallowed? Should regular devotional rhythms and routines shape each day of the week? If so, were set prayers and printed meditations as worthy as more improvised wrestlings of the soul with God? For American Christians, who have not been the heirs of a single tradition of religious practice, the most vexing puzzle has been the nature of the Christian life and the practices that constitute it.

Recent Theories of Practice

The History of American Christian Practice Project began with more questions than answers about the historical import and theoretical underpinnings of religious practice as a construct. What exactly is included within this rubric? Why are so many academics and churchgoers talking about "practice" and "practices" these days? Is it a valuable analytic category for religious historians? If so, how might we begin to draw a "more comprehensive map of practices" over time—to use David Hall's formulation from his introduction to the volume *Lived Religion*?¹

In order to answer such questions, we had first to make our way through an in-

creasingly complex, multidisciplinary literature on practice. That growing body of scholarship involves the work of constructive theologians, social historians, moral philosophers, cultural anthropologists, and qualitative sociologists of the past three decades. We found it of heuristic value to divide that literature into two intellectual lineages. The first is the work of leading social theorists of practice—Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Catherine Bell, and Talal Asad among them. The second is the work of contemporary theologians—Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, and Stephanie Paulsell, to name three—who have evinced a keen interest in revitalizing the Christian life through a sustained recovery of practices. These latter thinkers, in turn, have drawn on wider philosophical and ethical reconstructions of the virtuous life and its practices, including the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Hadot. Though the two camps, social theorists and practical theologians, often stand in tension with one another, they both provided resources for our work.

Within the first camp, the critical emphasis is on the hegemonic, regulatory, and structuring character of practice. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, identified “habitus” as the system of “durable, transposable dispositions” through which people “give shape and form to social conventions.” Bourdieu encouraged the study of practices as part of penetrating the “logic” of a whole social and cultural field.

In reality, even in social formations where . . . the making explicit and objectifying of the generative schemes in a grammar of practices, a written code of conduct, is minimal, it is nonetheless possible to observe the first signs of differentiation of the domains of practice according to the degree of codification of the principles governing them. Between the areas that are apparently “freest” because given over in reality to the regulated improvisations of the habitus (such as the distribution of activities and objects within the internal space of the house) and the areas most strictly regulated by customary norms and upheld by social sanctions (such as the great agrarian rites), there lies the whole field of practices subjected to traditional precepts, customary recommendations, ritual prescriptions, functioning as a regulatory device which orients practice without producing it.²

Rather than framing practice in philosophical terms as a conscious attempt to embody moral excellence, Bourdieu argued that practice is regulated by exterior social conditions and maintained by conscious and unconscious submission to those conditions. At the same time, Bourdieu insisted on keeping enough improvisatory play within the prescriptive, regulatory field of practices to allow room for resistance, negotiation, and redirection. In Bourdieu’s terms, practice was an inevitable aspect of social existence; practice was equated with the habits of body and mind, the customary acts and routine disciplines that formed the very texture of everyday life.

Attentive to Marxist and Foucauldian views of society in which individuals act within an arena of fundamental power differentials, these social theories of practice prove especially helpful at illuminating situations of conflict between prevailing groups and less powerful social actors. Terms like *domination*, *discipline*, *coercion*, and *constraint* fill this theoretical lexicon, capturing the note of suspicion toward the inculcation of practice. “Practice theorists are particularly attentive to the political dimensions of social relationships, especially with regard to how positions of domination and subordination are variously constituted, manipulated, or resisted,” explains Catherine Bell. “Not surprisingly, practice theory has emerged in conjunction with greater attention to the lingering effects of colonialism, the political ramifications of routine cross-cultural encounters, and the various social effects of economic and cultural domination.”³ From this vantage point, the exploration of practice is, at bottom, an examination of the intricate exercises of power, the procedures of enforcement, the spaces of negotiation, as well as the subtle tactics of resistance.

This theoretical approach provides critical terms for describing and interpreting a wide range of actions, religious and otherwise. Within religious studies, the deployment of the category of practice has facilitated examinations of behavior beyond narrow constructions of ritual and liturgy, enabling scholars to move into the murky arenas of daily social encounter and everyday experience. Now, alongside the study of sacraments, memorial services, and public prayers, historians of American religion can also approach more mundane regimens and habits of the Christian body. An emphasis on practice, then, opens doors to an astonishing range of historical queries. How are routine habits of deference to God, ministers, and elders inculcated and enfolded? How, in turn, are those patterns of authority and domination pried open, challenged, or nimbly evaded? How do the implicit rules that govern the relations between men and women within churches and homes operate? How are the bodily disciplines and postures of devotion instilled and enforced in the lives of children? Practice theory enjoins historians to see the Christian life within a dense pattern of cultural actions, dispositions, regimens, hierarchies, habits, resistances, and appropriations.

The second intellectual lineage, that of constructive theology and moral philosophy, offers a different purchase on the significance of religious thought and symbolism within communities of faith. Much of this scholarship, illustrated in the recent work of Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, and Stephanie Paulsell, has been prompted by a perception of diminished practice and a desire to recover and encourage more meaningful processes of spiritual formation.⁴ “Practices,” Dorothy Bass explains at the outset of her influential collection *Practicing Our Faith*, “are those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of

life. Reflecting on practices as they have been shaped in the context of Christian faith leads us to encounter the possibility of a faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom.”⁵ Whereas Bourdieu and Bell sought to describe the landscape of everyday experience and social action, Bass and other Christian interpreters of practice seek to form more virtuous or consecrated lives. They ask how contemporary Christians can cultivate sustaining religious practices in a postmodern world of fragmented identities and patchwork faiths. How can Christians practice their faith in a culture that offers so many alternatives, secular and religious, to Christianity? Proponents of a return to Christian practice come from both ecumenical and more conservative Protestant traditions, but all are convinced that in the self-conscious cultivation of particular types of traditional Christian habit lies the key to a renewal of the Christian life.

This resurgent emphasis on practice in American Protestant theology has received much of its inspiration from Alasdair MacIntyre’s retrieval of Aristotle’s virtue ethics. According to Aristotle, the good life does not consist of haphazard and unrelated acts of good conduct (for example, the American infatuation with random acts of kindness); moral excellence is achieved only through an intentional and full-orbed philosophy that constitutes a whole way of living in the world.⁶ Philosophy as a way of life offers those patterns of proper conduct (or habits of virtue) that result in true human happiness. MacIntyre’s reconstruction of that classical interpretation of the good life has proven highly resonant with leaders of Christian communities.⁷ MacIntyre proposes to those leaders that virtuous behavior can be achieved in their members through the cultivation of traditions of moral excellence. In habituating themselves to good practices, community members can recover a confidence and belief in the traditions themselves. In an increasingly “post-Christian” world, where theology seems to have been pushed to the wayside, churches can cultivate habits of Christian practice, foster corporate identity, and eventually reinstall belief in the tradition itself. In short, people can be habituated into belief in the truths of Christianity through the practices of the Christian life.

In contrast to scholars such as Bourdieu and Bell, these church leaders have faith not only in practice but also in the Christian social world. If our first group of theorists assume that social structures are generally hegemonic, with resistance located in small-scale tactics of getting by or making room, Christian theorists view such regulatory structuring as largely humane, enabling, and supportive.⁸ Happiness and virtue, they would say, are associated with a life of Christian discipleship through a religious community; the church and its leaders provide a structure that makes possible, rather than limits, true happiness. In this sense, elites and ordinary people (or clergy and laity) move toward a common and mutually beneficial goal. This con-

structive view rises not from a desire to unmask the asymmetries of power and the minutiae of discipline but from a hope of restoring power and regulation to the Christian life. The one approach interrogates discipline; the other celebrates it.

Yet, even the renewal of Christian practice bedevils its proponents with questions about the criteria for selecting and shaping current practices. According to most Protestant theorists of practice, the process of retrieval occurs through the careful culling of tradition based on an awareness of and appreciation for the history of Christian communities. What, exactly, is that “tradition” toward which Christians need to turn? It is at this point that the work of religious historians becomes especially salient. The recovery of the Christian way of life depends in large part on an agreed upon, constitutive set of historical *practices*. Protestant theorists of practice *need* history, because it provides the sources for those foundational habits and patterns of action that will lead to renewed faith. But, of course, they need histories of a particular kind, histories that yield kernels of insight about practice, that reveal what has shored up Christian identity in the past and what has produced sanctified and meaningful lives through the centuries. Though less likely, the histories could also recount what to avoid; they could be histories of patterns of practice that have produced violence, prejudice, disaffection, or boredom within Christian communities. The desired history is that of the “embodied wisdom” of Christianity on such mainstays as worship, prayer, Sabbath keeping, hymn singing, spiritual retreat, healing, and Bible reading.⁹

Such projects of recovery can too easily result in simplified and idealized narratives of practices sadly lost and then happily found; they depend largely on the discovery of recognizable practices that can be replanted in contemporary churches to flourish anew. In telling a story of recovery, what is significant about prayer and forgiveness, for example, is the common meaning they potentially present for Christians across time and place. Any disputes over that meaning or changes in the meaning over time are almost necessarily downplayed in the search for a usable past. In looking for relevant virtues and habits to reclaim from history, Protestant practitioners are at considerable risk of seeing their own prior assumptions, present values, and felt needs reflected back to them.

All of us involved in the History of American Christian Practice Project know this much: good histories alone will not create predictable or easy applications. The history of Christian practice yields irretrievable particularities more than irreducible commonalities; discontinuity is every bit as important as continuity; changes in the Christian life prove irrevocable. Still, we have not abandoned the proposition that fuller and more nuanced historical narratives may provide resources for reflection within contemporary Christian communities. Although the sweep of critical theories from Bourdieu to Bell holds considerable sway among our participants, we have re-

mained deeply interested in the possibilities of a conversation among historians of American religion, constructive theologians, and practicing Christians. The historical pursuit of practice may be useful to both descriptions and prescriptions of the Christian life.

The theoretical imagining of Christianity as a way of life presents historians with a significant opportunity to take seriously—more so than do some of the social theories mentioned above—the relationship among theology, community structures, and individual agency. Because Protestant theorists do not immediately regard with suspicion the motives of communal leaders nor assume that the inculcation of particular practices is merely a flexing of institutional muscle, proponents of practice prod historians to leave ample room for the consideration of the thick interpenetration of beliefs and behaviors for all participants. For Protestant scholars of practice, questions about religious meaning are not wholly subsumed into questions of social power, and their theological and philosophical concerns thus act as an important counterbalance in the larger academic inquiry into practice. At a still broader level, we recognize that historical scholarship is constructive too, that its task is not confined to exposing the forgetfulness at the heart of historical memory or the inventedness of the usable pasts Protestants (or others) create. As historians, we care as well about the embodied wisdom through which American civil and religious communities cohere or fragment.

In sum, we have taken a mediating stance between social analysis and theological appropriation of practice. Following the divergent promptings of these two theoretical camps, we hope to offer fuller descriptive accounts than have previously been written, ones that hold the hermeneutics of suspicion and trust in creative tension. As a scholarly group, we have worked with an understanding of practice that keeps it within the context of the instrumentalities and asymmetries of power and refracted through constructions of race, colonialism, gender, economy, sexuality, and spirituality. However, we have also interpreted practice as theologically informed acts that Christian communities have repeatedly nurtured and instilled over time. That is, we have also pursued the meaning of specific practices within a conception of Christianity as a whole mode of life, as a way of intentionally structuring relationships in this world and with the divine in order to embody Christian virtue and piety.

Protestant Practice in American History

A growing number of works in American religious history are calling attention to practice as an interpretive, and frequently ambiguous, rubric. Drawing on the social theory of practice and utilizing an ethnographic approach, these works maintain that

practices both mediate religious culture (thereby regulating behavior) and express creativity, improvisation, and resistance. As Robert Orsi has put it, “practice” offers a rich, varied approach to religion: “the key words here are *tensile, hybridity, ambivalence, irony*; the central methodological commitment is to avoid conclusions that impose universality.”¹⁰ This scholarly emphasis on ambivalence and negotiation thus far has generated more thematic analyses than chronological conceptualizations. One recent anthology argues that diversity and instability in American religion can be captured best by assembling practices not by historical or confessional identity but by type of activity: praying, singing, teaching, healing, imagining, persuading.¹¹ Such phenomenological approaches yield important insights about the multivalent character of particular religious behaviors, but they do not move us toward a more nuanced comprehension of the development and transformation—that is, the historical contextualization—of religious practices in American life.

As we began to ponder how our collaborative research could help map change in American religious practices over time, we made the decision to concentrate our attention on Protestantism. Fully aware that further mapping of practice was necessary far beyond Protestant church life, indeed far beyond Christianity itself, we nonetheless thought that the best way for us to begin to sharpen the history of practice was to narrow our focus to one tradition, however internally diverse and conflicted that tradition was. Looking at the history of American Protestants, we discerned several recurrent themes or clusters of issues that fell into historical periodization. Thus, we have organized the following essays around four turning points: Puritan and evangelical practice in New England, 1630–1800; mission, nation, and Christian practice, 1820–1940; devotional practices and modern predicaments, 1880–1920; and liberal Protestants and universalizing practices, 1850–1965. Although these turning points do not exhaust the possible interpretive rubrics, they provide useful, and we think provocative, starting points for the creation of a historical map, a legend, of sorts, in which to locate contests over specific practices and practice more generally.

One final word about the essays before we elaborate on our turning points. Not every essay defines a traditionally recognized Christian practice. Part of our purpose is to expand the usual scholarly repertoire beyond preaching and the sacraments; we hope, though, to widen the lens without letting the familiar emphases fall from view. Many of the essays do, in fact, address traditional practices, albeit through nontraditional lenses. Each essay explores the ways in which other religious communities, cultural challenges, and social forces have compelled a reconsideration of religious behavior. We historicize practice by looking for continuities and discontinuities, probing for contingency and change in discrete historical moments. We hope thereby to situate the history of Christian practice in the context of American cultural history,

to enrich the story of practices, and to suggest possible rereadings of American religious history itself.

Puritan and Evangelical Practice in New England, 1630–1800

The first of our historical turning points concerns the transition from Puritan to evangelical practice in New England, particularly as the Enlightenment took hold. Looking at a turning point compels consideration of what went before, in this case how eighteenth-century beliefs about practice derived from and diverged from earlier Protestant notions of comportment. Many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestants, fleeing what they took to be a “practice-bound” church, avoided a generalized, singular definition of *practice*. The founders of the Protestant movement set out to “recover” a true reading of faithful Christian behavior from what they impugned as medieval ceremonialism, sacerdotalism, and ritualism. Medieval traditions, by John Calvin’s reading, promoted Catholic practices as efforts to secure divine favor, thereby intruding on Christ’s saving work. This critique shaped fundamental assumptions about practice in communities that became Protestant. Rather than “practice,” reformers spoke of piety in everyday life, a “perpetual fast,” in Calvin’s terms, of self-sacrifice and discipline in opposition to the sacramental system. Many Protestants in seventeenth-century America expressed these assumptions in terms of the individual’s duty to the local community. Religious leaders encouraged practices as integral to communal and visible discipline. They urged the embodiment of the Christian life in corporate duties of sobriety and charity, along with prayer and worship, that bound adherents into communities of solidarity.¹²

In the course of the eighteenth century, American Protestants began to modify their expressions of practice. They moved toward universal definitions of Christian being-in-the-world, grounded on interior affections and beliefs that linked individuals to a religious society that transcended local communities. Several demographic, social, political, and cultural developments shaped these new understandings. Encounters with French and Spanish Catholics, trade and warfare with Indians, and the presence of new residents of various faiths drawn by commercial opportunities from throughout the Atlantic world challenged assumptions about a fixed and homogeneous social order. The rapid commercialization of the economy in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, and even inland trading centers such as Hartford and Albany, allowed for rapid social mobility and, moreover, for ease of long-distance communication of goods and ideas, tastes and religious sensibilities. The infusion of rationalist religious sensibilities, scientific discoveries, and a new moral philosophy based on natural law and individual affection, all of which were made widely avail-

able through new forms of print culture, offered alternatives to customary Christian formulations of the self and society, interior disposition and external deed. We use the term *Enlightenment* as a shorthand for the cultural coalescence of these varied forces—pluralistic, commercial, scientific, and philosophical.¹³

The first two essays in Part 1 probe in more detail this period of profound intellectual and behavioral transformation. Catherine Brekus examines devotional writing by focusing on Puritans and evangelical Calvinists in New England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Evangelicals inherited a seventeenth-century Puritan practice of spiritual self-reflection and journal writing as well as long-established Protestant assumptions about human sinfulness and self-deception. Yet, while retaining the practice of writing and the essential tenets of their spiritual forebears, they used a different grammar of religious experience. Inspired by the confluence of evangelical and Enlightenment cultures, which emphasized the individual's perceptions, sensation, and activism, evangelicals were more assured about their spiritual states than were Puritans. Evangelical devotional writing created a sense of continuity with the past, of stability in religious identity, along with adaptation to a new epistemology and form of activist self-fashioning. According to Brekus, the practice of writing by evangelicals mediated spiritual transformation under the guise of changelessness.

Mark Valeri's essay on how the well-known pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards promoted forgiveness as a Christian virtue reinforces many of the same themes. Edwards frequently accepted Puritan teaching that compelled forgiveness as a social discipline, the maintenance of the local community through social deeds such as the remitting of debts and kind speech. From 1730 through 1750, however, Edwards found this Puritan paradigm of forgiveness increasingly problematic. New philosophical ideas challenged him to ground moral behavior in individual affection rather than communal duty; like other evangelicals of the day, he assimilated many Enlightenment categories. Frequent warfare with Indian tribes provoked him to consider a universal benevolence that transcended tribal identities. In this intersection of social and theological forces, Edwards began to reconsider and reconstitute the practice of forgiveness, bit by bit, as a conduit of solidarity between white New England Protestants and their Indian, French-allied, Catholic-convert neighbors.

Mission, Nation, and Christian Practice, 1820–1940

The essays in Part 1 demonstrate how religious behavioral continuity mediated dramatic social and intellectual changes for eighteenth-century Anglo-Protestants; the essays in Part 2 deal more directly with innovation and social power in the Amer-

ican Protestant past. This section begins in the early nineteenth century, a period that saw American imperial expansion westward, the creation of new religious communities, and renewed interest in evangelization and mission. Previous scholarship on this transformative political project, with its emphasis on the internal dynamics of national development, has focused principally on domestic Protestant revivalist practices. The nineteenth century, in particular, has been characterized largely as the century of awakenings and the various physical manifestations—from barking and falling down to itineracy and entrepreneurship—that attended them.¹⁴

We shift attention instead to the margins of this political enterprise, to geographical and cultural borders where Protestant practices ran up against religious others in the course of colonization and nation-building. This focus allows us to limn the various ways in which Protestant practice can be seen as a medium through which power has been asserted, contested, and resisted. Here we witness its encounter with nationalistic imperatives: the political, one might even say national, dimensions of cultural encounter, meetings that catalyzed practical improvisation as much as principled adherence to tradition. Yet, as in Part 1, we discover the extent to which Protestant apprehension of correct religious practice also has been molded by intercultural awareness, of Protestants in relation to others—be they Catholic, Mormon, Japanese, or Native American.

This is not the only lens through which Laurie Maffly-Kipp in Chapter 3 views missionary practice in Hawaii from 1820 through 1860, but it provides a crucial angle of interpretation for her. Protestant evangelists from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and missionaries from the Latter-day Saints (LDS) encountered in Hawaii daily realities and momentary necessities that compelled adjustments in their practice of mission. Hawaiian customs, from ritual dance and the use of intoxicants to clothing and sexual practices, challenged missionaries to adopt new behaviors in the islands. These accommodations necessarily entailed, Maffly-Kipp maintains, an engagement in the colonial enterprise as a nationalistic venture. Infused with confidence in the colonial enterprise, ABCFM missionaries distanced themselves from native customs and actively separated themselves from Hawaiian communities and customs. Less attached to American national identity—indeed, resistant to it—LDS missionaries developed a closer rapport with Hawaiian culture on its terms, offering a theology of non-American sacred destiny and innovative, ecstatic practices of healing and prophecy that allowed a different interface with natives. In both cases, the convergence of Christian beliefs, Hawaiian culture, and nationalist agendas inspired practical improvisation.

Roberto Lint Sagarena, in Chapter 6, and David Yoo, in Chapter 5, address the culture of nationalism more explicitly. Lint-Sagarena's topic is the development of Mis-

sion Revival architecture in California in the 1870s, especially the appropriation by Protestants of Spanish mission styles and the attendant revision of California history in terms of the triumph of a Franciscan (putatively liberal and proto-American) ethos over other forms of Catholicism. In this case, architectural practice literally framed a space for the coexistence of Protestant, Catholic, and American nationalist identities. It expressed a “curious ecumenism” whereby American Protestants interpreted Spanish settlers of California as proto-democratic, that is, participants in the national myth. The practice of building public structures that evoked a type of religiosity was concrete, so to speak, yet it also delineated an area of interpenetration between sacred and political ideologies.

Similar elements—religious architecture, nationalist sentiments, deep intellectual convictions—flowed together in the story of the Korean Christian Church in Hawaii during the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, David Yoo takes the nurture of nationalist identity in this setting as a practice in itself. Yoo shows that in the teaching and liturgies of the Korean Christian Church believers engaged a series of outside forces, especially American and Japanese attempts at colonial hegemony. In that engagement they developed new modes of worship, education, and political utterance. All of these were bound together by corporate discipline and a particular theology. Yoo’s essay, like Lint-Sagarena’s, reinforces the interpretive potential of practice as a realm for religious and political confrontation and innovation.

Michael McNally also addresses Christian missions in his chapter on the Ojibwe. Like Yoo, he views Protestant practice from the vantage of those who had, to a greater or lesser extent, newly embraced Christian practices as their own. In terms of specific practices, however, Christianization provoked intense communal concern and debate about the relative merits of Christian and native ways. Here, too, novel combinations of practices provided the means of negotiating dramatic cultural change. McNally argues that the honoring of elders as a religious practice was the very ground on which Ojibwe Indians struggled to resolve their standing vis-à-vis Christianity. Honoring elders affirmed their pre-Christian customs. Yet, as Ojibwe converts submitted to Christian eldership, they deviated from those customs, developing new ways of honoring elders, an “improvisation on old kinship structures.”

Devotional Practices and Modern Predicaments, 1880–1920

In Part 3 we move back to beliefs and behaviors that might be defined more traditionally as spiritual practices—prayer, healing, and worship. Just as our first turning point involved struggles within and between Christian communities to adjust practices in new social and cultural conditions, so does this third set of essays, which tracks

modern predicaments encountered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By “modern predicaments” we mean a matrix of intellectual and social changes that compelled further reconsiderations of Christian practice. The ascendancy of Darwinism and the modern physical sciences in the academy raised questions about the cultural authority of the Bible, traditional Christian doctrines, and belief in miracles. Industrialization of the economy, new definitions of gendered social roles, and the spread of a consumer ethos and urban commercial organization over the landscape rendered problematic the pursuit of customary patterns of devotion premised on stable communities, extended families, and rural rhythms of labor.¹⁵

Traditionally, this period has been described in terms of a bifurcation within American Protestantism: modernists or liberals accommodated Christian belief and practice to these new conditions while sectarian movements, emergent Pentecostalism, and militant fundamentalism resisted change. Our essays here belie such a straightforward dichotomy. They show a subtle and sometimes surprising confluence of creativity and continuity in response to larger cultural challenges. Focusing on the emergence of the evangelical divine-healing movement that flourished among North American, British, and European Protestants in a broad range of denominations during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Heather Curtis explores how practices such as meditation, prayer, laying-on of hands, and anointing enabled participants in divine healing to challenge a Christian devotional ethic that linked bodily suffering with spiritual holiness and valorized patient resignation as the proper Christian response to physical affliction. By embracing a paradoxical understanding of the relationship between personal agency, ritual practice, and divine sovereignty, Curtis argues, proponents of faith healing sought to modify the meaning and experience of illness and pain in the spiritual life. Practices of healing, within this context, helped people navigate the various medical theories, gender ideologies, and religious idioms that influenced the ways in which Protestant women and men in the late nineteenth century understood and experienced bodily infirmity and pursued physical and spiritual health.

Rick Ostrander sets practices of prayer in a related milieu for American Protestants in the early twentieth century. Drawing a contrast between liberal and fundamentalist Protestants, Ostrander defines the context in terms of commercialization, the frantic pace of modern life, and scientific beliefs. Both groups, Ostrander concludes, adapted prayer practices to such conditions. Liberal Protestants developed a flexible, mobile, and spiritualized notion of prayer in accommodation to modern sensibilities, while fundamentalists created special prayer meetings and rural retreats and conferences to safeguard the spiritual life from modernist incursions. Like faith healers, these practitioners of prayer made innovations on received practices in the context of cultural and social exchange, particularly as that exchange suggested the need to

affirm or modify deeply rooted ideas about divine power and human agency, divine immanence and transcendence, the laws of nature and the graces of miracle. In this case, practice mediated not only Christian identity and the culture of modernity but also theology and bodily activity.

Anthea Butler uses this last observation as a central insight into her subject. She probes how the worship practices in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) mediated an innovative theology of sanctification (the necessity for personal holiness) through physical activities such as glossolalia, shouting, and dancing. The more frequently studied charismatic practices, Butler argues, cannot be understood apart from their connection to everyday moral regulation and communal demarcation. Butler shows that the improvised rhythms and bodily movements of COGIC worshipers represented both an adaptation to contemporary cultural forms and an expression of an underlying charismatic theology and concern for common discipline.

Liberal Protestants and Universalizing Practices, 1850–1965

The fourth part takes up the wider geographical and political contexts in which twentieth-century Protestant communities struggled with notions of practice. “Liberal Protestants and Universalizing Practices, 1850–1950,” concerns itself not simply with the *facts* of social and religious diversity and encounter—patterns which, as we have seen, have been evident from the very beginning of the American Protestant story—but with the ideology of pluralism as a *practical* religious dilemma for liberal Protestants. One reaction to cultural encounter was to separate one’s community from others (be they other Protestants or those of other faiths) by way of distinctive modes of religious practice. Another response, particularly for those Protestants who were colonized, occupied, or otherwise oppressed, was to use Christian practices to resist the dynamics of imperial control. Yet a third path emerged in the late nineteenth century, as liberal Protestants of European heritage sought their own means to reconcile Christian particularities with cultural difference through the construction of purportedly “universal” approaches to religious practice. Such strategies, in theory, could swathe all religious people in a cosmopolitan spiritual embrace. Liberal Protestants employed various ways of practicing religious universalism, including liturgical and artistic movements and interfaith conferences. In hindsight, we may see the boundedness of their vision, but we must also note that this trajectory toward pluralistic ideals and the dilemmas of appropriateness in Christian practice that it prompted still concern liberal Protestant communities today.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson was a New England social reformer, Unitarian minister, and writer during the second half of the nineteenth century. He was also one

of the first Americans to grapple with the practice of religious cosmopolitanism in a systematic way. He couched his response in the concept of “sympathy.” Leigh Schmidt’s essay on Higginson and the practice of sympathy among liberal Protestants at the end of the nineteenth century reveals explicitly universalizing encounters among different religious groups. Schmidt shows how the concrete acts associated with sympathy—concerted conversations with religious people from diverse traditions, the scientific study of religion apart from sectarianism, and the gathering in retreat centers—constituted a practical theology, an affective orientation in the territory of exchange, where quite distinct religious and social affiliations commingled.

Tisa Wenger focuses on dance as an innovation in Episcopal practices of worship. William Norman Guthrie, rector of St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie Episcopal Church in New York City in the 1920s, introduced “eurythmic worship” as a way to attract new members and resources to his inner-city parish. Guthrie, drawing on contemporary theories of comparative religion, claimed that a relevant Christianity must reach back to its pagan origins and that when he did so he found dance at the heart of religion. He believed that restoring dance to its proper place in Christian practice would ultimately make a truly universal Christianity possible. Wenger’s essay illustrates the friction and debate provoked by innovations in Christian practice, and it suggests yet again the mediating role of practices and their reflection of the historical and cultural moment.

Sally Promey’s discussion of liberal Protestants, the National Council of Churches, and arts professionals inside and outside the church looks at this type of encounter in the 1950s. Promey describes the close alliance between Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich and modernist visual art as the inculcation of a practice of aesthetic discernment, which leads into a host of other activities, ranging from the use of art in sanctuaries to the production of materials for Christian education. We see here especially how the interface between religious communities and cultural movements sparked innovative and controversial practices. Liberals nurtured a “taste culture” of aesthetic discernment as a mediation of what they saw as the dehumanizing, commercial, totalitarian mass culture of the age. In that social and political context, they promoted modernist abstraction as a truly Christian expression of the free individual in a free world, and they contrasted artistic modernisms with another sort of Protestant visual culture that they disparaged as mass-produced and sentimentalized. Aesthetic discernment linked a very particular theological vision to quite specific artistic practices, defying any notion of secularization.

We do not intend our four turning points to establish a single narrative, much less a theoretical baseline. The historical particularities defy insertion into a cohesive

schema of Christian practice. While talk of practice conjures material things, conceptual and literal geographies, familial relations, and daily epistemologies, the very localism and temporality of such matters confute historical and therefore theoretical generalization. Yet, we do think that these narrative clusters suggest ways in which to historicize practice, to recover the moments of interchange among received tradition, regulation, and power as one set of factors, and innovation, agency, and creativity as counterbalancing responses. By so historicizing practice, we hope to suggest movement, encounter, and transformation: perhaps as a heuristically useful backdrop against which to set other stories.

Our narratives illustrate the ways in which Christian practice in America has changed through its manifold encounters with the other, has defied categorical explanation, and may therefore be seen as all the more unbound by theoretical paradigms. Some of these paradigms, to return to our opening, limit our expectations of practice to regulation and power. Other paradigms dehistoricize practice by envisioning it as a recovery of Christian virtue in the midst of secularization and materialism. Historical particularity, in contrast, brings us to appreciate the confluence, in any one moment, of authority and innovation in a fidelity to the past accompanied by an adaptation to the present. Historical particularity as applied here knits together the history of Christian practice with the history of American culture and society.