Constituting the Protestant Mainline:

The Christian Century, 1908-1947

by

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Duke University

Date: October 27, 2008
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in
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Scholars, journalists, and religious leaders in the twentieth century widely hailed *The Christian Century* as the most influential Protestant magazine in America. This dissertation investigates the meaning of such praise. In what ways, and upon whom, did the *Century* exercise influence? Answering this question directs attention not only to the *Century*'s editorial content but also to the cultural role of magazines and the makeup of the *Century*'s audience, an elite group of white American Protestants who had no collective name for the first half of the twentieth century but came to be called the Protestant mainline.

I focus on the editorial tenure of Charles Clayton Morrison, who bought an obscure Disciples of Christ periodical at a sheriff’s sale in 1908 and transformed it, over the next 39 years, into the flagship magazine of liberal Protestantism. Attending to the *Century*'s history as well as its rhetoric, I find that the magazine had a deep effect on its readers but a limited effect on American Protestantism as a whole. Most American Protestants never read the *Century* or accepted its theologically and politically liberal messages. The mainline, while certainly powerful, was never mainstream.

Studying the *Century* reveals how the mainline evolved in terms of membership levels, core emphases, and posture vis-à-vis other religious traditions. Likewise, the *Century* clarifies the role of the mainline as the dominant Protestant tradition in America. If dominance is understood to mean control of positions of power, a plausible case can be made for the dominance of both the mainline writ large
and of the subset of this group who read The Christian Century. If dominance has anything to do with numerical preponderance, however, or with the ability to build consensus around key ideals, the supremacy of the mainline should be reexamined.

Lofty estimates of the Century’s influence presuppose a transmission model of communication in which the primary role of a periodical is to convey information that alters readers’ thinking. The Century did convey information to its readers, but the greatest service the magazine performed was to confirm readers’ identity as central figures in the growth of what its editors deemed a vital, progressive, but by no means universally accepted form of Christianity. The Century spoke to its 35,000 readers more than it spoke for them, and those readers frequently felt like members of a beleaguered minority rather than a triumphal majority.

Throughout its upward climb, the Century’s rhetoric ran ahead of its accomplishments. Without ever amassing a wide readership, it declared itself the rightful representative of American Protestantism. The Century’s rhetoric of unified, progressive, and culturally dominant Protestantism proved compelling, but it obscured many complexities. Examining the Century’s struggles to define itself and remain financially viable in its formative years brings to light the difficulties inherent in any attempt to lead America’s fractious Protestants.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ....................................................................................................................................................... iv  
List of Tables ................................................................................................................................................ viii  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................................ ix  
Introduction.................................................................................................................................................. 1  

1. The Making of an Editor ......................................................................................................................... 21  
   1.1 “The die is cast” ................................................................................................................................. 23  
   1.2 A movement on the move .................................................................................................................. 30  
   1.3 To Chicago .......................................................................................................................................... 36  
   1.4 Disciples Divinity House .................................................................................................................... 44  
   1.5 Ultimate issues ..................................................................................................................................... 48  
   1.6 Assessing influences ............................................................................................................................ 52  

2. Denominational Roots .............................................................................................................................. 57  
   2.1 The backdrop of religious magazines ................................................................................................. 60  
   2.2 Editor-bishops ..................................................................................................................................... 67  
   2.3 Establishing a foothold ....................................................................................................................... 74  
   2.4 More controversy, more subscribers ................................................................................................. 86  
   2.5 Leaving the harbor .............................................................................................................................. 98  

3. New Distinctions ...................................................................................................................................... 107  
   3.1 The new search for subscribers ......................................................................................................... 109  
   3.2 Editorial expansion .............................................................................................................................. 124  
   3.3 Standing alone .................................................................................................................................... 133  
   3.4 Cultural competitors ............................................................................................................................ 144  

4. Measuring Influence ............................................................................................................................... 156  
   4.1 The right readers ............................................................................................................................... 161  
   4.2 Entering the fold .................................................................................................................................. 167  
   4.3 “I could not live without it” ............................................................................................................... 174  
   4.4 Love letters ........................................................................................................................................ 182  
   4.5 Influence .......................................................................................................................................... 188  

5. The Shifting Center ............................................................................................................................... 192  
   5.1 The limits of debate ............................................................................................................................. 193  

vi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2 The breaking point</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 The edifice of establishment</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 “Can Protestantism Win America?”</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 The impossibility of consensus</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 5.1: Contributors to 1939 “How My Mind Has Changed” Series…………...216
List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Charles Clayton Morrison, ca. 1909.......................................................... 26
Figure 1.2: Central Church, Des Moines, Iowa, ca. 1904............................................ 27
Figure 1.3: Monroe Street Church, Chicago, ca. 1904 (after Morrison’s building campaign)............................................................................................................. 38
Figure 1.4: Herbert L. Willett. ..................................................................................... 39
Figure 2.1: Alexander Campbell................................................................................. 71
Figure 2.2: Isaac Errett and James H. Garrison........................................................ 73
Figure 2.3: Dr. J.W. McGarvey. ................................................................................ 75
Figure 2.4: Z.T. Sweeney.......................................................................................... 94
Figure 3.1: Continental Campaign announcement.................................................... 116
Figure 3.2: Continental Campaign prizes. ................................................................. 120
Figure 4.1: Caricature of Charles Clayton Morrison, by E.A. Fridell......................... 183
Figure 5.1: Christianity and Crisis, vol. 1, issue 1 (Feb. 10, 1941)......................... 206
Introduction

When, after 39 years, Charles Clayton Morrison stepped down as editor of *The Christian Century*, his readers were not the only people who noticed. On June 23, 1947, both *Newsweek* and *Time* recapped his career at the top of their religion sections. *Newsweek* called Morrison a “fiery, forceful man” who had increased from 600 to 40,000 the circulation of “the most important organ of Protestant opinion in the world today.” *Time* lauded the *Century* as “Protestantism’s most vigorous voice” and, in contrast to the “intellectual poverty” of dogmatic or secularized religious publications, “a beacon of level-headedness in a fog of misty thinking.” Both magazines credited Morrison’s genius as the reason for the *Century’s* success, though both also quoted Morrison’s attempts to deflect such praise. *Newsweek* suggested that Morrison’s inspiration was “the life blood of the magazine,” and *Time* judged his editorials, which led off each issue, “searching and often inspiring—as well as overpowering.” In both accounts, the ascent of the *Century* from an obscure Disciples of Christ journal to the voice of American mainline Protestantism testified to Morrison’s talents. Whatever struggles lay behind them, in 1947 the editor and his magazine stood at the pinnacle of their world.1

In one sense, such claims were incontrovertibly true. If *Newsweek* and *Time* declared a magazine influential, then, by one significant measure, it was. The praise of numerous historians over the years has confirmed this assessment. In 1933, Ray H. Abrams called the *Century* the “most widely read religious journal in America”

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1 “Voice of the *Century*,” *Newsweek* (June 23, 1947), 72; “Man of the *Century*,” *Time* (June 23, 1947), 75-76. Neither news article carried a byline. Both drew on a press release sent from the *Century* offices, a copy of which resides in the Christian Century Foundation collection, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL.
among liberal Christians. In 1958, Robert Moats Miller ranked it “Protestantism’s most influential periodical.” In 1972, Sydney Ahlstrom touted it as “the chief organ of interdenominational liberalism.” More recently, Donald Meyer called the magazine “the leading voice of liberal Protestantism,” William R. Hutchison identified it as “the prime journalistic medium for liberal and modernist ideas,” and Martin Marty deemed its editors “the most plausible and responsible unofficial voices of what is today called ‘mainline Protestantism.’” Additionally, nearly 3,000 libraries keep the Century on hand for research and leisure reading, more than any other religious periodical. Rare among magazines, the Century has achieved a high profile within the distinct spheres of journalism, the academy, and religion.²

Still, what does it mean to call a magazine “the leading voice of liberal Protestantism,” let alone “the most important organ of Protestant opinion in the world”? Impressive as such claims are, repeated assertions of influence resemble a roof without walls. They presuppose a large audience for the Century, a great capacity for individual magazines to shape cultural attitudes, and, most significant, a religious landscape on which Protestant liberals unquestionably dominated—all flawed assumptions. Further, the paeans to the Century do not answer such

foundational questions as how it rose to prominence, how it exercised its influence, or whom it affected. No scholarly work has addressed these questions.3

This project is first and foremost a history of The Christian Century during its formative years under the leadership of Charles Clayton Morrison, who served as editor from 1908 to 1947. As the only full-time staff member for many of those years, the man who hand-picked the rest of the staff and contributors, the author of the bulk of the editorials, and a dogged promoter of the magazine and its many causes, Morrison necessarily looms large. His name, however, has been forgotten. The Century, as an institution deemed representative of the powers that be in American religion, still wins attention. This history, then, includes both exploration of Morrison’s biography and analysis of mainline Protestantism, situating the Century at the intersection of personal ambitions and cultural impact. Put differently, this project is about Morrison, the magazine, and the mainline, with the magazine at the center of the narrative.

In attempting to assess the magazine’s influence, this dissertation argues that *The Christian Century* achieved its reputation as the leading organ of Protestant opinion through a combination of savvy, serendipity, and bravura. Morrison worked very hard to position himself, and his magazine, at the hub of networks of financial, religious, and cultural resources. At the same time, the *Century* benefited from instability in the religious magazine market. It did not muscle out all other vigorous Protestant voices so much as find itself still standing after its closest competitors collapsed. Throughout this upward climb, the *Century*’s rhetoric ran ahead of its accomplishments. Without ever amassing a wide readership, it declared itself the rightful representative first of its originating denomination, the Disciples of Christ, and later of American Protestantism as a whole. With sufficient repetition by sufficiently prominent people, these declarations of representative status became accepted by journalists, church leaders, and scholars as fact.

To be sure, the magazine exercised real influence. This influence was merely not the kind usually attributed to it. Morrison’s *Century* landed on the desks of religious leaders, journalists, and occasionally politicians, but it did not rally the majority of American Protestants to its causes, which included the Social Gospel, biblical higher criticism, ecumenism, and pacifism. Most American Protestants never embraced these ideas, and, besides, changing minds is not a task at which magazines excel. Magazines speak to a self-selected cohort of subscribers and therefore always “preach to the choir.” In the *Century*’s case, that choir consisted mainly of pastors in a handful of northern denominations. The *Century* informed these readers, as did the other denominational and secular publications they read. More important, the *Century*
confirmed their status as members of a forward-thinking elite who embodied the best hope for transforming church and society into God’s kingdom. The magazine set apart its readers, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, as it projected a vision of progress in which their roles were expansive and secure.⁴

Through rhetoric and real influence, Morrison’s Century helped distinguish a movement that would, in the 1960s, come to be called the Protestant mainline. The mainline constituency aligned closely with the Century’s readership. Mainline ideals aligned closely with the magazine’s editorial emphases. Additionally, the mainline and the magazine enjoyed similar social status. They came as close as any group in twentieth century America to functioning as a religious establishment, but even they fell short. Rhetoric could paper over some of the divisions within the mainline and some of the gaps between this elite and broader religious culture, but it could not, to Morrison’s great chagrin, create a unified Protestant America.

Constructions of the Protestant Mainline

One of the primary currents in academic discussion of the Protestant mainline is theology. This focus reflects both the kinds of places, most often seminaries and university-related divinity schools, where the work has been done and the interests of founding mainline figures like Edward Scribner Ames, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Shailer Mathews, Francis J. McConnell, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Walter Rauschenbusch—theologians all. Theological analysis has revealed continuities and discontinuities within the movement, the institutionalization of its impulses, the

⁴ On the relative importance of information and confirmation in periodicals, see James W. Carey, Communication as Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 13-36, esp. 18-19.
relationship of mainline thought to intellectual developments such as pragmatism and political currents such as socialism, and change over time, especially in response to wars and other upheavals. To its credit, this vein of scholarship has taken founders’ ideas as seriously as did the founders themselves.  

Sociology forms the other primary current in scholarship on the mainline. Much of this work has endeavored to account for the numerical decline of mainline churches since the 1960s and, in many cases, to offer suggestions on how to reverse this decline. These themes have appeared in studies of the mainline in the aggregate (defined somewhat differently by different sociologists) and studies of individual denominations. Some denominational studies have combined theological, institutional, and sociological concerns. For example, *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*, grouped its collected essays under the headings Bible and Theology; Mission and Image; Education; Structure; Theological, Moral, and Social Profile; and Ecology of Growth and Decline. Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and the

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United Church of Christ—the other denominations most often labeled mainline—have all produced studies along similar lines.\(^6\)

Unfortunately, as studies of other American religious movements branched out in multiple directions, the mainline largely got left behind. The close attention to ethnography, practice, aesthetics, deviance, and non-church institutions that has enlivened work on countless outsider groups has not, with few exceptions, been turned on the Protestant establishment. Of course, academe is full of pendulum swings, and it could be argued that over-attention to the exotic and unofficial has distorted images of the American faithful. Clearly, though, a picture in which only theologians and imposing edifices—however carefully rendered—are visible is incomplete.\(^7\)

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The study of the mainline could benefit from broader inquiries, including critical historical inquiry, provided that careful consideration of the movement’s central emphases remains. A useful guide to these emphases is the “logic of mainline churchliness” identified by historian Peter J. Theusen. Within the constellation of ideas encompassed by this phrase, Theusen highlighted three: “a reasonable tolerance of ethical differences, a thoroughgoing commitment to ecumenical cooperation, and an all-embracing conception of the church’s public role.” Churchliness suggests other ideas as well, all of them relevant to the study of the mainline. It speaks of place, a certain kind of place that looks like a church rather than a storefront or a warehouse. It suggests order and decorum, as well as the fellowship of a congregation. It embraces ecclesial matters, hierarchy, worship, ministry, and social pronouncements. The entire phrase proposes that understanding the mainline requires attention to ideology and practice, pulpit and pew, and especially the sinews that join them into an organic whole.8

This study does not attempt to comprehend the mainline. Instead, it focuses on just the most notable expositor of mainline churchliness, The Christian Century. Incorporating insights from theology and sociology, I examine leaders (especially Charles Clayton Morrison) and their ideas, expressed in articles and editorials, as well as responses from the magazine’s readers. I also attend to the magazine’s design and promotion, which aided its efforts to distinguish itself and its constituency. What

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editors told readers mattered, but so did the feel of the pages and the quality of the products offered as subscription premiums. These elements worked together to communicate the logic of mainline churchliness and to establish the place of the *Century* and its audience on the cultural landscape.\(^9\)

Several good studies have demonstrated the influence of periodicals on cultural (and subcultural) formation. The most ambitious of these, with titles like *Shaping Our Mothers’ World: American Women’s Magazines* and *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post*, argued for strong influence over large populations. At the other end of the spectrum lay books like Merrill D. Peterson’s highly personal *Coming of Age with the New Republic, 1938-1950*, in which the author described his own relationship with a magazine and merely suggested that other people might have had similar experiences. Works between these extremes have aimed to illustrate more complex connections between periodicals and specific audiences. Mark Hulsether’s *Building a Protestant Left*, for example, used Reinhold Niebuhr’s magazine, *Christianity and Crisis*, as a lens to examine identity formation and ideological evolution among the small but very politically active group of American Protestants known as Christian realists. This study takes a similar approach, linking *The Christian Century* and the formation of the mainline, but I

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\(^9\) As art historian Kenon Breazeale noted in a study of *Esquire*, “magazines are calculated packages of meaning whose aim is to transform the reader into an imaginary subject—as Louis Althusser put it, to ‘appeellate’ each reader. Magazines are both devised and experienced as a whole and can be most meaningfully studied as a system entire.” Breazeale, “In Spite of Women: *Esquire* Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer,” *Signs* 20.1 (Autumn 1994), 1-22.
attend less than Hulsether to ideological change over time and more to the business of magazine production.\textsuperscript{10}

I am not the first person to identify the *Century* as a touchstone of mainline identity. Religion scholar Peter W. Williams listed patronage of the *Century*, especially by clergy, among twenty characteristics of that wing of American Protestantism. Similarly, church historian Dennis N. Voskuil asserted that, during Morrison’s editorship, “the *Century* came to be regarded as the interpretive standard of the Protestant establishment.” Anecdotal evidence of connections between the magazine and this constituency abounds as well. I do not, however, mean to suggest that the *Century* and the mainline were ever coterminous, in audience or interests, or that all sectors of the mainline looked equally to the *Century* for leadership. Instead, I hope that this study takes a few steps along the lines of inquiry raised by historian William R. Hutchison regarding the mainline: “the nature of its extension outward, its interconnection with other organizations and elites … [and] questions of ‘influence’ and of broad cultural authority.” While no single study could explore all of these

topics, this study of the Century contributes to a better understanding of mainline religious establishment in twentieth-century America.11

Terms and Definitions

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers several pertinent concepts for investigating this subject. The first, cultural capital, encompasses qualities like “verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, scientific knowledge, and educational credentials”—the qualities that Time and Newsweek judged to be so abundant in Morrison.12 Like monetary capital, cultural capital is not evenly distributed throughout society but rather concentrated within an elite. Unlike monetary capital, though, cultural capital appears to be less a possession than a set of traits; money remains external to the possessor while knowledge, verbal acuity, and taste are internalized. Respectability comes with the package. The profits of cultural capital, then, are distinction and legitimacy, “the profit par excellence, which consists in the fact of feeling justified in … being what it is right to be.” Through this alchemy, elitism becomes establishment, and even in such a supposedly egalitarian


society as twentieth century America, establishment often escapes scrutiny.

Morrison’s accumulation of cultural capital is the focus of chapter one.

The second concept I draw from Bourdieu is field, which designates an area governed by certain kinds of cultural capital. Morrison and the Century sought recognition in a number of fields, both large (the field of religion) and small (the field of Disciples publishing). How well the magazine competed in these fields affected mainline Protestant identity and, more immediately, the financial health of the publication. The Century’s striving to represent the Disciples—in part through redefining what it meant to represent a religious movement—is the theme of chapter 2. The magazine’s expansion of its competitive field beyond Disciples publishing to the universe of opinion journals (including The Nation, The New Republic, and The Commonweal) drives chapter 3.

A third useful concept from Bourdieu is homology, which means correspondence or similarity in structure and function. The term comes from the natural sciences and suggests organic connection or outgrowth. Claims that the Century represented the Protestant mainline (or, more comprehensively, Protestantism as a whole) assume a close homology between the magazine and a definable constituency. This is a fair assumption, to a point. Magazines, like the Century, that relied on subscription revenue had to create an ongoing relationship with readers based on mutual interests and the meeting of needs. Publication and constituency had to resemble each other in some vital way, or the relationship would break down, the subscription renewals would stop, and the publication would die. The Century did not die, even when many of its peer publications in the realm of religious
publishing did, so it clearly established a meaningful connection with its target audience. The makeup of that audience and the substance of the connection, however, were not what the *Time* and *Newsweek* reporters, or the scholars who have heaped accolades on the *Century*, assumed. Chapter 4 tests the homology between Morrison’s *Century* and its readership through analysis of letters collected in 1928 for the editor’s 20th anniversary. These letters revealed a complicated relationship in which the *Century* more often spoke *to* than *for* its readers.

The last major concept I draw from Bourdieu is *habitus*, “the systems of dispositions … characteristic of the different classes and class fractions.”¹³ Though the mainline was never a class in Marxian terms, it is useful to think of mainline identity functioning *like* a class identity for certain American Protestants in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Bourdieu, habitus influences members of different classes as they decide everything from what to read and drink to which political views to espouse and whom to marry. Affiliation with the mainline colored all of these decisions, too, and the pages of the *Century* addressed many of them directly. Additionally, the habitus of *Century* contributors predisposed them to see some developments on the American religious scene, especially forays in ecumenism, while overlooking others, including the post-Scopes transformation of fundamentalism and the advent of Pentecostalism. The notion of habitus makes relevant the *Century*’s typography and advertisements as well at its editorials. It also shifts examination of editorial content away from writers’ conscious decisions to their unconscious assumptions, rendering the story of the *Century* less a tale of prophets

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¹³ Bourdieu, 6.
who either “got it right” or “got it wrong” and more a story of the world constructed by a small group of people within one rarefied social sphere. Habitus comes to the fore in chapter 5.\textsuperscript{14}

A far more important, but far more difficult, term to define is \textit{mainline}. Martin Marty noted in 1976 that no one, to his knowledge, had attempted to trace the rise of the term, and it does not appear that anyone has attempted the feat since.\textsuperscript{15} The word came to religious discourse from the world of rail travel, where it described the most-traveled or most direct line of any railroad system. Colloquially, in America from at least the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, mainline more specifically indicated one particular railroad leading to the tony northwestern suburbs of Philadelphia. Sociologist E. Digby Baltzell described this Main Line at some length in his 1958 study, \textit{Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class}. By the 1950s, he wrote, the term “Mainliner ha[d] become synonymous with ‘upper crust,’ ‘old family,’ or ‘socialite.’”\textsuperscript{16}

Elite connotations accompanied \textit{mainline} when it entered discussion of religion, but another meaning adhered to the word as well: normative. The term’s third definition in the Oxford English Dictionary encompasses both halves of its identity: “Principal, belonging to the first rank; of or characteristic of a well-established position, conventional, mainstream, middle-of-the-road.” This one word, then, indicates that which is select and that which is universal, the elite and the

\textsuperscript{14} Contributors to \textit{A Century of The Century}, for example, spent considerable time evaluating whether their predecessors had been sufficiently progressive on various issues. Hulsether did the same for \textit{Christianity and Crisis}.

\textsuperscript{15} Martin E. Marty, \textit{A Nation of Behavers} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 52.

everyday, all with echoes of northeastern gentility. Tensions embedded in this web of meaning sometimes twisted the *Century* in rhetorical knots, as when its editors defined *representation* as the interpretation of what people ought to think rather than the depiction of what people actually thought. The principal and the pedestrian do not always track together, but they do share a key characteristic in that neither invites examination. The connection, or lack thereof, between elite status and presumed universality is a recurring theme in this dissertation.

How and when the word *mainline* jumped from discussions of suburbs and socialites to discussions of certain “upper crust,” “old family” churches remains a mystery. An early instance of the word being used this way in print was a front-page 1960 *New York Times* article by John Wicklein headlined, “Extremists Try to Curb Clergy; Moves to ban social issues causing Protestant rift.” The details of the battle dated the piece, but the battle lines persist. The article began:

Protestant leaders in the Midwest and in Texas believe a concerted effort is being made by extreme economic and religious conservatives to keep ministers and church councils from speaking out on social issues and force them to “stick to the Gospel.”

The effort, they say, has intensified in the six weeks since an Air Force training manual drew attention to long-standing assertions by ultra-conservatives that Communists had infiltrated the major Protestant denominations and their federation, the National Council of Churches.

The article went on to identify two sources of the “intimidation” and “attacks” on clergy members’ freedom:

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18 John Wicklein, “Extremists Try to Curb Clergy,” *The New York Times* (Mar. 28, 1960), 1, 25. I have not found any earlier examples of this usage of *mainline*, but it is very unlikely that a *New York Times* reporter would have invented the term, so the search for antecedents continues.
[1] Wealthy laymen in and out of mainline denominations who object to social, economic and political pronouncements by local ministers, denominational leaders and officers of the National Council.

[2] Theological conservatives who object to liberalism in matters of belief, which predominates within the major denominations affiliated with the council.

The reference to “wealthy laymen in and out of mainline denominations” was the only use of the term mainline in the article. Elsewhere, the phrases “moderate and liberal” and “old-line Protestantism” were used as synonyms. The beleaguered heroes of the story would most likely have called themselves moderates, liberals, “social Christians,” “progressive Christians,” or—most likely of all—merely identified themselves by title and denomination. The opponents of such Christians were labeled in the article, by the author and by sources he quoted, conservative, ultra-conservative, fundamentalist, anti-liberal, anti-intellectual, emotional-appeal, schismatic, far right, and extremists. They probably would have called themselves conservatives, fundamentalists, or possibly evangelicals.

Without actually defining the mainline, Wicklein communicated a lot about it. The term designated entire denominations or churches, not individuals. The mainline was old and moderate to liberal, as well as socially progressive. Its churches were “major.” Its clergy were “leaders.” Its challengers hailed from the heartland and the Sunbelt. It was identified strongly with the National Council of Churches, both institutionally and ideologically. And it commanded the respect of The New York Times.

Peter W. Williams, in his textbook America’s Religions, gave the fullest description of the mainline. He admitted that mainline was not a technical term but
found it a useful name for religious expressions consonant with most or all of 20 characteristics including membership in the Seven Sisters denominations (Episcopal, United Church of Christ, American Baptist, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Evangelical Lutheran, Disciples of Christ), middle to upper social class, northwestern European ancestry, use of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, low tension with American culture, and patronage, particularly by clergy, of The Christian Century or Christianity & Crisis. It is significant that no handy pocket definition of the mainline, analogous to David Bebbington’s widely used four-point definition of evangelicalism, exists. Like the cathedrals in which many of its members worship, the mainline presents an intricate yet solid face to the world, its painstaking human construction seemingly long past.  

This project does not redefine mainline. There is some debate in sociological circles as to which denominations deserve the label, but, generally speaking, the word accurately conveys a variety of characteristics about a reasonably specific group of Protestants. In other words, students of American religion know what the mainline is and where to find it. The project does argue, however, that mainline should not be used interchangeably with mainstream, as it often has been in both scholarship and journalism. Mainline correctly denotes a liberal, WASP elite, but this elite is not now nor has it ever been (as the OED put it) conventional, mainstream, or middle-of-the-road.  

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20 Some studies of the contemporary mainline drop the Disciples, which have dipped below 1 million members. Occasionally the Lutherans are excluded, with the explanation that they either joined the
Significance

This dissertation’s primary contribution is telling the unfamiliar story of *The Christian Century* in its formative decades. That tale brims with important issues—battles between traditional and modernist interpretations of the Bible, the professionalization of clergy, the intellectual impact of World War I, challenges posed by immigration and religious pluralization—and forceful personalities, including Morrison, his longtime collaborator Herbert L. Willett, his editorial nemeses within the Disciples movement, and his protégé-turned-rival Reinhold Niebuhr. That the *Century* retains a following among academics, clergy, and journalists makes this story important as well as interesting.

Methodologically, I hope to model a comprehensive approach to magazine history. As more periodicals are digitized, it will become easier for researchers to trace the development of themes within a magazine or compare coverage across titles by means of simple keyword searches. Such research holds great promise, but it threatens to dissociate magazine content from its original context. Subscribers do not selectively read articles on only one topic, skipping from year to year or title to title to formulate a coherent argument. Assessing how subscribers *do* read is so complicated that an entire research industry is dedicated to the problem, but it is generally safe to club late or followed a trajectory different enough from the others that they should not be lumped together. Glenn Utter’s *Mainline Christians and U.S. Public Policy* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007) adds to the standard seven the Reformed Church in America and the Roman Catholic Church. On the conflation of mainline and mainstream, see Robert Wuthnow and John Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 5; Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 53; Marty, foreword to James K. Wellman Jr., *The Gold Coast Church and the Ghetto* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), ix.
say that people read issues of the magazines to which they subscribe in sequence, that they read articles on a variety of topics, and that they notice things like advertisements and promotions at least as much as they notice stories. Purely intellectual history might use periodical evidence without attending to such matters, but any social or cultural history that rests on periodical data should take them into account.

Cultural history is a natural fit for periodical research, because projecting a vision for a specific subculture is one of the things magazines do best. People do not merely read *The Nation, The New Yorker, or The Wall Street Journal*. They identify themselves by displaying the magazine on the coffee table or quoting from it in conversation. Similarly, subscribing to *The Christian Century* in the first half of the twentieth century was not only a way to gain information about theological trends and church business but a way to locate oneself on the map of American religious culture.

An anecdote from the subscriber correspondence collected in 1928 for Morrison’s twentieth anniversary illustrated the magazine’s identity-shaping power. Young minister Alfred H. Bartter of Gilman, Iowa, wrote, “I recently attended an ordination service at which this question was asked, ‘What magazines do you take?’ In his answer the candidate mentioned the *Christian Century*. When *The Christian Century* was named the questioner said, ‘that will be enough, I am satisfied that you will do in the ministry.’”21 Many other letters in the collected correspondence testified to readers’ reliance on the *Century* to clarify connections and distinctions in their personal and professional lives. This project explores those connections and

21 *Testimonial to Charles Clayton Morrison*, 1928, Codex Ms. 1255, University of Chicago Special Collections. 5 vols.
distinctions, as well as the world—eventually labeled the Protestant mainline—in which they were especially important.

As William R. Hutchison noted in his 1989 edited volume *Between the Times*, “We have mistakenly allowed ourselves to suppose, not only that our continuing analysis of outsiders can flourish while that of mainstream religion languishes, but also that the history of denominational Protestantism has been ‘done’—that we (both scholars and the public) know all we really need to know.”22 The history of the *Century* had not been “done,” but it needs to be, because of what it reveals about journalism in American religion and how it sheds light on the construction of the Protestant mainline.

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22 Hutchison, *Between the Times*, ix.
1. The Making of an Editor

The *Century*’s ascent to prominence was neither purely intentional nor inevitable. In fact, like most American success stories, the magazine had a humble beginning. According to the oft-retold, official account, the intelligent but chronically insolvent Disciples of Christ periodical, founded as the *Christian Oracle* in 1884 and renamed *The Christian Century* in 1900, was about to go under in 1908. Impending mortgage foreclosure sent it to the sheriff’s auction block, where Charles Clayton Morrison, a Disciples minister and editorial neophyte, redeemed it with a scraped-together payment of $1,500. Just 25 years later, a Princeton sociologist declared the *Century* the “most widely read religious journal in America” among liberal Christians. By way of explanation for the *Century*’s remarkable achievement, Morrison told *Newsweek* in 1947, “Like Topsy it just growed.”¹

Clearly, such a dramatic story bore much repetition, and it reappeared each time the magazine celebrated an anniversary or attracted significant notice from outsiders.² But it was not the whole story.

In his decades in the editor’s chair, Morrison led the *Century* in pursuit of distinction. Ambitious, entrepreneurial, and well educated, Morrison overcame his lack of cash through careful investment of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu

calls “cultural capital.” He was not just a former pastor with no journalistic experience, but also one of John Dewey’s doctoral students at the University of Chicago. The Disciples of Christ in the early twentieth century were not just a loose confederation of frontier Restorationists, but an urbanizing and upwardly mobile movement. Morrison counted among his friends biblical scholars such as Chicago’s Edward Scribner Ames and Herbert Willett as well as businessman William H. Hoover, the vacuum magnate. These details do not appear in the Century’s standard lore.

Understating the forces in the Century’s favor does not just punch up the drama of the magazine’s genesis, though that journalistic motive has certainly shaped the story. More significant, the Horatio Alger tint disestablishes the Century, locating its strengths not in institutional connections but in the merits of its plucky editors and sparkling contributors. This sleight shields the magazine from charges of elitism. Playing up Morrison’s backing by the capital-E Establishment would undermine the magazine’s later claims to be “Protestantism’s most vigorous voice” and “the most important organ of Protestant opinion in the world today.” Authority and appeal must rest on some other basis in America’s touted religious marketplace. But of course it is not so simple to separate institutions from individuals or privilege from prominence.

Morrison’s undoubtedly possessed journalistic gifts. He was a skilled writer, editor, promoter, and talent-spotter. The Century very likely would have folded if he had not taken it over when he did. Even so, Morrison could not have succeeded on

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gifts alone. He derived significant cultural (and sometimes financial) capital with which to fund his publishing endeavors from his associations with the Disciples of Christ and the University of Chicago. An examination of those institutions, and the benefits they conferred on him, helps explain the Century’s success at identifying and fulfilling an emerging role in American religious life.

1.1 “The die is cast”

“For an American coming of age in the last third of the nineteenth century,” Michael Kazin wrote in his biography of William Jennings Bryan, “one of the surest ways to gain prominence or to secure it was to become a fine public speaker. Oratory was an indispensable element in both politics and religion.”

Morrison followed this plan diligently, working his way up through the ranks of Disciples of Christ preachers.

Morrison’s affiliation with the Disciples went back at least one generation, and his affiliation with professional ministry at least two. His mother, nee Anna Macdonald, was the daughter of a Baptist minister from New Brunswick. His father, Hugh Tucker Morrison, was a farm boy from Truro, Nova Scotia, who was converted at a religious meeting led by the Rev. Donald Crawford, a follower of Alexander Campbell. Hugh traveled for awhile as Timothy to Crawford’s Paul and then spent a year and a half at Bethany College, West Virginia, which Alexander Campbell had

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6 Unless otherwise noted, all biographical details in the section come from Morrison’s unpublished autobiography, typescript pages of which reside in the Christian Century Foundation Archives, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL. An archivist or editor penciled in section letters and page numbers within each section. The same notation system is followed here.
founded in 1840 as a training ground for Disciples ministers. Hugh returned to Canada to marry Anna before embarking on an unusually peripatetic 50-year ministry. He moved the family frequently between short pastorates (rarely longer than two years) throughout the Midwest. He also spent long stretches away from home, preaching in Missouri, Colorado, Oregon, and even a three-year stint in Australia and New Zealand. Morrison wrote in his autobiography, “One of the most vivid of my boyhood memories is that of driving tacks in carpets—and pulling them up again to move our modest belongings to a new pastorate. What all this meant, not only to father, but most poignantly to mother, needs no telling.”7 Late in life, Morrison marveled at his mother’s ability to rear him, his older brother, Russell, his younger brother, Hugh T. Jr., and his sister, Louise, with so little support.

Despite what could have been a disillusioning pilgrimage, Morrison, born into this household in December 1874, seems never to have considered joining any other church or pursuing any other career than ministry. (Hugh T. Jr. followed this path as well, more than once sharing a pastorate with his older brother.) It was a career that served him well, as the rapidly growing Disciples church had abundant need for preachers, while the movement’s minimal training requirements and loose structure offered young stars the chance to rise quickly. Morrison preached his first sermon, to a flock under his father’s pastoral care in Red Oak, Iowa, at age 16. Years later, he recounted the typical story: he was pressed into service by the scheduled speaker’s (his father’s) illness, he was exceedingly nervous and lost track of time while preaching, the audience responded warmly, but he felt he had done a terrible job. The

7 Autobiography, bl.
clichés continued in the next lines of the autobiography: “I was now committed to the ministry. Yet I had always intended to be a minister. But now in this country school house the die was cast.”

Morrison must have performed better than he realized. He became a “boy preacher,” speaking throughout western Iowa and eastern Nebraska to “sizeable” audiences who had heard of his speaking gifts, or of his vocal talents, or both. For he had another claim to fame—a duet with his older brother, Russell, at the national Disciples convention in Des Moines in 1891 garnered repeated encore requests. He had no other credentials at this point, save a second-place finish in an Iowa state declamation contest.

Over the next decade, the pulpit and the schoolhouse competed for Morrison’s attention. As valedictorian of his high school in 1893, he delivered a rousing oration on “The Progress of Civilization” and was almost immediately tapped to serve as summer pulpit supply at a Disciples church some 100 miles west of his family’s home in Jefferson, Iowa. His family encouraged the move, as long as he would be ready for college by fall. The lack of religious training prior to this temporary pastorate did not bother young Morrison, for, he recalled, “I knew my Bible, many of its great paragraphs I knew by heart. And my mind was well furnished with Father’s interpretations.” Only much later did this foundation for preaching strike him as woefully inadequate. To the mature Morrison, the long-ago sermons seemed biblical

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8 Ibid., a5. Hugh, Sr., was pastor of the Disciples church in Red Oak, but Morrison filled in for him at an “afternoon appointment” at a schoolhouse outside town. It is not clear from the Autobiography what occasion drew the afternoon crowd or what kind of building the church occupied in town.
9 Ibid., a6.
10 Ibid., a5.
11 Ibid., b2.
12 Ibid., b3.
in a negative sense—“enclosed” in the text, using the Bible to elucidate itself rather than applying external wisdom. In short, as he summed up his opinion of his 18-year-old self: “I had not yet learned to read books.”

The book-learning process began that fall, when Morrison enrolled at Drake University, the Disciples school in Des Moines that had been founded in 1881. Iowa’s largest private school, it enrolled many future pastors but also endeavored to provide men and women of all races a well-rounded liberal arts education. In Morrison’s day, a preponderance of Drake undergraduates doubled as student preachers to help pay their way through school. He likely would have followed this course if he had not stopped by the Disciples convention at Oskaloosa before classes started, agreed to sing a gospel hymn for the delegates, and caught the attention of Dr. H.O. Breeden,

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13 Ibid., b4.

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pastor of the large Central Church in Des Moines.\(^{15}\) Breeden and Dr. Barton O. Aylesworth, president of Drake, lunched with Morrison and worked out a deal whereby he would lead singing at Breeden’s church but not bear any other pastoral responsibilities that might interfere with his studies.

![Central Church, Des Moines, Iowa, ca. 1904.](image)

**Figure 1.2: Central Church, Des Moines, Iowa, ca. 1904.\(^{16}\)**

It is difficult to discern how Morrison’s stock had risen so high so rapidly. He recalled being “inwardly astounded” that two Disciples heavyweights had singled him out for special treatment.\(^{17}\) Nothing in his father’s career suggested a legacy to build

\(^{15}\) Ibid., c1.

\(^{16}\) Image source: John T. Brown, ed., *Churches of Christ* (Louisville, KY: John T. Morton and Company, 1904), 315. This is also the source for the image of Monroe Street Church on page 38.

\(^{17}\) Autobiography, c1..
on. Apparently Morrison’s verbal (and vocal) flair made an instant impression on these denominational leaders, as it would on those who lavished praise on him and his magazine decades later.

For most of his college career, Morrison invested more in his church work than in his schoolwork. “My services as a singer,” he reported, “set up a psychological competition with my studies—for which I had little enough relish anyhow.”18 A remedial year of Latin, Geometry, and Greek, undertaken to bring Morrison up to freshman rank, failed to inspire him. The most mentally stimulating moments of his first collegiate year came in conversations with Breeden, who had attended the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago the summer before. Breeden preached a sermon series on what he had learned there and even brought Swami Vivekananda to Des Moines to speak at Central Church. Morrison was not much impressed by the swami, but he was very impressed by Breeden, whom he later described as “a ‘liberal’ in the days before the tension in the churches over the higher criticism became overt and bitter.”19

Breeden influenced Morrison in another way as well. In mid-winter 1894, Breeden dispatched his song leader to Osceola, in southern Iowa, to lead a three-week revival, complete with preaching every night (twice on Sundays) and regular altar calls. Morrison was such a hit that 140 people were added to the church rolls and he received “a kind of Billy Sunday send-off at the railroad station” on his way out of town.20 Curiously, though, instead of pulling him further into ministry, this

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18 Ibid., c2.
19 Ibid., c3.
20 Ibid., c6.
experience convinced him to settle down to his studies. When he reported this change of heart to Breeden, the elder minister declared Morrison “the most important convert” of the revival.21

Morrison’s conversion to intellectual pursuits did not lead him out of the pulpit, for he believed then and throughout his life that scholarship and ministry best edified the church when pursued together. He saw this connection firsthand after he was freed from singing duties at Breeden’s church and sent to serve as the student pastor of a Disciples church in Perry, Iowa. His cross-town rival there, a Unitarian minister, attempted to dazzle the community by speaking out against the backward doctrines of the other local churches. “The other ministers of the town left him alone,” Morrison wrote. “But I couldn’t take it. Besides, I instinctively felt that he could be used as a foil against which I could educate and perhaps liberalize my own flock—by trouncing him!”22 According to the mature Morrison, this liberalizing preaching had a profound effect on the congregation and on his own thinking. His parishioners, who numbered 150 when he began at the church and 350 when he left, loved the new ideas, which had “relieved their minds of a burden of traditional and opaque orthodoxy without weakening their faith in the slightest degree.”23 Morrison felt new freedom in the pulpit and found himself leaving behind his “boyhood conception of the Christian faith” for the vistas opened up by modern scholarship.24

21 Ibid., c7.
22 Ibid., e2.
23 Ibid., e3.
24 Ibid.
1.2 A movement on the move

Morrison’s personal journey from revivalist biblicism to modernist erudition tracked a broader, though hardly universal, trend within the Disciples tradition. The movement (which, though it adopted many denominational characteristics over the years, still eschews the “denomination” label) emerged from an inchoate but widespread Restorationist impulse in the early nineteenth century. At that time, according to Nathan O. Hatch’s *The Democratization of American Christianity*, four reformers—Baptist Elias Smith, Methodist James O’Kelly, and Presbyterians Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell—independently concluded that American Christianity needed to return to the New Testament model immediately. Hatch cast the four as democrats par excellence who urged Christians to wrest the Bible from their lettered pastors’ hands and start fresh. Only by restoring the anti-hierarchical primitive church, these men argued, could Protestants bridge their sectarian divisions and faithfully represent God’s kingdom on earth. Not surprisingly, this radical individualism proved problematic as an organizing principle. Nonetheless, a series of informal mergers culminated in the 1830 joining of about 10,000 of Stone’s followers, called “Christians,” with about 12,000 of Campbell’s followers, called “Disciples of Christ.” The united movement, encompassing entwined branches that later redivided into “Disciples,” “Christians,” and “Churches of Christ,” grew at four times the rate of the general population to claim more than 190,000 members by
1860. This growth made it the fifth largest Protestant body in America. Steep gains continued, pushing membership over 400,000 in 1875 and over 1,140,000 in 1906.\textsuperscript{25}

The myriad continuities and discontinuities between these Restorationist branches made for an exceedingly complicated story. This complexity could explain why the Disciples and Churches of Christ remain, in R. Laurence Moore’s estimation, “the most seriously overlooked and underestimated groups in the standard surveys of American religious history.”\textsuperscript{26} Regarding continuities, historian David Edwin Harrell, Jr., identified broad commitment to the movement’s two founding emphases—the reestablishment of New Testament patterns and the drive for Christian unity—and an endemic moderate temperament as the glue holding the Restorationists together in the nineteenth century. Harrell wrote, “Of course, doctrinal unanimity did not exist in the early movement, but during the first generation opinions were loosely held and disagreements were easily pushed beneath the surface hope for Christian union. Camaraderie born of persecution and social ostracism obscured differences, as did the personal friendship among church leaders.”\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, according to Harrell, the intentional paucity of denominational bureaucracy gave Restorationists relatively little to fight about. As many other denominations splintered over slavery, mission


\textsuperscript{26} R. Laurence Moore, “Insiders and Outsiders in American Historical Narrative and History,” \textit{American Historical Review} 87 (Apr. 1982), 420.

\textsuperscript{27} Harrell, 4-5.
boards, biblical interpretation, and other social issues, the Disciples family clung to its “distinctive theology of toleration.”

Even so, differences in theology and practice churned beneath the “surface hope” of unity. Points of conflict included worship music, the movement’s fledgling administration, baptism, and relations between Restorationists and other churches. In 1889, a conservative Restorationist firebrand named Daniel Sommer gathered a crowd of some 6,000 fellow conservatives at Sand Creek, Illinois, to draw a clear line between “The Church of Christ” and the “So-called Christian Church,” the latter encompassing the movement’s liberal “innovators.” Sommer railed against church societies, the growing stratification between pastors and laity, choirs, “and other objectionable and unauthorized things,” foremost among them the use of musical instruments. He challenged the assembled who shared his objections to separate themselves from the other Restorationists, and many did. The codification of this conservative secession came in 1906, when a national census listed the 159,658-member Churches of Christ separately from the much larger Disciples of Christ. Generally speaking, the conservatives who formed the Churches of Christ took more seriously the half of the movement’s mandate that related to the restoration of the early church, while Disciples cared more about the injunction to foster church unity. Along with this difference in emphasis, the breakaway group held onto revival-tuned biblicism as the Disciples majority (or at least its clergy) slowly embraced biblical

28 Harrell, 5.
30 Harrell, 6.
higher criticism, historical consciousness, and the Social Gospel—the hallmarks of modernism.

Even deeper than these theological divergences lay demographic fissures. Harrell called attention to these fissures by titling the second volume of his history of the movement *The Social Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865-1900*. Nearly 85 percent of the Churches of Christ members counted in the 1906 census lived in formerly Confederate states or the border states of Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. By contrast, over half of the Disciples counted in the census lived in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky, with another 30 percent living nearby in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas. Though both bodies were predominantly rural, the Disciples had significantly better representation in cities. Furthermore, thanks to greater concentration and greater wealth, Disciples worshiped in much nicer churches than their erstwhile brethren. Using data from a 1936 religious census, Harrell calculated the average size of a Disciples congregation to be 422 members, compared to 92 for the Churches of Christ, and the average cost of a Disciples “edifice” to be $16,000, compared to less than $3,000 for the Churches of Christ.

Noting these sectional and economic differences puts the theological rhetoric of the two sides in context. When conservatives such as Sommer condemned “objectionable and unauthorized” musical instruments, they were describing luxuries their churches could not have afforded even if their biblical interpretation had

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31 Harrell, 325.
32 Harrell, 6.
33 Harrell, 335.
permitted them. Conservative complaints about over-educated ministers and the growth of mission agencies and other church structures similarly reflected fears of losing ground to the richer, more urbane liberals. Though arguments about these matters usually centered on key passages from the New Testament or invocations of Alexander Campbell and other first-generation heroes, a few observers of the growing Restorationist rift identified status and class as the roots of the problem. Eight years after his Sandy Creek pronouncement, Sommer wrote:

As time advanced such of those churches as assembled in large towns and cities gradually became proud, or, at least, sufficiently worldly-minded to desire popularity, and in order to attain that unscriptural end they adopted certain popular arrangements such as the hired pastor, the church choir, instrumental music, man-made societies to advance the gospel, and human devices to raise money to support previously mentioned devices of similar origin. In so doing they divided the brotherhood of disciples.34

Liberals, naturally, saw these “devices” as positive developments and were (in the words of the inaugural issue of the re-christened Christian Century) “hardly … tolerant of the gross stupidity that stands in the way of progress because it is too lazy to move or too conceited to think it needs moving.”35 Even with this counterclaim, though, the liberals acknowledged that they were heading in a new direction, and they had good reasons to believe that direction was up.

Division pained the Restorationists, who had believed their unsystematic ecclesiology and theology would protect them from sectarian strife. For the main body of Disciples, however, the dark cloud of schism quickly revealed a silver lining. The departure of the Churches of Christ left the Disciples without much of a foothold

34 Daniel Sommer, “The Signs of the Times,” The Octographic Review 40 (October 5, 1897) 1, cited in Harrell, 344.
35 “Twentieth Century Christian Journalism,” CC (Jan. 4, 1900), 4.
in the South, but it also relieved them from arguing with or apologizing for the often
cantankerous Southern conservatives. Moreover, the profile of the Disciples instantly
became more urban, more genteel, more Northern—in short, more socially
distinguished. Harrell described the post-split Disciples as “typical of mid-American
Protestantism,” a group composed of “the sons and grandsons of the Anglo-Saxon
pioneers who settled the Midwest and the South.”36 With these new social options
came new religious options as well. Disciples historian D. Newell Williams
considered the secession of the Southerners critical to the church’s entry into the
Protestant mainline, which he defined as the collection of denominations “identified
with the religious interests and aspirations of persons associated with the urban and
industrial segments of American society and culture that had emerged in the post-
Civil War era.”37 Typical middle-American demographics did not guarantee mainline
status, but they provided a good start.

The contrast between Morrison’s ministry and his father’s illustrates how far
the Disciples had come in just one generation. When young Charles preached for his
father the first time, he traveled to the Sunday afternoon meeting in a horse-drawn
buggy.38 The meeting was one of three Hugh had scheduled for that day, which
suggests that the Disciples in and around Red Oak, Iowa, could not support settled,
full-time pastors and, possibly, that farm chores prevented many parishioners from
making it into town for a Sunday morning service. By contrast, in his own first

36 Harrell, 6.
37 D. Newell Williams, “How and Why the Disciples Have Changed in Relation to Culture,” in
Williams, ed., A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American
38 Autobiography, a4.
pastorate, the pulpit-supply job he undertook the summer before he entered college, Morrison found a financially secure and intellectually adventurous congregation. He specially noted the lay leader of the congregation, William Orr, a bachelor lawyer who founded the local Chatauqua and had a hand in all of the community’s other religious and cultural projects. “I remember him with love touched with awe,” Morrison wrote. The church Morrison served in Perry, Iowa, during college offered a salary sufficient for him to move his entire family to Des Moines, hosted two multi-denominational “union revivals” during his tenure, and completed a major building campaign just before Morrison left. And even the Perry church was only a stepping-stone to bigger and better things, both for Morrison and for the Disciples tradition.

1.3 To Chicago

For a Midwestern boy, or a Midwestern movement, looking to make a splash at the turn of the twentieth century, Chicago was clearly the place to go. From a population of just 100,000 in 1860, it had swelled to 1.7 million by 1900, making it the second-largest city in America and the fourth-largest city in the world. The 1893 Columbian Exposition, in some ways the city’s world debut, attracted 21 million paid admissions to a dazzling display of exotic cultures and electric lights. Nelson Algren memorably called Chicago the “City on the Make,” the place where “the

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39 Ibid., b5.
40 Ibid., c7, e5, and f1.
battle between the Pure-of-Heart and the Brokers’ Breed was joined for keeps. The ceaseless, city-wide, century-long guerrilla warfare between the Do-As-I-Sayers and the Live-and-Let-Livers was on. With the brokers breaking in front."43 Its criminals—Hinky Dink Kenna, Bathhouse John—were as colorful and well-known as its reformers—Jane Addams, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday. It gave the literary world Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, and Carl Sandburg. The city pulsed with possibility.

The biggest attraction Chicago held for Morrison was its new university. The attraction was not, however, immediate. He professed to have no plan for his years after Drake other than leading his growing church in Perry, Iowa, but upon his graduation in 1898, as at so many other points in his life, “the unexpected happened.”44 In the midst of the graduation procession, Dr. I.N. McCash, pastor of University Church in Des Moines, pulled Morrison aside and asked him, “How would you like to go to Chicago as pastor of a church?”45 The offer stunned Morrison, who responded that he could not leave his Perry church during its building campaign. Nonetheless, he accepted an invitation to preach a test sermon at the Chicago church and was immediately offered the job. He worked out a plan to send his younger brother, Hugh Jr., then a Drake student, to Chicago as summer pulpit supply, which gave him enough time to tie things up in Perry.46 Then Morrison left Iowa for good.

44 Autobiography, f1.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., f2.
The Chicago church did not initially impress Morrison. Disappointment seeped through the description in his autobiography:

The Monroe Street Church, at Francisco and Monroe, viewed in terms of numerical membership, building and prestige, bore out in no respect the vision that had arisen in my imagination when Dr. McCash asked me if I would like to go to Chicago. Its building enclosed a single room about the size that Perry had outgrown. The front of the lot was vacant, awaiting the construction of a sanctuary. The membership was less than half that of the Perry church.47

Despite this disheartening scene, Morrison glimpsed promise in his new setting. The church’s west side neighborhood housed “resourceful middle-class people, predominantly Protestant.” Some of the nearby Protestant churches were large and imposing, their pastors “strong,” even famous. (Given his ambitions, it is hard to believe Morrison when he wrote of these other churches, “I was not depressed by this over-shadowing of our humble position.”) His own church boasted a “splendid” choir, directed by a conservatory professor and fronted by an outstanding tenor

47 Ibid., g1.
soloist. Overall, he found the congregation “warm-hearted, loyal and eager for expansion.”

Though Morrison would serve several years at Monroe Street, the newly formed University of Chicago exerted a stronger pull on him as soon as he arrived in the city. He hesitated to encourage the church’s expansion plans, because, “I felt that I should not allow myself to mortgage my educational program by becoming involved in an undertaking so prolonged in preparation, and in responsibility that would follow upon its completion.” In fact, less than two years after taking the Monroe Street job, he attempted to bolt for a pastorate in Hyde Park, only to be beaten out by Disciples superstar Dr. Edward Scribner Ames. Losing the Hyde Park opportunity delayed Morrison’s entry to the university, but he never lost sight of this goal, planted in his mind by University of Chicago biblical scholar Herbert L. Willett following a series of guest lectures in Perry.

![Figure 1.4: Herbert L. Willett.](image)

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., g2.
50 Ibid., g3.
51 Ibid., e3.
During his first year at Monroe Street, Morrison stayed on the city’s west side and took classes in systematic theology and hymnody at Chicago Theological Seminary, a Congregational school.52 The next year, he turned down a lucrative pastorate in Denver, at Willett’s urging.53 In 1901, after (one wonders how willingly) seeing the Monroe Street Church through its building campaign, Morrison invited Willett to speak at the dedication services.54 In spring 1902, Morrison received an offer he apparently could not refuse—leadership of the First Christian Church in Springfield, Illinois—but he accepted it only after working out a complicated co-pastor arrangement in which Morrison’s brother Hugh, Jr., took primary responsibility for the Springfield church and Morrison stayed in Chicago.55 Finally, that fall, he entered the University of Chicago as a graduate student.

The university was only a decade old when Morrison enrolled. The third American university founded on the German research model (behind Clark and Johns Hopkins), its location and opening day had been chosen to coincide with the Columbian Exposition—though, unlike the Exposition, it opened on time in 1892. Its granite structures, designed to resemble Oxford and Cambridge, remained after the fair’s temporary “White City” had been dismantled. Originally linked with the Baptist church, the university had quickly broken ties because of the vigorous support of its first president, William Rainey Harper, and the rest of its biblical studies faculty for German-inspired higher criticism. Fortunately for Harper, the university’s largest donor, John D. Rockefeller, welcomed this new scholarship and continued to fund the

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52 Ibid., g1-g2.
53 Ibid., h1.
54 Ibid., i3.
55 Ibid., i6.
school generously. Profits and prestige drawn from the school’s powerhouse football team helped, too. And so, by the turn of the century, the university had already established itself as an educational leader, “a center of graduate study where research and the discovery of new knowledge, rather than mere teaching and transmission of established truths, was to be the central aspiration of professors and students alike.”

Even the Ivies considered changes to keep up with Chicago.

Like most university presidents, Harper spent much of his time raising funds and poaching faculty from other institutions, but he kept up the momentum of his scholarly pursuits as well. One of his early hires at Chicago recalled, “Those of us who were in the university marveled as much at his energy in getting men for history and chemistry and all other departments. But no interest was greater with him than his interest in religion.” In 1875, at age 18, he had received a Ph.D. from Yale for a comparative study of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Gothic prepositions. Soon afterward, he changed his membership from the Presbyterian to the Baptist church and began teaching Hebrew at a Baptist seminary.

After working his way up to a chair at Yale, Harper started over at Chicago, where he served both as president of the university and as a professor in the Semitics department of the Divinity School. There, according to Disciples scholar and longtime Century literary editor Winfred Ernest Garrison, he became “the most

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56 McNeill, 3. Many details from this paragraph are drawn from McNeill.
conspicuous American exponent of the new methods of biblical study.\(^5\) Though administrative duties consumed much of his time, Harper remained involved in the American Institute of Sacred Literature, a large correspondence school he had founded at Yale in 1880, and presided over the institute’s journal, *The Old and New Testament Student*.\(^6\) He also contributed editorially to two other journals published at Chicago, *Hebraica* and the *Biblical World*.\(^7\) The institute and journals relied upon the resources of the Divinity School, the faculty of which would eventually include such luminaries as George Burman Foster, Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case, and Gerald Birney Smith.\(^8\) (Morrison’s *Century* would later draw from the same well of local experts.) Harper stocked his own corner of the university so well that historian Sydney Ahlstrom averred, “So dynamic and accomplished was its faculty, and so great a regional need did it fill that Chicago remained throughout the first third of the twentieth century probably the country’s most powerful center of Protestant liberalism.”\(^9\) Harper’s death in 1906 prevented him from seeing much of this success, but he had ably laid its foundation.

As a hub of modernist biblical scholarship, the University of Chicago served as a gathering point for young Disciples liberals. The two most prominent

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\(^6\) William J. Hynes, *Shirley Jackson Case and the Chicago School: The Socio-Historical Method*. Society of Biblical Literature: Biblical Scholarship in North America, No. 5 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 1-2. The correspondence school was originally called the Correspondence School of Hebrew and renamed the American Institute of Hebrew in 1883. It included some 9,000 students by 1890. The journal was earlier called *The Old Testament Student*.


\(^8\) Hynes, 13.

representatives of this group, later dubbed the “illuminati” by detractors and “saints” by devotees, were Morrison’s friend Willett and his one-time pulpit rival Ames. Willett hailed from Ionia, Michigan, where his parents had sat under the pastoral leadership of Isaac Errett, widely considered to be Alexander Campbell’s successor at the head of the Restorationist movement. Willett received B.A. and M.A. degrees at Campbell’s school, Bethany College, before pursuing graduate work in Semitics under Harper at Yale. When president Harper put out the call for faculty at Chicago, Willett eagerly joined him. Ames, born to a Disciples minister in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, attended Drake and Yale before finishing a Ph.D. in the philosophy and psychology of religion at Chicago. According to Ames’s autobiography, Harper intended to offer Ames a position to keep him at Chicago, but Ames was out of town and ended up taking instead a chair of philosophy at Butler College, a Disciples-affiliated school in Indianapolis. After three years at Butler, in the summer of 1900, Ames was offered opportunities both to lecture in philosophy at Chicago and to lead Hyde Park Church (the post Morrison had wanted), and he accepted. In this auspicious year, Willett was just 36 years old, Ames just 30.

Calling Harper, Willett, Ames and other figures in this study “liberal” and “modernist” does not at all mean that they agreed on everything. Harper, a generation older than the other two, championed critical biblical scholarship but never doubted that such intellectual work would deepen the piety of the laborers. Willett shared
this basic faith; his work was edgy enough to raise loud opposition to his appearance on the program of the Disciples’ 1909 Centennial Convention, but he wrote mostly in a popularizing vein, to and for the church. Ames was far more famous and far more radical, endeavoring throughout his career to move (as the title of his autobiography phrased it) “beyond theology.”\textsuperscript{67} Some of the ideological differences among these men were substantial, but they offer little insight into Morrison’s ascent to become the leading public voice of liberal and modernist Christian ideas. In this regard, the proximity and frequent cooperation of these Chicagoans, combined with shared interest in the culturally advantageous “modernist” identity, mattered more than theological specifics.

1.4 Disciples Divinity House

Perhaps the most concrete example of this cooperation was Disciples Divinity House, established in 1894. Around 1892, Willett, Ames, and a few other highly educated Disciples (there were not many) pressed for a national Disciples university—to rival, perhaps, the new Baptist school in Chicago.\textsuperscript{68} Presidents of existing Disciples Bible colleges resisted, and hardly anyone else in the church caught even a glimpse of this vision, but the men found an advocate in Harper. The Chicago president did not assist them in erecting a rival university, of course, but he conceived a way to combine their educational aspirations with his own. Ames described the collaboration in his autobiography:

\textsuperscript{67} Arnold, 16, 18.
\textsuperscript{68} Harrell, 346-347.
From the first, President Harper encouraged the founding of houses for the students of different religious bodies. The Disciples of Christ were the first to co-operate in this way. This was partly due to the fact that Herbert Lockwood Willett was a graduate student in Dr. Harper’s own field of Semitic languages and literature and, as a Disciple, was at once interested in the possibility of a Disciples house. Scarcely less important was the fact that another Disciple, Professor W.D. MacClintock, was a close friend of President Harper and one of the first men the president appointed to the faculty of the university. Professor MacClintock was in the department of English and had had ministerial training and some experience in the pastorate. He realized fully the significance of such a training center for the Disciple ministry as the house might be.69

Willett became the first dean of the house, a post he would hold until 1921. At the second meeting of the house’s trustees, Ames, then a graduate student, was elected head of the house, with responsibilities for promotion and fundraising. Ames later served as dean of the house, from 1927-1945.

Disciples House had a nebulous status on campus and within the church. It did not grant degrees, but, according to Chicago Divinity School historian W. Clark Gilpin, “developed as something of an intellectual bridge between the academic departments of a research university and the religious interests of the denomination.”70 Moreover, it did not occupy an actual “house” until 1928. Prior to that time, when asked “Where is the Disciples Divinity House?” Ames recalled that he had to answer, “The house is not something you can see; it is not yet something made with hands. It is an idea, an association. You get into it by becoming a student for the Disciple ministry or other religious work. It does things to the minds and hearts of students, and its influence is attracting men and women here to study.”71 Indeed, Chicago and the Disciples House exerted a powerful attraction. In the last

69 Ames, 173.
70 Gilpin, 103.
71 Ames, 173.
decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, Disciples also raised funds for a scattering of Bible chairs and Bible Schools attached to universities in Michigan, Virginia, Georgia, Missouri, Kansas, California, and Oregon, but Chicago almost immediately became the center of gravity for liberal Discipledom. Chicago also quickly supplanted Yale as the main site of postgraduate education for the small but growing cadre of Disciples ministers who pursued such studies. By the turn of the century, Harrell noted, “Increasingly the younger generation looked not to the old sources of authority but to H.L. Willett and Edward Scribner Ames and the Disciples Divinity House.”

Not surprisingly, many older Disciples regarded the upstart Chicagoans with deep hostility. This hostility increased when, in 1896, Willett, Ames, and Winfred Ernest Garrison founded the Campbell Institute, another edifice-without-an-edifice designed to facilitate fellowship among highly educated Disciples. The Institute had germinated earlier, among five homesick Disciples at Yale, but it came to fruition at a Disciples National Convention at Springfield, Illinois, and remained strongly associated with that state. Open only to college graduates, the institute had 14 charter members (among whom was the fellowship’s only female member in the early decades, Mrs. Albertina Allen Forrest) and had grown to just 200 members by its twentieth anniversary. A proponent, Drake history of religion professor Alfred T.

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73 Harrell, 348.
74 Morrison erroneously recalled the group being even more exclusive. On page 2 of the autobiography, he described the Institute as “a sort of Academy or Honor Society formed in 1900 by a group of men who had taken graduate degrees at Yale and the University of Chicago.” He also erroneously reported that, “Prior to that date there were not more than a half dozen ministers in the denomination whose formal theological training had extended beyond the AB degree.” Actually,
DeGroot, lauded and defended the group in 1948, writing, “Through this fellowship there flowed much of the vital substance nourishing the growing edge of the Disciples. Many of the most successful pastors serving notable congregations were in its company. A neglected theme is the achievement in practical affairs of the churches, in evangelism and other promotional work, by men of this fellowship.”75 Such a defense was necessary because, as DeGroot also noted, “The close fellowship of such a group quite naturally drew down the suspicions of oldsters and outsiders who questioned the soundness of the theology of the younger and yet-curious students and ministers.”76 The leading old-line Disciples publication, *The Christian Standard*, denounced the institute and its members regularly, subjecting them to what one institute member called *Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy*.77

Morrison participated avidly both in the Divinity House and the Campbell Institute. He contributed regularly to *The Campbell Institute Bulletin* (1903-1906) and its successor, *The Scroll* (1906-1910), monthly publications of news, biblical reflections, and intra-Disciples argumentation written for and by institute members. Morrison often wrote the back-page column, a meditation, with titles such as “The Peril of Character,” “The Final Test of Interpretation,” and “Is God a Christian?”78 In 1918, Morrison caused significant consternation when he questioned, in the pages of

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76 Ibid., 382.
77 Stephen J. Corey,* Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy: The consequences among Disciples of Christ* (Des Moines, IA: Committee on Publication of the Corey Manuscript, [1953]). Corey notes, on page 18, that he became a member of the institute in 1904 upon graduation from Rochester Theological Seminary. Editors of the *Standard* sent him and the other members a note prior to a 1906 denunciation, offering to leave out their names if they would resign from the group.
78 These articles appeared in *The Scroll* in December 1906, April 1907, and September 1907.
The Christian Century, whether the institute should disband in the name of Disciples unity (the institute voted “no”), but in general he vigorously supported its efforts, as enumerated by another leading member:

(1) To encourage and keep alive a scholarly spirit and to enable its members to help each other to a riper scholarship by the free discussion of vital problems;
(2) To promote quiet self-culture and the development of a higher spirituality among the members and among the churches with which they shall come in contact; [and]
(3) To encourage positive productive work with a view to making contributions of permanent value to the literature and thought of the Disciples of Christ.79

Aside from the 1918 kerfuffle, Morrison and the Campbell Institute remained in each other’s good graces. In fact, The Scroll discontinued publication in 1910 because institute members believed that Morrison’s Century capably served their own ends.80

1.5 Ultimate issues

Curiously, although Disciples Divinity House clearly, in Ames’s phraseology, “did something” to Morrison’s mind and heart, he wrote nothing about it in his autobiography. This omission seems related to Morrison’s choice to study with John Dewey in the philosophy department instead of joining Willett, Ames, and Garrison in the Divinity School. He explained the decision in his autobiography, writing, “I chose the Department of Philosophy rather than the Divinity School because I had a theory that the problems of theology originated in philosophy, and I wanted to get to

80 Ibid., 9. The smaller, newsier Campbell Institute Bulletin replaced The Scroll for the next few years. The Scroll returned in 1918.
the bottom of things!”\textsuperscript{81} Similar to his decisions at other turning points in his life, however, this choice also brought Morrison closer to power and influence. Acknowledging that getting to the bottom of things might be a “dubious” reason to pick a graduate program, he justified his choice further by describing, almost breathlessly, the possibilities the department opened up for him:

I found myself confronting the ultimate issues of the Nature of the World and Man in a more naked form than I was likely to face them in the theology of the period. Besides, philosophy seemed to be the most exciting field in the academic world at that time. The head of the Department was Professor John Dewey, one of the most distinguished scholars among those whom President Harper had picked off from top positions in the leading universities of the country to man his new institution—founded only ten years before I entered. Dewey had gathered a faculty of his own disciples around him. Together they were elaborating a philosophical position which boldly challenged traditional modes of thinking and came to be known as the “Chicago School” of philosophy.\textsuperscript{82}

Just four weeks into his first class with Dewey, “The Philosophy of Evolution,” Morrison was ready to number himself among those disciples. Confused by one of Dewey’s lectures, Morrison asked him to name a book covering the same ground. When the professor answered that, unhappily, his book had not yet been published, Morrison “realized then that I was sitting at the feet of an original thinker. And I doggedly stayed with him. At the end of the course, I began to ‘see men as trees walking.’”\textsuperscript{83} The allusion to Mark 8:24 is astonishing. Dewey had become as Christ to the Disciples minister.

Morrison was hardly the only person on whom Dewey had such an effect. Louis Menand, in \textit{The Metaphysical Club}, described Dewey as “one of the most

\textsuperscript{81} Autobiography, j1.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., j2.
celebrated public intellectuals of his time” and cited historian Henry Steele Commager’s comment, “It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.” Historian William R. Hutchison considered Dewey an exemplar of “leaders of great innovative movements,” and Dewey’s name dots the pages of Hutchison’s book on modernism in American Protestantism as it does countless other books on early twentieth-century philosophy, theology, pedagogy, and politics. As Morrison had suspected, Dewey’s “Chicago School” of philosophy powerfully informed the “Chicago School” of theology, as the latter’s socio-historical method and socially transformative aspirations responded to the empiricist and pragmatist challenges of the former. The preface to a 1935 collection of essays by Chicago Divinity celebrities including Ames, Case, Mathews, and Garrison stated that the authors shared a view of “the churches in action as constituting, in their collective aspect, the growing-point of a long historical process which at the same time adapts its ideas and methods of work to the demands of the ever changing social situation.” Collective, growing, historically grounded, adaptive—the theologians described precisely the kind of church Dewey would have wanted, if he had wanted any at all. An ardent opponent of the supernatural, Dewey

had no truck with the creeds and cults of “what have passed as religions” and did not trust churches to nurture the kind of “religious values” he affirmed.87

Dewey profoundly influenced Morrison. In his autobiography, written more than 50 years after his graduate study, Morrison was still wrestling with what the great pragmatist had taught him. In prose laden with underlines, Morrison described Dewey’s principles: truth, experience, the useful, process, Naturalism, progress. He expressed fundamental agreement with Dewey’s practical focus, which he summarized with a quotation from his mentor, “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers, and becomes a method cultivated by philosophers for dealing with the problems of men.”88 He defended Dewey from charges of mere materialism, which he traced to William James’s unfortunate use of the phrase, “the cash value of ideas.”89 (Morrison also related a charming little story about a visit by James to the philosophy fellows at Chicago, during which James and Dewey each attempted to give the other credit for engendering pragmatism.)90 Citing bad blood between President Harper and Mrs. Dewey, he recalled with sadness the relocation of the “Chicago School” to Columbia.

Morrison did identify what he considered the “Achilles heel” of Dewey’s system—its unwarranted transference of trust from a personal God to the impersonal Universe—but the overall effect of this section of the autobiography was to clothe Morrison in the disciple’s garb. The Christian Century’s long obituary for Dewey (to which Morrison, in 1952 a contributing editor, obviously contributed) ratcheted up

89 Ibid., j2.
90 Ibid., j10.
the critique, calling Dewey’s “considerable” influence on church life in America “mostly bad.”91 In his private writing, though, Morrison would only go so far as to call his one-time mentor’s impact “unsatisfying.”92

### 1.6 Assessing influences

The mature Morrison offered two figures of speech to describe his understanding of how religion and education formed his character. The first was colloquial: “my philosophy was held at the top of my mind; my faith, at the bottom of my heart.” The second, which he expounded at much greater length, took its cues from fluid dynamics:

> Another figure is that of two parallel streams of loyalty which, for many years, flowed through my spiritual experience in separate channels. One of these streams was my unshaken sense of having received a heritage, something that had been given to me, which had the right to command my loyalty, because it was inherently true and infinitely precious. This was my heritage in the Christian faith, which I had variously conceived as the truth of the Gospel, the revelation of God in Christ, the Christian tradition, and, latterly, as the historical community of the faithful, namely, the Christian Church itself, which comprehends all the rest. … The other stream, which ran parallel to this unwavering loyalty to my Christian inheritance, was my indoctrination with the empirical way of thinking.93

Morrison described the decades after graduate school as marked by attempts “to open a connecting channel between the two separate streams of loyalty, so that their waters could flow together.”94 Some of these attempts took the form of internal wranglings, while others, such as a 24-part debate on “the theistic problem” published in *The

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91 “John Dewey,” *CC* (Jun. 18, 1952), 717-719. The obituary includes Morrison’s eyewitness account of the “No, it’s your philosophy!” exchange between Dewey and James. It is not clear whether Morrison wrote the entire, unsigned editorial.
93 Ibid., 2-3. The typed original also bears handwritten edits, which I have applied here.
94 Ibid., 5.
Christian Century in 1932, proceeded before the public. He dated his final disillusionment with naturalistic empiricism to a review he published in the November 13, 1946, Century of Henry Nelson Wieman’s The Source of Human Good. (Wieman had represented the atheistic position in the 1932 debate.) In the review, Morrison lambasted the University of Chicago professor’s idolization of creativity, mythologizing of theology, celebration of free love, and general endeavor to “disclaim the Godhead of God while retaining the manhood of man.”95 If the review had not appeared right below an article in which a young veteran pleaded with qualified pastors to save his generation from fundamentalists, a reader might have concluded that Morrison had gone conservative.

Much more could be written about the complex interplay of theology and philosophy in Morrison’s life, and much has been written about the broader effects of Dewey’s ideas on American religion.96 For the purposes of this study, though, Morrison’s intellectual labors to combine these legacies matter less than his status as heir to both upwardly mobile Protestantism and fashionable pragmatism, and a favored heir to boot. However much he struggled to find his footing in these two

streams, he could not have attained the prominence he did without the ability to harness their combined energy.

Pierre Bourdieu called the sorts of resources Morrison had accumulated by the first decade of the twentieth century cultural capital. Though cultural capital is seldom accumulated completely apart from the monetary type, its currency consists not primarily of material objects but of “dispositions and competences.” These assets, including aesthetic tastes, linguistic patterns, and academic skills, are not innately valuable but gain worth by being difficult to acquire and therefore comparatively rare. The coveted dispositions and competences might or might not yield material benefits, but they reliably “yield a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them, and a profit in legitimacy, the profit par excellence, which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be.” Distinction and legitimacy, in turn, bestow authority. Possessors of cultural capital have confidence in their fitness to tell other people what to think and do, though, in democratic societies like that of the United States, they can exercise that power only “within very narrow limits and with a very high degree of euphemization.” This power is not the divine right of kings, but the deserved right of experts.

The lens of cultural capital causes certain elements to leap out of Morrison’s autobiography. A prime example is the assessment of himself at age 18, “I had not yet learned to read books.” The sentence is not factually true; he had been reading for

97 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 228.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
years by that age and would start college in the fall. Rather, the sentence disparages his ignorance at that point of how much he did not yet know. In his youth, he thought the Bible was the only book a preacher needed, and he read it literally, the same way his father had. He lacked the disposition to seek out scholarly interpretations of the Bible or the competence to incorporate insights from such books into his preaching.

Bourdieu, incidentally, addressed precisely this situation, explaining “the incessant revisions, reinterpretations and rediscoveries which the learned of all religions of the book perform on their canonical texts” as attempts to use “levels of ‘reading’ [to] designate hierarchies of readers.”

Morrison’s frequent name-dropping (Willett appears throughout the autobiography, while Morrison’s wife is named exactly once), appropriation of key terms from Dewey, and even his impulse to write an autobiography also serve to identify him as a conscious accumulator and spender of cultural capital.

Attention to cultural capital also facilitates a reinterpretation of the canonical story of the Century’s founding. To start with, emphasis in the oft-told tale on the $1,500 Morrison had to pull together to buy the magazine was, in some ways, a smokescreen. Having risen through the ranks of a socially climbing church, and having studied under America’s foremost philosopher at one of its most prestigious universities, Morrison had plenty of cultural capital with which to make the purchase. Money could be raised on this collateral.

Moreover, the drive to invest his cultural capital in a higher-yield venture is what attracted him to publishing in the first place. In the autobiography, he described

100 Bourdieu, 229.
the career shift from pastor to editor in terms of increased prestige. Monroe Street Church, to which he returned after his University of Chicago years, had declined in the interim as weak pastors had provided poor leadership and the neighborhood had been overwhelmed by “wave after wave” of Southern European immigrants. (This demographic shift surely contributed to Morrison’s lifelong antipathy toward Roman Catholics.) Regarding the church, he lamented, “Plainly, I had over-idealized its prospect for significant ministry, at least a ministry that I could make significant.”

On the heels of this discouraging realization came the invitation from the Century, which he called “a small but reputable paper” whose editors enjoyed “high respect” among the Disciples of Christ. Actually, he admitted a few pages later, two decades of financial woes had left the paper “only a shred of good reputation, and this shred was the personal prestige of Dr. Willett.” Willett, though never the editor, had lent his name and talents to the publication since its days as the Oracle, and he promised continued use of his name (along with minimal financial assistance) if his protégé would accept the editorship. Given the choice between a fading congregation and a magazine with nowhere to go but up, Morrison took the gamble.

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101 Autobiography, k1.
102 Ibid., k3.
2. Denominational Roots

A magazine industry observer wrote in 2002 that half of all new magazines fail before their first anniversary, and only one in ten is still in publication a decade later.¹ The *Century* could easily have succumbed to this fate. The magazine Charles Clayton Morrison rescued from the sheriff’s sale in 1908 reported little on the positive side of the ledger. It reached just 600 subscribers, who paid an annual subscription rate of $2.00 (up from $1.50 at the beginning of the year).² Never profitable, it had run through five editors and several financial backers in the previous dozen years, making three trips through bankruptcy.³ “Every Disciples business man of resources in Chicago had put up money again and again to save the paper,” Morrison recalled in his autobiography. “I could expect no help from these sources, which had gone, if not dry, at least sour.”⁴ A February 20, 1908, editorial acknowledged that the magazine had been forced to vacate its offices at 358 Dearborn Street as it passed through “very deep waters.” The same editorial begged for “at least two more strong men on the staff of the *Christian Century*, one on the editorial side and one in the business management. … We need a Paul and Barnabas, loyal to the deep things of God and able to do heroic service for the King.”⁵ In the next issue, “A

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² Charles Clayton Morrison, “The First Twenty Years,” *CC* (Oct. 11, 1928), 1220-1222. Morrison wrote in his *Autobiography*, page k3, that he inherited only 300 subscribers, but this was presumably an error. All of his published recollections of the magazine’s early years mention 600 subscribers.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ “Glad Tidings,” *CC* (Feb. 20, 1908), 115.
Word to Our Readers” apologized for erratic publication over the previous two months and promised to do better under the new business manager’s regime.⁶

Upon acquiring the magazine, Morrison’s first impulse was to change its name. This move, he reflected in the autobiography, would signify a rupture with the past, allow him to begin with Volume I, Number 1 on the front page, and free him from the grandiose implications of the title *The Christian Century*. Several of the magazine’s friends already disdained the moniker; one advised Morrison, “You might as well kill a dog as give it a bad name.”⁷ Regardless, Morrison had helped select the name in 1900, and he still liked it. More important, he did not wish to break completely with the magazine’s past, particularly its denominational character. He continued to date publication from the 1884 founding of *The Christian Oracle* and, for his first decade as editor, “had no other thought or ambition than to keep *The Century* within the Disciples denomination, both as to editorial outlook and constituency.”⁸ The *Century* had no legal ties to the Disciples (or any other organization), for Morrison had bought it outright, but for several years it stayed firmly within the Disciples family.

Though the *Century*’s Disciples roots had become nearly invisible by the middle of the twentieth century, this denominational background powerfully shaped the magazine’s editorial approach and sense of its place in public discourse. To use Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, the first field in which the *Century* competed was the

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⁶ “A Word to Our Readers,” CC (Feb. 27, 1908), 131.
⁷ Autobiography, k3.
⁸ Ibid., k4.
field of Disciples journals. The rhetorical patterns on which so many readers of the *Century* remarked over the years—the forceful prose, the grand pronouncements, the curious mixture of ecumenism and provincialism—developed as the magazine sought to distinguish itself from its competitors within the denomination and to contend for the soul of the Disciples movement. Rhetorical properties, Bourdieu observed, “like all properties of distinction, exist only in and through the relationship, in and through difference” in each cultural field. In other words, the *Century* did not project the voices of Morrison and his early collaborators into a void, but rather into a crowded auditorium, where echoes of other voices affected the ways statements had to be crafted in order to be heard.

A leading liberal, independent journal could have originated elsewhere in the matrix of the eventual Protestant mainline, but it would have manifested a quite different personality. The *Century’s* character evolved as the magazine and its editor won and lost specific denominational battles, notably those centered on the 1909 Disciples centennial and on questions of baptism and church membership, and as the magazine struggled to remain financially viable within the Disciples constituency. Eventually, a variety of factors combined to push and pull the *Century* out of its original field and into the larger fields of religious periodicals and elite opinion journals.

This chapter locates the *Century* within the history of religious periodical publishing and demonstrates how early denominational sparring conditioned the

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10 Ibid., 227.
magazine to survive in a volatile market. First, an examination of broad trends highlights the opportunities and constraints present in the publishing industry before Morrison’s entry. Next, a sketch of Disciples publishing emphasizes traits peculiar to that field, including acute controversialism, ad hoc financial support, and a tradition of “editor-bishops.” Finally, close readings of two major debates illustrate what was at stake for Morrison and the Century as they neared the outer boundaries of Discipledom. Morrison’s cultural capital could only bring the magazine so far. The Disciples movement could incubate Morrison’s vision for only so long. The mission and nature of the Century required that Morrison cultivate support from a very particular, ultimately nondenominational, audience. This process was neither easy nor straightforward.

2.1 The backdrop of religious magazines

Religious magazine publishing in America predated the republic. The Christian History, an eight-page periodical launched in Boston in 1743 to publicize accounts of the First Great Awakening, was the first magazine in American history to survive beyond a few issues (though it ceased publication in 1744). Between 1730 and 1830, some 590 religious periodicals circulated, though none enjoyed wide circulation until the end of this period. Publishing was almost entirely regional in this era, and about three-fourths of the periodicals folded before they had been in print for five years. Toward the early nineteenth century, longevity, publication frequency, and readership increased dramatically as religious publishing remained at the forefront of

the industry. Two New York religious titles, a Methodist weekly and an interdenominational monthly, claimed circulations greater than 20,000 in 1830, which made them the most widely read periodicals in the world. No secular American magazine at that time reached more than 4,500 readers.¹²

Gaylord P. Albaugh, author of the most extensive study of religious periodicals before 1830, linked their proliferation to the rise of denominationalism.¹³

Prior to 1800, almost no periodicals declared affiliation with a specific church, but by 1830, 131 of 193 religious publications in print attached themselves to a denomination. Eight church families claimed the allegiance of at least five magazines each in 1830: Presbyterian and Reformed (31), Baptist (18), Congregational (13), Universalist (12), Protestant Episcopal (10), Methodist (9), Roman Catholic (9), and Disciples of Christ (7). Smaller denominations and dissidents from the larger ones published their own titles as well. The balance of the era’s religious publications mainly promoted benevolent causes including Christian education, temperance, anti-slavery, and other reforms. Like denominations, though, these causes also found themselves under attack in print. Staid denominations and genteel crusades might have enjoyed certain advantages in the press, but as Nathan O. Hatch noted, the climate of the early nineteenth century “favored religious insurgents willing to

¹³ Ibid., xvii-xx.
employ fresh strategies to capture public attention. “14 Editorial pages enabled stump speakers to cast their voices even farther.

From the middle of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth, American publishing saw decentralizing and centralizing trends. On the side of decentralization, advances in printing technology—often spurred by colossal efforts to distribute the Bible and other Christian literature—made it ever easier for small shops to mass-produce texts. 15 Literacy and a culture of reading for enjoyment also advanced with the lower and middle classes’ pursuit of gentility. 16 The American population continued to grow and congregate in towns and cities, creating accessible audiences. These developments prompted a rise in the number of daily newspapers (which peaked at 2,600 in 1909) and other periodicals of varied type, quality, and circulation. 17 Nearly 11,000 magazine titles were published between 1885 and 1905 alone. 18 All of these developments increased the range of perspectives in print but diminished the impact of any one.

Working in the direction of centralization, the invention of the telegraph in the 1830s facilitated wide and rapid sharing of information. In 1846, two years after Samuel Morse’s famous telegraphed message, “What hath God wrought,” a consortium of New York newspapers formed the Associated Press to streamline the collection and distribution of news. Telegraphy enabled the entire nation to receive

16 Ibid., 18.
prompt word about the Civil War, a sectional conflict that created national
consciousness.19 Soon after the war, the completion of the transcontinental railroad in
1869 began to make national distribution of goods possible, just as industrialized
production sent the number and variety of goods soaring. Abundant goods and wide
distribution created a need for advertising, which in turn spurred more interest in
purchasing goods. Advertising dollars boosted periodicals, especially those with the
means to invest in the latest technology for reproducing attractive images. And so,
even as minor titles multiplied, in 1903 Ladies’ Home Journal became the first
American magazine to reach one million readers nationwide.20

Religious journalism in the later nineteenth century followed some general
publishing trends but also developed its own trajectories. Religious magazines grew
in number and audience along with the rest of the industry, with the result that some
650 religious titles circulated in 1885.21 These periodicals had weekly, monthly, or
even less frequent distribution, however, so as news coverage became a daily
concern, many responded by dropping or significantly scaling back news coverage.
Most religious periodicals also lacked the printing technology or wide audience to
attract big advertising dollars, so they eventually fell behind in ad revenue as well.
Even so, as late as the 1890s, the advertising authority Printer’s Ink reported, “Of all
the class publications, those devoted to religion are regarded with the most favor by
general advertisers and used more largely than any others. … It is said that they are
more thoroughly read, and each copy has a larger number of readers than most

19 See, for example, Harry S. Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation (New York: Viking Press, 2006).
20 Tebbel and Zuckerman, 68.
secular papers.” The sequestering of religious journalism into a niche, supported by niche advertising, did not begin until the early twentieth century.

Trends within American Christianity affected religious journalism at least as much as these economic shifts. For example, the Sunday school movement of the later nineteenth century generated an insatiable need for teaching materials, which was addressed by widely circulated titles like *The Sunday School Times* and numerous denominational quarterlies. Media historian Frank Luther Mott estimated that in 1885, Sunday school papers accounted for half the total circulation of religious periodicals. In this way, religious journalism did not merely respond to large cultural and technological developments. Churches and other religious organizations created both markets and products to serve those markets.

Outside educational publishing, the landscape of religious periodicals was complicated by the very different media strategies adopted by various denominations. Roman Catholics and Methodists made expansive use of print, publishing 74 and 73 titles, respectively, in 1885. Most of the Roman Catholic magazines represented sectors within that large and internally diverse body, and new immigrant groups were especially likely to utilize print to preserve community and identity. Reaching a more culturally homogeneous but geographically diffuse readership, the Methodists struck a balance between centralization and decentralization by publishing dozens of regional periodicals, usually called *Christian Advocate*, featuring a mixture of shared and unique content. Baptists launched even more magazines than the Roman

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22 *Printer’s Ink* (Jan. 13, 1892), 55, quoted in Mott, 290.
23 Mott, 67.
24 Ibid., 67.
Catholics or Methodists, but because these ventures tended to be short-lived, the
Baptists never led with titles in print at any given time. Presbyterians,
Congregationalists, and Episcopalians produced far fewer magazines, but these were
well financed and produced in leading cities like New York and Chicago, so they
were especially likely to be read by powerbrokers and quoted in other media outlets.

A few periodicals stood out from this crowd. One non-denominational
magazine, Henry Ward Beecher’s *Christian Union*, claimed the distinction of being
the most widely circulated religious title of the late nineteenth century. It topped
100,000 readers for a few years in the 1870s but dropped back around 20,000 by
1885. Toward the other end of the circulation spectrum lay scholarly religious
journals, which almost never amassed more than a few thousand readers but exerted
significant influence within religious institutions. Mott assessed the overall strength
of religious periodicals at the end of the nineteenth century by writing, “Though in
both aggregate number and total circulation they fell far below the secular newspaper
press, they did not, as a rule, fall below it in ability; and they possessed a formidable
power.”

Amid all of these developments, periodical classifications frequently blurred.
For example, the distinction between religious and secular or mainstream publishing
was less clear in the nineteenth century than it would become. According to historian
Charles H. Lippy, “In a secular age, it is difficult to recall that printed sermons once
represented some of the most popular leisure reading in literate circles and that minor
points of theology once generated as heated debates as [did] topics such as the nuclear

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 67.
arms race and civil rights in the later twentieth century.” Mott agreed, pointing out that when hell suddenly became a hot topic in the 1870s, perhaps as a result of the revival preaching of D.L. Moody, even *The Nation* commented on it.

Denominational boundaries could be porous as well. Some small religious magazines simply could not afford to be choosy about the church affiliations of potential subscribers, while other religious titles reached beyond their home constituencies with missionary purpose. For example, when Congregationalists founded the *Independent* in 1848, its intended audience consisted of Congregationalists who lived outside the church’s home base in New England. The magazine soon built an even broader audience, in part through its publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as abolitionist fervor ran high in the 1850s.

Finally, popular and scholarly religious periodicals only slowly differentiated themselves over the course of the nineteenth century, and even as this separation became wider, a few titles endeavored to bridge the gap. Future University of Chicago president William Rainey Harper led the way here, founding the *Hebrew Student* (later the *Biblical World*) in 1882 to share scholarly knowledge with a wide audience.

Cognizant of these complexities, at the end of the nineteenth century Mott nonetheless found it possible to identify 13 types of religious periodicals. The first

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26 Lippy, xi.
27 Mott, 85.
28 Lippy, xiii.
five gave a good sense of the context in which Disciples publishing generally, and the

*Christian Oracle/Christian Century* specifically, operated:

1. magazines of comment and literature with church backgrounds, such as the *Independent* and *Outlook*;

2. journals of liberal variety, but still denominational, such as the *Churchman* and *Christian Register*;

3. well-edited denominational spokesmen, such as the *Congregationalist* and *Christian Advocate*;

4. the hundreds of regional Protestant denominational journals, which attempted with indifferent success to combine, as the *Andover Review* put it, prophetic utterance with news and gossip;

5. the many interdenominational journals, of which the *Christian Herald* was foremost.\(^{29}\)

Where a magazine located itself on this landscape determined its competition. The *Oracle/Century* first competed among regional denominational journals. Morrison soon pressed into the realm of liberal, national, denominational magazines and then, in 1917, interdenominational magazines, with aspirations toward reaching an even broader audience. The remainder of this chapter will address only the first three fields, all categories within religious publishing. Morrison’s foray into social commentary occupies chapter three.

### 2.2 Editor-bishops

Owing to its primitivist and Restorationist sensibilities, the Disciples movement kept hierarchical oversight and church institutions to a minimum. Nonetheless, like any movement of its size and scope, it developed centers of gravity.

\(^{29}\) Mott, 289-290.
At the turn of the century, Disciples leaders, known internally as “the brotherhood,” included heads of its schools and seminaries, biblical scholars, and pastors of its larger churches. A network of independent denominational periodicals linked the academic and parish power centers and connected leaders and laity. The importance of these periodicals can hardly be overstated. Disciples historian David Edwin Harrell, Jr. noted, “The simplest, and probably the best, way to trace the course of Disciples history is to study the editors and periodicals of the church.” These periodicals spoke neither to nor for the entire Disciples constituency, of course, but neither did the hierarchs and councils of other denominations. Rather, the periodicals provided a venue for the brotherhood to carry on boisterous denominational meetings, in public, all the time.

Periodicals performed such a vital function for the movement that a common Disciples saying declared, “We don’t have bishops. We have editors.” The editors of these periodicals, like bishops in other traditions, set the theological climate, taught doctrine, punished wayward sheep, and exhorted members to collective action. Disciples who would have shrieked at the imposition of a president or presbytery accepted this form of direction. An unsigned editorial in the Century in 1928 wryly observed, “the domination of a newspaper [was] always less feared by liberty-loving Disciples than any other form of social control.” That the Century was, by 1928,

31 Charles Clayton Morrison assigned Disciples papers a tamer role, writing, “They provided a kind of parliament for the discussion of questions of interest to the denomination.” Autobiography, p.1.
well on its way to becoming one of the dominant Christian papers in the country only
depens the irony of this observation.

Disciples periodicals did not perfectly fit Mott’s categories. They were
independent in that they were not owned or funded by the church, and none of them
claimed to be the official voice of the church. They were not, in other words, “house
organs.” They are best understood as denominational, however, because their editors
and contributors belonged to the brotherhood, most of their pages were filled with
Disciples news, and they advertised and promoted Disciples institutions and causes.
As to function, sometimes they carried the weight of a theological review, which the
movement lacked, and sometimes they sounded more like the megaphones of
religious action groups, especially in times of intense conflict within the brotherhood.
And at any moment, they might strike a posture of prophetic witness to all
Christians—a rhetorical move in the repertoire of many American churches, and one
particularly consonant with the aims of the Restorationists.

The first and most imposing portrait in a gallery of Disciples editor-bishops
would depict Alexander Campbell, who re-founded the monthly magazine he had
launched in 1823, the Christian Baptist, as the Millennial Harbinger in 1830. The
first issue began with a prospectus:

This work shall be devoted to the destruction of Sectarianism, Infidelity, and
Antichristian doctrine and practice. It shall have for its object the
developement, and introduction of that political and religious order of society
called THE MILLENNIUM, which will be the consummation of that ultimate
amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures.\footnote{\textit{"Prospectus,"} \textit{The Millennial Harbinger} (Jan. 4, 1830), 1.}

\footnotetext{33}
The Harbinger hastened the millennium with 48 monthly pages (printed in “beautiful new type” on “super-royal paper”) of theological pugilism, which promised to be well worth the price of $2.50 per year, or $2.00 if paid early. Most of the articles read like debates, often framed as exchanges of open letters with Baptist and Presbyterian ministers, or with publications from both of those denominations, as far west of Campbell’s western Virginia base as Kentucky and as far north as Vermont.

In the inaugural issue, for example, Campbell took on “the Rev. A. Converse of the Paidobaptist Army, and the Rev. A.W. Clopton of the Baptist Army,” who had quarreled with Campbell’s Christian Baptist in the pages of other papers. Only a few lines of the Converse and Clopton critiques filtered into the Harbinger, but Campbell’s readers got an eyeful of his response:

Now I say to one and all of these men, Point out one error in the Christian Baptist, one ruinous doctrine, except to the would-be-priests, and I will thank you. I challenge you to the conflict for the faith once delivered to the saints. You can, I doubt not, excel me in all the arts of calumny and in all the logic of the vantage ground; but take some one topic; discuss it. My pages are open to you.

Clopton rose to the challenge. Several succeeding issues of the Harbinger featured lengthy exchanges in which he submitted doctrinal “remarks” and Campbell responded point-for-point with “remarks on remarks.” To distinguish the sides of the exchanges, and to put a thumb on one side of the scale, Campbell printed his interlocutor’s text in a smaller point size than his own.

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34 Ibid., 2.
35 Albaugh, 610-611.
37 See, for example, The Millennial Harbinger (Apr. 5, 1830), 159-170.
Campbell also competed—and sometimes agreed—with other Restorationist periodicals, including Barton Stone’s *Christian Messenger* and Walter Scott’s *Evangelist*. All three of these journals supported the Stone-Campbell merger in the early 1830s. Disciples historians Winfred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot considered this support crucial to the union’s success. Following the merger, members of the united movement continued to raise questions in these journals about matters like the proper status of clergy and the best name for the church: Disciples, Reformers, or Christians? Aside from the travels of movement leaders, the periodicals constituted the only connective tissue in the large, loose body through the early years.

*The Millennial Harbinger* broadcast Campbell’s authority until his death in 1866, but then the top echelon of Disciples publishing became crowded. The *American Christian Review*, edited by Benjamin Franklin (a man, according to Harrell, “conservative in temperament and rustic in style”), stood as a self-proclaimed bastion of “old-fogeyism” and “anti-progressionism” from its founding in 1856 into

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the 1880s, when its status waned. Daniel Sommer, the preacher who railed against liberals’ “So-Called Christian Church” at Sand Creek, Illinois, in 1889, purchased the Review in 1887 and continued its conservative advocacy under different titles, but the Disciples movement largely passed by him and his magazine on its way to respectability.

To counter the Review’s conservatism, a group of moderate and liberal Disciples launched the Christian Standard in 1866. Isaac Errett, deemed by Harrell “a man of gentility and ability,” edited this journal until his death in 1888. The Standard advanced a centrist agenda that was amenable to many—though by no means all—members of the brotherhood and palatable to moderate and liberal Christians outside the Disciples movement. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as the Review’s star faded, the Standard’s primary competition for prestige became the Christian-Evangelist, created from a merger in 1882 and edited by James H. Garrison. Younger and somewhat more liberal than Errett, Garrison nonetheless worked closely with the widely respected editor, and during Errett’s lifetime their two periodicals adopted similar positions.40

Countless smaller magazines nipped at the heels of these giants. (The movement had spawned some 1,500 periodicals by the 1970s, most of them short-lived and quickly forgotten.) At the end of the nineteenth century, these minor players ranged in editorial outlook from southern titles like the *Gospel Advocate* (Nashville) and the *Firm Foundation* (Austin) on the right to *The Christian Oracle* on the left. In intra-Disciples discussions, periodical affiliation served as shorthand for theological and social position, as in this 1883 *American Christian Review* assessment of two other conservative titles: “The *Times* says the *Guide* is drifting toward the *Review*. You are mistaken, sir. The *Guide*, or the *Allen* part of it, like the *Review*, stands upon apostolic ground. Take *Allen* out of the *Guide*, and, like the *Times*, it would watch wistfully the nod of the *Errett Standard*.” In this critique, the editor of the *Review* assumed that his readers knew quite a bit about all of these magazines and their editors or major contributors, whether they actually read them or merely gained

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41 Short, 295.
a sense of them from references in places like the *Review*. The magazines stood as landmarks by which Disciples oriented themselves.

Because most Disciples titles, like most magazines in this era, had only limited distribution, readers never had the option of choosing their favorite from the entire range of periodicals. Nonetheless, the magazines regarded each other sometimes as competitors for subscribers and consistently as competitors for the heart and soul of the movement. The fights could cause the editors to become, in the hallowed tradition of Alexander Campbell, rhetorically fierce. All of these patterns within the field of Disciples publishing were well established by the time Charles Clayton Morrison entered the ring.

### 2.3 Establishing a foothold

In the early twentieth century, as in the late nineteenth, the *Christian Standard* of Cincinnati and the *Christian-Evangelist* of St. Louis dominated the landscape of Disciples publishing. The *Standard*, however, grew much more conservative after Errett’s death. Beginning in 1892 it carried a column by Dr. J.W. McGarvey, who held a chair in biblical studies at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky. McGarvey had traveled to the Holy Land to find tangible support for literal readings of the Bible, and he used his academic position and periodical platform to attack biblical higher criticism. Some contemporaries attributed McGarvey’s refusal to listen to higher critics to his age (he was born in 1829) and deafness, but many Disciples, especially in the movement’s southern regions, shared his suspicions.  

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decade of the century, the Standard enjoyed a readership of 40,000 and carried advertisements for such high-profile products as The Uniform Soda Cracker and Prudential Insurance, as well as promotions for Disciples educational institutions as varied in geography and reputation as Transylvania University in Kentucky, Christian University (now Culver-Stockton College) in Canton, Missouri, and Berkeley Bible Seminary in California. The sometimes intransigent spirit with which the magazine upheld its motto, “Devoted to the Restoration of Primitive Christianity: Its Doctrine, Its Ordinances and Its Fruits,” hardly relegated it to the fringe of the movement.

Figure 2.3: Dr. J.W. McGarvey.

Though the Christian-Evangelist of this era looked quite a bit like the Standard, with a similar trim size, paper stock, and a cover image or text (Standard covers always featured images) flanked by similar columnar torches, the magazine’s mottoes embodied a different spirit. The cover proclaimed it simply “A Weekly Religious Newspaper,” and the inside cover added, “In Faith, Unity, in Opinion and

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Methods, Liberty, in All Things, Charity.” The *Christian-Evangelist* carried less biblical studies content than the *Standard*, and what it did carry advocated a moderate or liberal position. University of Chicago professor Herbert Willett frequently contributed, at editor J.H. Garrison’s request. But rather than vaulting the *Christian-Evangelist* ahead of the *Standard*, this moderate-to-liberal outlook apparently put the magazine at a competitive disadvantage. It had only 27,500 subscribers in 1910, and it ran substantially fewer advertisements for colleges or national products. Whereas the *Standard* could sell its premium back cover space to Prudential, the *Christian-Evangelist* made do with interior partial-page ads for Glenn’s Sulpher Soap and A Sarsparilla Without Alcohol.

*The Christian Century* could not, initially, hope to challenge these two pillars of Discipledom. A crumbling business ledger yields a few clues about the magazine’s status before Morrison’s purchase.49 The pages for January 1906, one of the last months for which early records survive, listed 202 amounts in the column “Chr. Century,” mostly $1.00 or $1.50, which would represent discounted and full-price subscriptions. Each amount was listed with the city and state from which it was received. Ninety-two, or nearly half, of the addresses were in Illinois, and 21 of those were in Chicago (sometimes listed simply as “city”). The next state by representation was Iowa, with 28 entries, followed by Nebraska (12), California (9), Kentucky (8), and Missouri (7). The list was overwhelmingly Midwestern, centered north of the

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46 Blakemore, 22.
47 Ayer, 1091.
48 These ads appeared in the June 17, 1909, issue of the *Christian-Evangelist*.
49 This ledger, along with a few others from before Morrison’s purchase of the magazine, resides in the archives at Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago.
Disciples’ geographic heart.50 Morrison likely inherited a subscriber base with similar distribution in 1908.

The contents of the magazine in 1908 indicated an audience composed mainly of clergy. Most of the lead editorials addressed theology or church business, with the possible union of Disciples and Baptist churches and various “heresy hunting” campaigns against prominent liberal ministers garnering significant attention.51 Standing columns included teaching aids for leading “The Sunday School Lesson,” “The Prayer Meeting,” and “Christian Endeavor” (a service for youth), plus newsy items headed “With the Workers: Doings of Preachers, Teachers, Thinkers and Givers” and “From Our Growing Churches.” These news columns filled one-third to one-half of the total pages in each issue, though their editorial content was much shorter, for the bulk of the advertisements appeared in this section as well. The ads promoted books on theology and biblical studies, “self-pronouncing” pocket commentaries, teaching resources, Sunday school banners, four brands of bells, hymnals, and Holy Land cruises.52 The Century’s masthead proclaimed it “A Clean Family Newspaper of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” but it is hard to imagine many families settling down together to read of baptismal controversies or

50 Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker wrote in an official history of the Disciples, “The heart of their numerical and financial strength lies in the Midwest and the Southwest. Slightly more than one-third of all Disciples in the United States and Canada can be found in Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, and Texas. Another third of the participating membership is located in the six states of California, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, and Oklahoma.” McAllister and Tucker, Journey in Faith (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1975), 20.
52 Ads for all of these products appeared in the January 2, 1908, issue of the Century.
browse for church bells. The magazine’s lay readership stood at just 25 percent in 1947, and that percentage was probably lower in 1908.\(^\text{53}\)

Morrison’s options for growing circulation were limited, in part by his own limited goals. The potential audience for a Disciples publication consisted almost entirely of church members. The denomination was not a small field—it had well over 1 million members by the beginning of the twentieth century—but the *Christian Standard* and the *Christian-Evangelist* had already established their places of prominence. Morrison’s strongest support within the denomination came from the Campbell Institute, which in 1908 counted only 115 members (Morrison among them) and had already come under attack by the *Standard* for what that magazine deemed elitist and divisive liberal leanings.\(^\text{54}\) Granted, the Campbell Institute included some of the most prominent and best-connected members of the Disciples brotherhood, but it hardly constituted a broad enough base on which to build a robust readership. Where to find more subscribers?

Representing a vocal minority viewpoint within the denomination, and lacking funds or vision for a large-scale circulation campaign, the *Century* relied on word-of-mouth marketing. In February 1908, the magazine offered every subscriber who paid by March 15 a one-year renewal and a free gift subscription for any friend who did not already take the paper.\(^\text{55}\) Morrison devoted one of the first covers after his purchase of the magazine, the cover of the October 24 issue, to “A Special

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\(^{55}\) “Glad Tidings,” CC (Feb. 20, 1908), 115.
Subscription Offer” that promised ten weeks free and implored, “If you believe in the
Christian Century and wish to see its ideals prevail, get your friends to subscribe. The paper will grow better and better.”56 An inside page of that issue interspersed promotional hints with news bits from Chicago, noting, “One good Chicago Disciple, a member of the Englewood Church, sent a subscription last week for a friend in Iowa. That helps as much as if the paper remained in Chicago.”57 The December 12 issue suggested that a subscription would make a fine “Christmas Present for the Brotherhood.”58

Like many publications before and since, the Century got a big circulation boost from participating in a controversy. In 1908, preparations began for the Disciples’ centennial, to be celebrated the following fall in Pittsburgh. The event commemorated Thomas Campbell’s 1809 Declaration and Address. Herbert Willett, whose name appeared with Morrison’s on the Century masthead, reportedly was invited to give a plenary address. The invitation roiled the denomination, or at least its more conservative elements, because Willett was a known modernist who applied historical criticism to biblical texts and even questioned some miracles. The Christian Standard expressed outrage. The Century was outraged right back. An unsigned editorial, published October 1, 1908, and almost certainly written by Morrison, accused the Standard of assailing Willett for selfish gain.

It would not do for the Standard to let the brethren gather in convention with undistracted minds to sing and thank God together for his mighty blessings on the great cause he has committed to our hands. It would not do to let the councilors of the church sit down together in quiet confidence and plan greater

56 Cover, CC (Oct. 24, 1908).
58 “A Christmas Present for the Brotherhood,” CC (Dec. 12, 1908), 760.
conquests for the future. No! The Standard must be kept in the limelight. Its pages must be kept lurid with hate and partisanship. It will not be enough to ignore Willett, “we must repudiate him,” their editor says. That sounds sensational. Everybody wants to read the next issue to see the “repudiation” actually executed.  

The Christian-Evangelist capitalized on the Willett controversy as well. It mailed a promotional circular that called its own editor, J.H. Garrison, “A Defender of the Faith” for challenging Willett’s views on miracles. Morrison held his fire against the Christian-Evangelist, for he was fairly sure that Garrison had not been personally involved in creating the circular, but he did request an apology. “We are deeply in earnest,” he wrote, “in calling attention to the ethical point involved in the use of another man’s personality as a whipping boy for advertising purposes.”  

Defending another man’s personality for advertising purposes was, apparently, a completely different matter in Morrison’s mind.  

The Century mounted a two-pronged, editorial and promotional response to the attacks on Willett. Editorially, in addition to excoriating the Standard and chastising the Christian-Evangelist, the paper ran a four-part series on Willett’s beliefs, beginning with “My Confession of Faith,” the lead editorial in the October 31 issue. The marketing response began in the same issue. That week’s cover introduced the Willett series and offered a six-month subscription for the introductory price of 50 cents, or a free six-month subscription “with a club of five.” The promotional copy

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59 “Our Periodic Disturbance,” CC (Oct. 1, 1908), 527.  
60 “Deceptive Advertising,” CC (Oct. 24, 1908), 592-593. As reported in the Century on November 7, 1908, Garrison disavowed any knowledge of the advertising circular, though he did not disavow his editorial criticism of Willett’s views on miracles. See “Dr. Garrison’s Disavowal,” CC (Nov. 7, 1908), 641.
concluded, “This is an opportunity for our readers to enlarge our family circle and to advance the ideals for which our paper stands.”

Soon afterward, Morrison set his sights on a much larger circle. A bold-print editorial in the December 5 issue, titled “To All Friends of the Truth,” asked subscribers to fund a special mailing of the magazine to all Disciples ministers. “There are about five thousand of them who do not see the *Century,*” the editorial claimed. “They have no other source of information concerning the teachings of Professor Willett than the *Christian Standard.* The minds of multitudes have been poisoned and corrupted by the wanton misrepresentations of that paper.” Postal regulations prevented the *Century* from sending out so many sample copies on its own, and the cost was prohibitive as well; the editorial cited a figure of $100 to send the magazine to 1,000 preachers for six weeks. The plea apparently raised only enough money to fund one week of free delivery to the entire brotherhood, but, for that week at least, the magazine increased its circulation eightfold.

Friends of the magazine continued to serve as its marketing department for the next few years. Starting in 1909, these loyal readers could get paid for their work. In the first issue of the year, under the heading “Now Is the Nick o’ Time,” the editors optimistically declared the Willett controversy over—his invitation to speak at the centennial stood—and sought to channel readership-building energies in new directions. They promised all things to all potential subscribers.

[O]ur purpose will be to produce a paper that will be an assistant pastor to every preacher into whose congregation it goes.

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61 Cover, CC (Oct. 31, 1908), 613.
62 “To All Friends of the Truth,” CC (Dec. 5, 1908), 755.
We mean to make our pages constructive and inspirational. We shall not fear to lead our readers into new truth as God gives us to see the truth, but our treatment will be irenic, not controversial.

We aspire to be a layman’s paper—as well as a preacher’s paper. Our pages will discuss life’s big problems in which all earnest men and women are interested.

We shall have constantly before us the purpose of building up the spiritual life of our readers—in intelligence, in breadth of vision, in zeal. Every member of the *Christian Century* family should be a better worker in the church and a better citizen of his community as a result of his habitual reading of our pages.

To share these benefits as widely as possible, the editors set a goal of doubling circulation in the denomination’s hundredth year. Any reader who contributed to this goal by securing ten new subscriptions would be eligible for a “cash commission.” No amount was disclosed, but potential agents were invited to write for terms.\(^{64}\) In late summer, the call for “a representative of *The Christian Century* in every church in the land” offered the perk of a round-trip train ticket to Pittsburgh.\(^{65}\) A full-page house ad later that year promised, “Laymen and Energetic Women can make from $25 to $100 in 60 days by putting intelligence and vigor into the work we will outline for them.” In addition to monetary reward, agents were assured, “Your success strengthens the church as much as a Revival.”\(^{66}\) Even if business records from this period could be located, progress on these goals would be difficult to measure. Whatever the *Century*’s readers contributed to God’s kingdom, though, they did not collect enough subscriptions to put the magazine on solid footing.

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\(^{65}\) “We Want a Representative,” CC (Aug. 12, 1909), 822.

\(^{66}\) Advertisement, “Of Interest to Every Reader,” CC (Nov. 25, 1909), 1160.
Throughout the first ten years of Morrison’s editorship, the Century required frequent financial intervention. “In 1909 our affairs had reached one of these crises—many times to be repeated—when its continued publication depended on an immediate payment to the printer of a substantial sum on our delinquent account,” Morrison recalled in his autobiography. The editor turned to the Campbell Institute for help.

The annual meeting of the Campbell Institute was then in session with about forty members present. I frankly informed one of the members of the sword of Damocles that hung over our head. He laid our situation before the group and asked for money. It came in amounts ranging from five and ten to a hundred dollars. These ministers and college professors, all but two or three on small salaries, produced nearly a thousand dollars to meet our emergency.

Though generous, this collection kept the creditors at bay for only a short time. Morrison subsequently embarked on a “long one-man campaign to finance The Christian Century,” recruiting journalist and fellow Campbell Institute member Orvis F. Jordan to run editorial operations while Morrison canvassed the upper Midwest for “freewill offerings.” This effort put significant strain on Morrison and the magazine, but it enabled the operation to carry on while also gaining subscribers and contributors. By fall 1909 the Century had increased its advertising pages and begun carrying full-page advertisements for such large secular firms as Aetna Insurance Company and the Pennsylvania Short Line railroad. These advertisements represented a significant jump in both income and prestige from the January 2, 1909, issue, which ran less than one total ad page and featured shills for household

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67 Autobiography, o3.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., o3-o4.
70 Ibid. o4.
71 Both of these ads appeared in the October 14, 1909, issue, on pages 1007 and 1027.
lubricant, free digestive tablets, and “A new collection of the brightest and prettiest
Sunday-school songs you ever heard.”

The magazine built on its forward momentum with a big publicity push at the
Disciples Centennial in October 1909. The October 14 issue, extra copies of which
were likely available for distribution at the convention, extolled the benefits of
subscribing to the Century, “A Progressive Religious Weekly For Christian Homes”
that promised to be “Thoroughly Up-to-Date,” “Devoted to Christian Union,” staffed
by “the best equipped and most brilliant writers among the Disciples,” and “An
Inspiration in the Home.” Adding to these appeals, the issue’s editorial articulated
the magazine’s position within the movement. As befitting the occasion, Morrison
and Willett paid fealty to the “Fathers,” a designation applied to Alexander and
Thomas Campbell, Walter Scott, and Barton Stone. The editors clarified, however,
“We are not worshipers of the Fathers.” The significance of these founders to
Morrison and Willett lay first in their vision of “the union of Christendom” and a
related hostility toward sects, denominations, and all of the “religious machinery”
they entailed. Beyond this, Morrison and Willett adopted from the Fathers only what
the editors deemed a remarkable flexibility. They wrote, “The Christian Century
believes that the Fathers made no mistake in the essential elements of their message;
but it also believes that as they adjusted themselves admirably to the changing events

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72 CC (Jan. 2, 1909), 849, 851.
and forces of their day, so must the people who in the providence of God have been raised up to continue their work, meet the needs of the new times as they come.”

Loyalty to the true Disciples tradition, the editors argued, did not mean holding the same opinions as the Fathers. Rather, “It will include loyalty to the Word of God, such loyalty as makes diligent use of every help which can throw light upon that wonderful revelation of divine purpose and activity, and then such obedience to its message as shall transform mind and heart into likeness to Christ.” In other words, Morrison and Willett cast the Fathers as moderns who would surely have preached the insights of biblical higher criticism and the Social Gospel had they lived later. A centennial looking backward to the era of the founders would be disastrous. A centennial looking forward to the “appropriate embodiment” of the founders’ ideals, the magazine hoped, was “the high purpose of an increasing number of Disciples.”

However many Disciples subscribed to this “high purpose,” an increasing number of them did subscribe to the Century. Under the heading “A Word to Our Friends,” an item in the November 11, 1909, issue exulted,

The work you did for the Christian Century at Pittsburgh has yielded results beyond our plans. We will be unable, we regret to say, to send the first two issues following the convention to more than half of the new subscribers, so much larger is the list than our calculations. A great body of sentiment is organizing itself in behalf of the Christian Century as an exponent of those ideals for which the Disciples must strive in the new century. Our true friends are not content to merely stand by and watch and applaud but they want to help.

The bottom half of this page featured a facsimile of a note sent by a Denver pastor to nearly 200 members of his congregation, urging them to take the Century. The next

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74 “The Christian Century and the Centennial,” CC (Oct. 14, 1909), 1008. The editorial was unsigned, but Morrison’s and Willett’s names appeared above the headline.
75 “A Word to Our Friends,” CC (Nov. 11, 1909), 1112.
week’s issue proclaimed “Every Reader a Stockholder” and set forth the attendant dividends and responsibilities. Dividends included “the benefits the paper brings to your own life each week and the benefits it brings to the cause of Christ.” The primary responsibility lay in attracting new subscribers. This call curiously combined appeals to heart and pocketbook: “You are in deeper than when you made your first investment. As you have read your paper from week to week you have found your eyes and heart opening to perceive and to cherish certain great ideals and purposes which your paper espouses. … You have invested your Heart in *The Christian Century*, and along with your heart you wish to invest your Service.” In addition to earning “from $25 to $50 by the close of the holidays, without giving up his regular employment,” the enterprising subscriber could lay up treasures for the paper, the church, the family, and his own soul. The offer proved compelling. By 1910, the *Century*’s circulation had risen to 10,250.

2.4 More controversy, more subscribers

*Century* coverage of the centennial segued immediately into the next controversy. The main editorial in the November 11, 1909, issue ran under the headline, “Re-Opening the Baptism Question: Shall the Disciples Practice Sprinkling Alongside of Immersion?” One speaker in Pittsburgh, Colonel Samuel Hardin Church, had identified Disciples’ insistence on immersion as an impediment to Christian unity and had suggested that Disciples should instead adopt the Methodist approach of allowing candidates for baptism to choose their own method. The

76 “Every Reader a Stockholder,” CC (Nov. 18, 1909), 1136.
77 Ayer, 1089.
78 “Re-Opening the Baptism Question,” CC (Nov. 11, 1909), 1113.
*Century* demurred: “As a people seeking a basis of Christian unity the Disciples are on the right ground when they practice immersion only. No other basis of union is possible.” The magazine reasoned that, if the mode of baptism was of little concern to other churches but of great concern to Disciples, then the other churches ought to defer to the Disciples. Even so, the *Century* admitted, “The practice of immersion only is one thing, and the dogma by which this exclusive practice has been upheld is another thing.” Here, the editors referred to arguments common among Disciples that the New Testament allowed only immersion—arguments that took early church practices to be absolutely normative and rested on a literal reading of the Greek word *baptizo*. In his translation of the New Testament, Alexander Campbell had controversially rendered the word “immerse.” Based on this interpretation, Disciples required re-baptism by immersion of persons who joined their church from denominations that sprinkled or poured.

Campbell’s choice in translation galled Morrison, who considered it “an ethical and linguistic atrocity.” Moreover, Morrison deemed the practice of re-baptism insulting to the other churches with which the Disciples, as a unity movement, were supposed to be cooperating. In his own pastorate at Monroe Street Church in Chicago, beginning in 1906, Morrison accepted new members without re-baptism. His was the first church in the denomination to do so. In subsequent years, the First Christian Church of Berkeley, California, E.S. Ames’s University Church in

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79 Autobiography, p2.
Chicago, and the Disciples’ foreign missionary society took similar steps and thereby became flashpoints in a battle that roiled the denomination.

As it had in the Willett fracas over biblical higher criticism, the Century barreled into the baptism controversy with rhetorical guns blazing. The magazine followed “Re-Opening the Baptism Question” with a series of editorials that dug beneath practice and dogma to the question underlying re-baptism, namely, How should Disciples relate to other churches? Were the “pious unimmersed” (a designation Morrison hated but that cropped up often in Disciples discussions) really Christians?81 The Disciples’ central emphases, the restoration of primitive faith and the unity of all Christians, seemed at odds on this subject. If the New Testament commanded and modeled immersion, then Disciples had solid reasons to insist on the point, but such insistence would almost certainly lead other churches to see the Disciples as sectarian.

One Century editorial, “A Plea for Immersion,” described the “deadlock” over baptism among the Disciples, and between Disciples and other Christian bodies, as a struggle for the movement’s identity: “As individuals we, the Disciples of Christ, have our conscientious convictions on the baptism question. Most of us are committed to the immersionist position. But it is not our mission as an organized movement working for Christian union to advocate the dogma that loyalty to the Scriptures and to Christ demands the practice of immersion only. … To conceive our mission in such terms is to conceive ourselves a sect among the sects.”82 Because the denomination had no hierarchy to adjudicate the matter, Morrison determined, “It was

82 "A Plea for Immersion," CC (Jan. 20, 1910), 51.
strictly in harmony with the Disciples tradition for the *Christian Century* to direct the denomination’s attention to a serious inconsistency in its practice and to an egregious error at a vital point in its traditional ideology.³³ The *Century* called on Disciples and other Christians to find a way out of the baptism deadlock by focusing on love rather than dogma.³⁴

Predictably, not everyone agreed with the *Century*’s interpretation. The magazine’s “Our Readers’ Opinions” pages in early 1910 brimmed with letters accusing *Century* editors of jettisoning Scripture and tradition in a hopeless quest for Christian unity.³⁵ The magazine even printed some counterpoint articles, noting, “The policy of The *Christian Century* is to hear all sides of any question that seems to us vital enough to discuss.”³⁶ Going further, in an editorial preamble to a long, critical letter, the editors averred, “Happily the moment has come when a minister may state his mind on the baptism question or any other question without suffering ostracism from the fellowship of the Disciples. In *The Christian Century*, at least, we wish our readers to know that they have one paper from whose opinion they may differ without being pilloried.”³⁷ Of course, the preamble and editorial response after the letter did much to censure, if not exactly pillory, the critic. Moreover, the *Century*’s claim to the irenic high ground did nothing to prevent it from lashing out at its journalistic competitors.

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³³ Autobiography, p1.
³⁶ “As To Our Consistency,” CC (Feb. 10, 1910), 126.
In June 1911 the *Century* traded baptism barbs with the *Christian-Evangelist*, which in the previous year had come under new management. (Regarding the administrative change, the *Century* had noted, “The reactionary character of the paper, since its editorial control passed from the hands of J.H. Garrison, has been the occasion of much regretful comment among those who had become accustomed to looking to it for forward leadership.” The *Century* also clearly resented its rival’s consequent bid to become the official Disciples magazine.)

The *Christian-Evangelist*, like many of the *Century*’s own readers, faulted Morrison and company for sacrificing true baptism to the vaporous cause of unity. *Century* editors felt they had been misrepresented and demanded a correction. The *Christian-Evangelist* complied, but the *Century* called the effort “ineffective.” The crux of the dispute seems to have been the *Century*’s willingness, and the *Christian-Evangelist*’s unwillingness, to accept modes of baptism other than believer’s immersion. The two magazines could not even agree which ceremonies deserved the title “baptism,” and because they used the word in different ways it was difficult to tell if they were talking about the same thing. Regardless of whether the editorial staffs purposefully or accidentally misunderstood each other, by late June the *Century* was accusing the *Christian-Evangelist* of being “insecure in its faith,” evincing “non-committal canniness,” and printing “sentences [that] do not seem to track.” As a result of these frictions, the *Century* ceased to consider the *Christian-Evangelist*, apart from its

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88 “Not a Representative Motto,” CC (Oct. 6, 1910), 225.
89 “An Ineffective Correction,” CC (Jun. 1, 1911), 511.
occasional contributions from editor emeritus Garrison, “our amiable and usually progressive neighbor.”

The same month, the Century declared that it was “A Time for Loyal Souls to Speak Out” against the Christian Standard. Divergent conceptions of baptism fueled this quarrel as well, but the specifics of this dispute differed. Whereas the Century and the Christian-Evangelist mainly disagreed about how Disciples churches in the United States should receive members coming from other churches, the Century and the Standard sparred over baptism and church membership in mission fields. The Standard had long opposed the Disciples’ mission agency, the Foreign Christian Missionary Society, because of its methods, because it accepted money from John D. Rockefeller, and because, not alone among Disciples, the Standard viewed denominational apparatuses of all sorts with suspicion. These objections exasperated the Century, but when the Standard added criticism of cooperation between Disciples missionaries and other Protestant missionaries abroad, the Century exploded. “[T]he most profane words which have ever shamed the Disciples of Christ in the eyes of the Christian world,” the Century ranted, “are those used by the Standard in characterizing Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Methodist Christians in foreign lands as ‘unbaptized heathen enrolled by denominational missionaries.’”

91 “The Road To Yesterday,” CC (Mar. 31, 1910), 291. This editorial appeared before the baptism argument between the two magazines, but it signaled the beginning of the Century’s concern about the Christian-Evangelist’s direction.
92 “A Time for Loyal Souls to Speak Out,” CC (Jun. 8, 1911), 531.
The *Century* also offered the Foreign Society space to refute the *Standard*’s charges.94

Given the precedent of the 1909 centennial, no one should have been surprised when, one month after lashing out at both of its main competitors, the *Century* parlayed baptism controversies into a subscription drive. The cover of the July 27, 1911, issue announced a “Ten Weeks for Ten Cents” campaign through which subscribers could purchase cheap, short-term gift subscriptions for friends. The cover of the next issue sweetened the offer by promising that the issues produced during the gift subscription period, set to begin September 21, would feature an editorial series on “The Meaning of Baptism.” By mid-August, according to subsequent covers, a church in Evanston, Illinois, had begun efforts to place the *Century* in each of its members’ homes, and an unnamed Sunday school teacher had mailed in $1.50 and a list of 15 names. The August 24 cover stressed that this was the readers’ “own campaign” and that the baptism articles would be “constructive—written without reference to any controversy,” but neither the circulation management angle nor the controversy were any secret. At the end of the campaign, editors announced that it had exposed “several thousand” new readers to the magazine, a “large number” of whom opted to become subscribers.95 The campaign kept on giving when, in 1914, several of the editorials from this period appeared in Morrison’s *The Meaning of Baptism*, published in an “extraordinarily large edition” by the *Century* and sold for $1.25 or sent free with a new *Century* subscription.96

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95 “All Ten Week Subscriptions End With This Issue,” *CC* (Nov. 30, 1911), 1050.
96 Advertisement, *CC* (Jun. 11, 1914), 548.
As this conflict lurched along, the *Century* committed a major tactical error. In January 1912, as part of an ongoing discussion taking place on and off the magazine’s pages, Z.T. Sweeney of Columbus, Indiana, dismissed the editor’s main points about baptism as mere “Morrisonisms.” Sweeney also dismissed as a Morrisonism the editor’s claim to represent the Disciples, calling this claim “a bald faced assumption that may be easy to assert, but utterly impossible to prove.” Sweeney challenged the editor to name any members of the brotherhood who would support his theological position. “You can’t fool the Disciples of Christ,” Sweeney snarled. “They know the difference between a ‘fish and a serpent.’ If you wish to fire on the flag of the Disciples nobody will object if you will do it like a man from the outside instead of from the inside of their ranks.” Morrison could not let such an indictment pass, especially as it came from someone who had once been deep inside the *Century*’s own circle. The January 14, 1904, issue of the magazine, for example, featured an address from Sweeney (then president of the American Christian Missionary Society) on the cover and promised a series of articles by him as bait for a circulation campaign.98

Recalling the tiff with Sweeney in his autobiography, Morrison wrote, “We were charged with misrepresenting our own denomination. A prominent preacher challenged us to name ‘two or three’ representative Disciples who would support our position. We replied by naming fifty.”\textsuperscript{99} Actually, the \textit{Century} named 84 men and three women at the end of its three-page reply to Sweeney’s one-page letter. The group included three other Disciples editors (J.H. Garrison, W.T. Moore, and J.A. Lord), nine presidents of the church’s colleges and Bible colleges, 15 college professors, 14 officers of its missions and benevolence agencies (this group included the three women), and 46 pastors of large churches. The problem was, none of these people had consented to be named. “We did not think it necessary to consult any of them,” Morrison wrote in his autobiography. “We believed that they were in essential agreement with our basic affirmation that the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational local churches are true churches of Christ and that the members of these churches are baptized members of the Church of Christ. I believed that no man

\textsuperscript{99} Autobiography, p6.
on our list would deny or express embarrassment by our inclusion of his name.”\textsuperscript{100} He should have asked.

The week after Sweeney’s letter ran, the \textit{Century} remained convinced that public opinion must be on its side. Under the editorial headline, “The Blight of Legalism,” the editors wrote, “No reader at all acquainted with the historic ideals of the Disciples of Christ can have escaped shock and hurt at the position frankly taken by the letters of Hon. Z.T. Sweeney.”\textsuperscript{101} More specifically, according to a letter the editors had received from “one of our most prominent and influential pastors,” surely not more than five percent of Disciple ministers would back Sweeney. “The main body of Disciples … have found the logic of these reactionary brethren altogether impossible for them,” editors assured readers. “Their heart is too big for the gnarled sectarianism to which the strict constriction of legalistic premises leads them.”

Another miscalculation.

Throughout February and March 1912, the \textit{Century} fended off bitter complaints from men named in its response to Sweeney. (None of the women complained publicly.) The \textit{Century} duly printed several angry missives in its letters pages, typically following the protests with an editorial comment that refuted the protest, asked the writer to reconsider the statements with which he professed disagreement, and reminded the writer that the original list ended with a disclaimer: “[T]hese names have not been set down as endorsing ‘us’ or ‘our views’ or our ‘assumptions.’ Their names are set down as representative men who endorse the essential position contained … above as a fair description of the position of the

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., p6-7.
\textsuperscript{101} “The Blight of Legalism,” CC (Jan. 25, 1912), 78-79.
Disciples.” These moves failed to pacify the complainants, however, and some of them escalated the conflict by airing their arguments in the *Christian-Evangelist*. Most of the people named on the list did not protest, at least not in print, but the *Century* had alienated substantially more than the benchmark five percent of its own supposed allies, including editor J.A. Lord, the president of the Disciples Home Missionary Society, and several pastors.

Finally, in late March, the *Century* was forced to rearticulate its relationship with the Disciples. It did not back down from its claim to represent the movement, but it acknowledged that it used “representation” in an undemocratic sense. In an editorial, “On Representing the Disciples,” editors contrasted photographic with interpretive description. “The photographic description,” editors wrote, “simply sets down the prevailing practices of the people and quotes the phrases in which they characteristically express their views and purposes.” Such a description might appear accurate, but common “customs and phrases may actually contradict the essential purpose of a people.” Interpretive description, therefore, “penetrates prevailing practices and prevailing opinion; it cracks open characteristic phrases; it goes back to origins and traces out the historical process, asking all the while how this custom came to be, and in the heat of what controversy was this phrase formulated? … And it asserts that this idealistic picture is more real than the photographic picture, that it

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102 Letters of protest appeared in the following issues: Feb. 1, 1912, p. 112; Feb. 8, 1912, p. 128 and 135; Feb. 15, 1912, p. 151; Feb. 29, 1912, p. 205; Mar. 7, 1912, p. 230-231. Elsewhere in these issues, and in others from this period, *Century* editors alluded to protests lodged outside its pages, for example in the *Christian-Evangelist*. The six points about baptism that became the specific points of contention were listed in the *Century*’s response to Sweeney, Jan. 18, 1912, p. 1230.
represents the facts while the photograph misrepresents the facts.” In other words, according to the Century, proper interpretation of a church resembled modernist interpretation of Scriptures. Both were best handled by experts.

The photographic approach and the interpretive approach both found outlets in Disciples journalism, but the Century considered this a late and lamentable development.

In the early days its journalism was independent and therefore creative. It actually led the people. Later it became apparent that the commercial advantage of a journal lay in its shrewdness in reflecting the consensus of opinion of the churches that had espoused the ideals of Christian union. It ceased to lead. It became a mouthpiece of popular sentiment, prejudice and partizanship [sic].

By 1912 the movement’s primary “photographic” publication was the Christian-Evangelist, whose endeavor to become the official Disciples journal struck the Century as “the final stage in the development of this false conception both of the Disciples and of journalism.” The Century, in contrast, sought to be the movement’s foremost “interpretive” publication. Such a role might compel the Century to stand virtually alone, as in response to a hypothetical question about the movement’s view of revivalism: “Now if [a correspondent] should ask The Christian Century to state the Disciples’ attitude toward evangelism we would not give him a photographic picture of present practices. We would affirm this paradox: that the Disciples are opposed to the typical revivalism of today—even while nine-tenths of their churches are engaged in it.” The Century insisted that this perspective made it not contrarian, unfaithful, or duplicitous, as charged, but truly representative of what the Disciples should be.
On reflection, Morrison called the whole baptism and open membership battle his “lover’s quarrel” with the church of his childhood and ministry. Frustrated and disillusioned as he had become, he remained committed to Disciples ideals as he understood them. He never disaffiliated from the church and, according to the autobiography, never even considered doing so. Dissociating the *Century* from the Disciples was equally unthinkable in the early years. The *Century*’s ties to the church might have been at the level of constituency (readers and donors) rather than ownership, but the ties remained consequential. Moreover, while other magazines, notably *The Sunday School Times* and the *Christian Herald*, had demonstrated the possibility of subsisting without church support, the magazines that Morrison considered the *Century*’s closest peers—the other Disciples publications, the Congregational *Advance* and *Congregationalist*, the Presbyterian *Continent*, and the Episcopal *Churchman*—all maintained clear denominational identities. Perhaps most important, Morrison cared deeply about the Disciples trajectory, and he did not want to cede control of the movement to the editors of the *Standard* or the *Christian-Evangelist*. No one wants to walk away in defeat.

2.5 Leaving the harbor

The long, bruising conflict over baptism illustrated the depth of division within Discipledom, with the *Century* on one side and the *Standard* and *Christian-Evangelist*, as well as the majority of members, on the other. Despite its relative

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105 Autobiography, p1.
106 These are the first publications Morrison discusses in the autobiography section on “Contemporary Religious Journalism,” pages m1-13. Additionally, quotations from all of them appeared periodically in the pages of the *Century*. 98
isolation within the movement, though, the *Century* spent another five years seeking to sustain itself while upholding its denominational identity. Ultimately a combination of push and pull factors led the magazine to, as Morrison put it, leave the denominational harbor.\textsuperscript{107}

Probably the biggest push factor in this decision was the *Century*’s inability to secure adequate funding from its Disciples constituency. This failure did not reflect a lack of effort. In January 1913, the magazine announced a sale of $25,000 worth of bonds in a new Disciples Publication Society, which would replace the New Christian Century Company as the journal’s publisher.\textsuperscript{108} The announcement proclaimed, “It has been a long-standing and earnest desire on the part of the editors of *The Christian Century* that the ownership and control of this newspaper should pass from the hands of private individuals into the common possession of the general brotherhood of the Disciples whose ideals it has for twenty-nine years been striving to interpret.” In addition to *The Christian Century*, the Disciples Publication Society would publish books and Sunday school materials, and all profits would be used to fund religious education in the United States and abroad.\textsuperscript{109} Editors did not say much about profits, though. They called the publication society “a cause rather than a business” and appealed “not to motives of profit but of loyalty.”\textsuperscript{110} They quickly learned that neither money nor loyalty abounded among their readers.

\textsuperscript{107} “Leaving the Denominational Harbor” is the title of the section of the autobiography with page numbers n1-6.


\textsuperscript{109} Announcement, “Disciples Publication Society,” CC (Jan. 16, 1913), 34.

\textsuperscript{110} Announcement, “A Cause Rather Than a Business,” CC (Jan. 23, 1913), 50.
The *Century* repeatedly stressed the modesty of its request. Editors claimed that they had already proven how well they could get by with minimal funds—“Probably $250 would cover the amount of money we have spent to enlarge our circulation in the entire five years!” Furthermore, the field was ripe unto harvest.

There is not the question in the minds of those who are in the office that there is an entirely unoccupied field into which *The Christian Century* could enter immediately if it had the small sum of money it is now asking its friends to invest. To enter this field is the bounden duty of a newspaper uttering our message, and it is also our opportunity to place the Disciples Publication Society on a solid profit-earning basis.111

Even on these terms, most readers were not buying. Charles M. Fillmore of Indianapolis wrote, “Congratulations on the Disciples Publication Society. I wish I had $5,000 to invest. As it have it not, I must content myself with offering 5,000 best wishes for success.”112 An anonymous correspondent confessed, “I do certainly want to see your pungent and able pen kept on the job. But before I talk to anyone about bonds I would like for you to fortify me on one point. The *Century* has not been paying. It has been losing if I am rightly informed. … I want you to convince me of the business soundness of the arrangement.”113 Morrison answered the correspondent with characteristic optimism, and the Disciples Publication Society was soon chartered, but the enterprise continued to lose money. It did not help that the *Century’s* business manager had died in 1912, leaving his responsibilities to the overburdened Morrison.114

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112 Ibid.
In fall 1913, the “Thirtieth Anniversary Subscription Crusade”—an attempt to collect “Twenty Thousand New Subscribers and Twenty Thousand Dollars to Pay for them!”—fell far short of its goal. In spring 1914, the magazine was still pleading for names and dollars, even asking supportive Disciples ministers to make Sunday, April 5, “Christian Century Day” at their churches. Later that year, help came from vacuum magnate (and committed Disciples layman) William H. Hoover, who suggested that Morrison stop selling the profitless bonds and instead seek straight donations to his “missionary” cause. At Hoover’s urging, a committee of Disciples businessmen took over as the magazine’s primary fundraisers, and they succeeded in both reducing its debt and increasing its subscriptions. Despite all of this assistance, in spring 1915 Morrison, exhausted, took a leave of absence from the magazine on the advice of his physician. The Century could not plow the same little patch of stony ground forever.

Frustration with Disciples trends constituted another push factor. In 1914 members of the brotherhood, including Z.T. Sweeney and Christian Standard publisher Russell Errett, founded a conservative Bible institute at Canton, Ohio, in what the Century deemed “A Radical and Flagrant Departure” from the Disciples’ broad-minded ideals. (Making matters worse, the denomination’s decision to fund the new Bible institute but not the Disciples Divinity House really rankled the

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115 Announcements ran throughout fall 1913, for example Oct. 13, 1913, p. 714-715; Oct. 30, 1913, p. 738-739; Nov. 6, 1913, p. 762-764; Nov. 13, 1913, p. 786; Nov. 20, 1913, p. 810.
117 “Two Letters.”
118 See, for example, “A Call for Co-operation,” CC (Oct. 22, 1914), 995, and announcement, “Help us wipe out our debt!” CC (Apr. 29, 1915), 364.
Century. The denomination eventually funded both.)\textsuperscript{121} Later the Standard took a leading role in the Disciples’ minimally institutionalized version of a fundamentalist-modernist split.\textsuperscript{122} Although the Century commented relatively rarely on the Standard, its comments bristled with hostility. For example, in an editorial on the Standard’s “evangelistic number” of August 28, 1915, the Century averred that it had to quote the issue selectively, because the “coarse and contentious spirit revealed in certain other utterances, the legalism, the unbrotherliness, the vulgar personalities indulged by the editor and permitted in his contributors” would offend its own readers’ sensibilities.\textsuperscript{123} Returning to a familiar theme, the same Century editorial accused the Standard of “Misrepresenting the Disciples” and called upon right-thinking brethren “to repudiate the claim that such a spirit actuates us and either to reclaim the Standard from its unspeakable course or compel it definitely to go to its own place.” The Century politely refrained from naming that place.

Also in 1914, the Century found itself nearly alone in defending the First Christian Church of Berkeley, which was kicked out of the northern California convention of Disciples for accepting unimmersed persons into membership. The Standard and the Christian-Evangelist agreed that the Berkeley church had erred. In opposition, the Century asked its readers to send letters of support to the pastor of the Berkeley church and also surveyed them to see whether they approved or disapproved

\textsuperscript{121} This saga consumed many column inches in the Century in early 1914. See, for example, Morrison, “Men and Millions—and the Disciples’ Ideals,” CC (Mar. 5, 1914), 212-214; editorial, “A Triumph of Magnanimity,” CC (Mar. 12, 1914), 244-245.
\textsuperscript{122} See Corey, Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy.
\textsuperscript{123} Editorial, “Misrepresenting the Disciples,” CC (Sept. 16, 1915), 8.
of that church’s policies. Published replies to the survey revealed much wholehearted support for the Berkeley church, some stern condemnation, and some belief that while the Berkeley church was wrong, the convention was more wrong to take such high-handed action against it. Morrison, ignoring his earlier disdain for periodicals that photographically represented the views of their readers, cast the *Century* as a megaphone for the *vox populi* and predicted great progress toward the Disciples ideal of Christian unity. But the denomination declined to follow the *Century’s* lead. Instead, committees convened to work through the Berkeley situation devised a sort of halfway covenant by which the unimmersed gained second-class membership and were barred from seeking church office. The *Century* scoffed at this solution under the headline, “Christian Unity Made Ridiculous.”

The desire to foster Christian unity constituted a pull factor for the *Century*. The magazine had eagerly noted signs of union throughout Morrison’s tenure, in editorials such as “Can Congregationalists and Disciples Unite?” “Baptists Also to Practice Unity,” and “A Union Worth Talking About.” Morrison also had been greatly inspired by his participation in the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, which he judged “a line from which a new epoch in the movement for the reunion of Christendom will be dated.” Choosing the progressive over the conservative of the Disciples’ traditional emphases, Morrison considered the

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127 These editorials appeared Feb. 2, 1911, p. 99; Jul. 18, 1912, p. 627 (this article was a reprint from *The Congregationalist*); and Sept. 9, 1915, p. 3.
movement not an effort to restore universal practice of New Testament ordinances
but, in the words of another editorial title, “God’s Experiment in Christian Union.”¹²⁹
Keeping a denominational label on the Century impeded this ultimate goal.

More immediately, a shifting audience pulled the Century out of its
denominational field. Morrison described the shift in “The First Twenty Years,” an
anniversary reflection published in the Century on October 11, 1928.

The discovery came about this way. I happened to be passing a desk in the
business office when my attention was called to the list of new subscriptions
received that day. I observed to my surprise the names of several well-known
churchmen who were not Disciples. I asked for an inquiry to be made into the
personnel of new subscriptions for the past thirty days. I found that without
any one’s being conscious of what was happening The Christian Century was
steadily drawing to itself readers from other denominations. This went on for
some time, without any special effort on our part. We had no circulation
program, for the simple reason that we had no capital with which to promote
circulation. Our entire effort was concentrated upon the task of creating a
journalistic medium whose message and spirit should reflect the convictions
of its editors and the prophetic ideals in modern religious and social life which
were struggling for realization.¹³⁰

Like the canonical story of Morrison’s purchase of the magazine, this one almost
certainly leaves out some key details. None appeared in the magazine, however. On
December 6, 1917, with no fanfare, the Century changed its tagline from “Published
Weekly by the Disciples of Christ in the Interest of the Kingdom of God” to “An
Undenominational Journal of Religion.” The issue’s cover promised an examination
of a suitably broad topic: “What the War Is Doing to Religion.” The contents of the
issue, though, conveyed continuity with the magazine’s previous incarnation. The last

¹³⁰ Morrison, “The First Twenty Years,” CC (Oct. 11, 1928), 1220-1222. Linda-Marie Delloff, citing
an unpublished source, expanded on this story, naming Henry Churchill King, the Congregational
president of Oberlin College, and Lynn Harold Hough, the Methodist president of Northwestern
University, among the non-Disciples subscribers whose names caught Morrison’s eye. See Delloff,
“The Century in Transition,” in Delloff et al, A Century of The Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B.
of the short editorials considered the advisability of “Using the Name ‘Disciples,’” as opposed to “Christian,” to eliminate possible confusion with other religious groups such as the Church of Christ, Scientist.\textsuperscript{131} Disciples minister Alva W. Taylor continued to contribute brief commentaries under the heading “Social Interpretations.”\textsuperscript{132} The issue also carried several pages of “Disciples Table Talk,” including a sidebar, “Disciple Leaders Discuss the War,” and the last two-and-a-half pages were filled with advertisements for texts from the Disciples Publication Society. The magazine had become undenominational in name more than in actuality.

Still, dropping the \textit{Century}’s explicit Disciples affiliation marked a turning point in its history. As early as 1910, Herbert Willett had told the Religious Educational Association, “The difficulty of maintaining the religious journal upon the lines of denominational attachment grows yearly. … Whether or not the religious journal shall survive must depend upon the service it is able to render, not merely to its denomination, but to the community at large.”\textsuperscript{133} Even earlier, according to his autobiography, Morrison had recognized that the boundaries of his target audience and the boundaries of his denomination did not align. “By the end of my first year [as editor],” he noted, “\textit{The Christian Century} had become something more than a journalistic organ; it was distinctly identified with a cause—the cause of liberalism.”\textsuperscript{134} Elsewhere, Morrison described the magazine’s early audience as limited “not only to the thoughtful minority [of Disciples] but to the still lesser

\begin{footnotes}
\item[131] Editorial, “Using the Name ‘Disciples,’” \textit{CC} (Dec. 6, 1917), 9.
\item[134] Autobiography, o1.
\end{footnotes}
minority of the liberal minded.”135 This was a significant limitation. As late as 1916, only eight percent of the Disciples’ roughly 5,000 ministers had been educated beyond the undergraduate level, and while advanced education was not the only indicator of liberalism, Morrison, as a member of the beleaguered Campbell Institute, knew it made a difference.136 So the Century’s editors seemed to have known all along that the magazine would eventually need to redefine its constituency away from a denominational identity and toward a mindset, or “cause.” Nonetheless, nearly a decade of articulating goals, mulling varieties of “representation,” and fighting for funds and subscribers passed before the magazine took this step.

In his first decade as editor, Morrison had learned several lessons that carried him forward over the next 30 years. First, he learned that it was possible for a publishing venture to survive without denominational support, provided that sympathetic laymen, especially businessmen, were willing to help. Second, he learned the value of provoking fights; broad-mindedness without an edge would not sell papers. Third, he developed a nuanced understanding of the dialectic between editor and audience as he sought to balance leadership with sustainability. In short, the “organ of a cause,” irenic though it endeavored to be, needed friends and enemies. Years spent cultivating both within the Disciples field emboldened Morrison and the Century to venture into the larger and even more competitive field of opinion journals, secular and religious.

135 Morrison, “The First Twenty Years,” 1221.
136 Statistic from Gobbel, 7. On the divisiveness of education among Disciples ministers, see Corey, Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy.
3. New Distinctions

The *Century* began 1918 with a somber comment on “Disciples and the World Mood.” Hopes that the war might bring a revival of religion had been dashed, the editorial claimed. Men at the front wanted reality, not piety or dogma. Many churches, instead of embracing the insights of science and biblical higher criticism, either fell silent or shrilly declared their adherence to old ways. Even the Disciples of Christ, whose enlightened catholicity should have been a beacon to other churches, failed to rise above internal squabbles. As a result of all of this, the *Century* warned,

> At the present moment the mood of the world with respect to religion has defined itself by a negative more than by a positive attitude. As for their positive beliefs and ideals men’s thoughts are badly shaken. People are groping their way; they are waiting and yearning to be led; they look wistfully for God’s prophets to guide them out of the marshes of fear and confusion and disillusionment to the uplands of truth and comfort and faith, where God’s face shines gracious and fair. … It is a time pregnant with destiny.¹

The men whose names appeared above this editorial statement—Charles Clayton Morrison, editor; Herbert L. Willett, contributing editor; Orvis Fairlee Jordan, Alva W. Taylor, and John Ray Ewers, contributors; and Thomas Curtis Clark, office manager—took seriously what they considered to be their prophetic mission.² They declared their magazine “a free interpreter of the essential ideals of Christianity,” published by Disciples but for “the Christian world.” In this first issue of 1918, the

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² It is difficult to determine exactly what each of these men contributed to the magazine, especially because so many items in its pages carried no byline. Generally speaking, Morrison would have written most of the editorials and exercised the most control over the selection of features. Willett primarily contributed articles on biblical interpretation, but he had not been involved in day-to-day operations at the magazine since 1913. Jordan reported on Chicago and compiled the “News of the Christian World.” Taylor wrote a standing column on Social Gospel concerns like economics and labor relations. Ewers wrote a standing column with ideas for teaching Sunday school. Clark chose poems (most issues of the *Century* had at least one, sometimes as many as six) and, on Morrison’s insistence, contributed many of his own poems as well. Only Clark worked regularly in the office with Morrison.
magazine boldly offered that audience Baptist minister Joseph Fort Newton’s “Good Thoughts in Bad Times,” Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch’s analysis of “Super-Personal Forces of Evil,” and Progress, “a brave and brilliant volume prepared by The Campbell Institute.”\textsuperscript{3} The rest of the world might have been badly shaken, but the Century marched resolutely forward.

Financially, though, the magazine still wobbled. In fact, economic instability and religious uncertainty threatened the entire market into which Morrison had led the Century. His reflections on the period, from the section of his autobiography titled “Contemporary Religious Journalism,” described the rough waters through which the magazine passed:

By “contemporary” is meant the period in which the Christian Century was emerging from its denominational harbor and charting its course as an undenominational journal. I soon learned from rumors and some confidential information within the “craft” that the religious press in general was having hard sledding. It was a surprise to learn that only a few, if indeed a single one, of the denominational papers were self-supporting. I derived a wry sort of comfort from the information that they were operating in many cases at a greater deficit than our own. … It became gradually clear to me that we were entering a period of declension, if not decline, in religious journalism.\textsuperscript{4}

This sector-wide turmoil created both challenges and opportunities for the Century. The magazine could easily have foundered in the tide that sank so many other boats. Advertisers, investors, and churches hesitated to throw money at losing ventures. At the same time, as other titles struggled, and many eventually ceased publication, fewer competitors stood between the Century and its target audience of America’s leading liberal-minded Protestants. As fewer and fewer magazines competed for that prize, the group for and to whom the Century could plausibly claim to speak grew

\textsuperscript{3} These appeared on pages 10-12, 12-14, and 24 of the Jan. 3, 1918, issue.
\textsuperscript{4} Autobiography, m1.
larger and larger. By the 1930s, in the campaign to represent liberal Protestantism, the
Century ran essentially unopposed.

Morrison played a crucial role in this process. He had been seeking to expand
the horizons of his ministry since his days as a pastor, and he had assiduously sought
to increase the reach of the magazine. His stature as an urbane, educated man,
coupled with his denomination’s tradition of regarding editors as highly as bishops,
emboldened him to address wider audiences. Entering into dialogue with other
Protestant magazines and, eventually, such varied interlocutors as The Nation, The
New Republic, and The Commonweal also suited Morrison’s longstanding aim to
guide people, wherever they might be, toward God’s shining face. Still, some of the
key factors that contributed to the Century’s success cannot be attributed to
Morrison’s brilliance. The Century succeeded where other magazines failed in part
because other magazines failed.

3.1 The new search for subscribers

The Century’s repositioning as an undenominational journal did not
immediately change its approach to attracting new subscribers. In February and
March 1918, the magazine ran “An Intensive and Immediate Drive” to double its
circulation, still aiming, with the slogan “Every Reader a Cooperator,” to grow by
word of mouth and gift subscriptions. For $5, a reader could send the magazine for
one year to four friends who did not already subscribe.5 “Let every reader seek out his
thoughtful acquaintances and get their subscriptions,” the ad urged. “The sooner we

5 This campaign was introduced in a three-page house ad in the Feb. 7, 1918, issue, 11-13.
get the new names the more they get for their money!” The sooner the Century got the $5, of course, the sooner it could pay its own bills as well.

The special content published to support this circulation drive did depart from previous campaigns. Whereas earlier efforts sought to increase the number of Disciples readers and thereby bolster the modernist cause in intradenominational disputes over conference speakers, membership regulations, and so forth, this effort promised comment on issues of interest to all Christians. Under the headline “1918 Is Our Richest Year!” the Century promoted three upcoming article series: “What the War Is Doing to Religion,” “The Millennium and the Return of Christ,” and “Billy Sunday and His Meetings in Chicago.” The first series promised editorials on topics as varied as “The War as a Rebuke to the Divided Church,” “The War and the Inner Life of the Soul,” and “The War and the New Era of Poetry.” The second, to be written by Willett, would examine Old and New Testament passages to determine whether 1918 marked the beginning of the end. (Willett’s answer, not surprisingly, was no, but it is striking that the Century devoted so much attention to a topic usually associated with fundamentalists.) The third series anticipated Sunday’s massive spring crusade with ambivalence, as the ardently Prohibitionist Century found itself put off by Sunday’s style and message but hopeful that his presence might help the “dry” forces of Chicago win a local option election to ban liquor. The Disciples label appeared nowhere in the promotional copy. The only descriptor applied to potential subscribers, a word used three times, was “thoughtful.”

The broadening of the Century’s audience began in earnest in 1919 with an infusion of cash. That year Morrison met in Detroit with William H. Hoover and two
other magazine benefactors, E.M. Bowman and Philip H. Gray, to seek their advice and support for the struggling enterprise. (In print, Morrison declined to name his supporters, calling them “three laymen who had been helping us from time to time” and who desired to remain in the background.) All three were active in Disciples and other religious philanthropic causes. In 1932, Hoover left $50,000 to the Disciples “for the publication of writings on Christian unity.” After 1945, the money was used to endow lectures on the same topic at the Disciples Divinity House. Bowman, of Chicago, served as the Disciples representative to the Federal Council of Churches for the Quadrennium 1916-1920. Gray, for a time president of the Detroit-area YMCA, also funded construction of an elegant Gothic church for the Disciples on Detroit’s Upper Piety Row. Collectively, the men pledged $45,000 over three years to the Century for staff costs and the magazine’s first sophisticated circulation drive. The capital fund created by the Century’s principal supporters grew to $300,000 by the early 1920s.

Thus endowed, Morrison and Clark strategized ways to reach what Morrison described as “the leadership of the denominations, both lay and professional—ministers, college and seminary professors, missionaries, public school teachers and in general those who might be said to represent the Christian intelligentsia of all the

7 Charles Clayton Morrison, “The First Twenty Years,” CC (Oct. 11, 1928), 1221.
churches.”¹² They decided to purchase full-page advertisements in 34 religious and cultural magazines, for which Clark would write copy emphasizing “the social implications of the teaching of Jesus, the new biblical scholarship, in general the liberal point of view and the undenominational character of the Christian Century.” The ads ran over a period of about three years.

Morrison could not later recall all of the periodicals in which they purchased space, but the group included The Congregationalist and the Advance (Congregational), the Continent and the Christian Work (Presbyterian), the Christian-Evangelist (Disciples), the Churchman and the Living Church (Episcopalian), six Methodist Christian Advocates (including New York, Northwestern, Central, Pacific, and Western), Zion’s Herald and the Western Recorder (also Methodist), The Outlook, The Independent, The Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s, The New Republic, The Nation, and World Tomorrow, the journal of the pacifist Fellowship Of Reconciliation. Although many of these periodicals enjoyed national readership, most were published in the northeast, mainly Boston and New York. Also, although several of these titles had modest circulations (in the 30,000 range), and there would have been some overlap in readership, the total reach of this advertising campaign easily exceeded half a million potential subscribers.¹³

It is difficult to determine the numerical and financial impact of this campaign. The Century declined to report its circulation in the early 1920s. A

message in the January 1, 1920, issue suggested modest initial success. During December 1919, the editorial note announced, the *Century* gained nearly 1,000 new subscribers. Yet the magazine continued to call on its readers to participate in word-of-mouth marketing, rousing them to collective action it declared to be impossible through any other channel:

> The problems of spiritual progress, of an educated leadership, of a truly catholic spirit, of an untrammeled fellowship and cooperation with all Christians, and of the rescue of our Christian union plea from the legalism and bigotry which threaten to extinguish it—these all depend upon the degree in which the leading minds in our far-scattered local churches are brought into vital contact with one another and into some sense of informal but conscious comradeship in a common cause. There is no other way in which vital contacts of this sort can be established except by a journal like *The Christian Century*.

The magazine aimed to double its circulation by March 1, 1920, at which point the subscription price would increase to $3.00 per year, or $2.50 for ministers. The higher rate, later house ads explained, would cover rising production costs and an “enrichment of contents” including, presumably, that year’s “Has the Church a Future?” series, which featured contributions from such luminaries as future presidents of the Federal Council of Churches Robert E. Speer and Bishop Francis J. McConnell, Oberlin College president Henry Churchill King, Labor Secretary Louis F. Post, University of Chicago professors Shailer Mathews and Edward Scribner Ames, and poet Carl Sandburg.

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15 The *Century* introduced this series in a house ad that ran in January 1920. The top of the advertisement proclaimed, “Keep your religious thinking abreast of your other thinking!” In 1928, Edward Laird Mills of Portland, Oregon, a subscriber who wrote to congratulate Morrison on 20 years as editor, recalled seeing an advertisement with this slogan in *The New Republic*. It might have been the same ad.
The announcement of this circulation campaign began by stating, “The *Christian Century* has an increasingly definite and important place in American Christianity.” At the beginning of 1920, though, it was not at all clear what that place was. The *Century* moved only slowly away from its denominational identity; the announcement declared the magazine’s mission to be “two-fold, first to the Disciples of Christ and, secondly, to the larger Christian world.” That so many religious and secular publications accepted the *Century*’s advertisements indicated that these publications did not consider the *Century* a threat. Morrison recalled that only one paper refused the ads on grounds of competition.\(^{16}\) It is also unlikely that any of the contributors to the series on the future of the church sought to gain recognition by writing for the *Century*. Rather, by naming the contributors in self-promotional advertisements, the *Century* hoped to catch some reflected glory from them. In 1920, the *Century* was not yet a magazine other papers envied or a place where writers could establish their fame. By the end of the decade, through savvy and serendipity, it would be both.

Evidence of the *Century*’s success at building readership and prestige in the early 1920s is patchy but telling. By early 1923, the magazine had stopped regularly filling its pages with ads for its own circulation and begun carrying ads for periodicals like *The Outlook*, *The Independent*, and *The Nation*.\(^{17}\) These promotions could have been merely payment in kind for the *Century*’s ads in these magazines, or they could have reflected a rise in the *Century*’s strength and status. Additionally, the *Century*

\(^{16}\) Autobiography, n6. Morrison did not name the publication that refused the *Century*’s ads.

\(^{17}\) Advertisements, CC (Jan. 11, 1923), 55, 57; CC (Feb. 22, 1923), 251. Early 1923 issues also featured ads for *The Christian Work* and, oddly, the *Manchester Guardian*. 
still periodically ran the sort of all-hands-on-deck circulation drives upon which it relied in the early years, but the tone of these appeals shifted from desperation to confidence.

The Continental Campaign, which aimed to double the magazine’s rolls between October 1, 1925, and February 28, 1926, took a new tack. The magazine announced the campaign with an extraordinary 8-page insert in the September 24, 1925, issue that included hyperbolic self-congratulation, a two-page map of the United States indicating the number of subscribers in each state (to give subscribers an idea of what it would take to double circulation in their area), and big prizes for the ten subscribers who collected the most new subscriptions. Unpacking this insert reveals what the magazine’s staff considered to be its “definite and important place” in American culture in 1925.18

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18 The insert ran with unnumbered pages between pages 1180 and 1181 of the September 24, 1925, issue. As there were no bylines anywhere in the insert, it is impossible to determine who wrote the copy. The Century staff in September 1925 included editor Morrison, managing editor Paul Hutchinson, and nine contributing editors. Thomas Curtis Clark, one of the contributing editors, had also served as office manager and had written the promotional copy for the magazine’s 1919-1922 circulation campaign. He probably had a guiding influence on the 1925 insert as well. Morrison wrote of Clark, “His gift for discursive prose was quite pedestrian. But, oddly enough, he had a flair for writing advertisements!” Autobiography, n6.
Figure 3.1: Continental Campaign announcement.
The promotional piece nearly burst with self-congratulation. “The Christian Century is now universally recognized as America’s most free and most inspiring journalistic voice speaking in the name of religion,” the second page began. “The press of England and Europe are represented by the Westminster Gazette when it refers to The Christian Century as ‘The most influential religious newspaper in America.’” Next, the copy touted the Century’s “steady and uninterrupted growth,” which had “brought it to the point where its circulation is larger than that of any other journal of opinion in the United States.” One must wonder how the copywriter defined the universe of opinion journals. To cite just one counterexample, Current Opinion magazine reported a circulation of 87,298 in 1924; the Christian Century pegged its own at 30,000 at the outset of the Continental Campaign.19 Regarding editorial quality, the magazine described itself as gripping, delightful, amazing, “loyal to the church, devout and evangelical, and at the same time as free as a university classroom.” No wonder the cohort who “ought to be reading” the Century numbered at least 60,000.

The insert offered a detailed picture of the magazine’s readership. As to affiliation, it claimed, the Century boasted the most “continuously catholic constituency” of any religious periodical in American history, a constituency that included “Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Disciples, Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Quakers, Universalists, Unitarians, Mennonites, Brethren, and Mormons—there is not a single Christian communion, large or small, but that

19 Ayer & Son’s (1924), 1278.
The Christian Century has readers within it.” (The most obvious omission from this “catholic” list was, of course, Catholics.) Intellectually, the Century wanted sharp and inquiring minds, with liberal views optional. “Among our most loyal subscribers are many who differ radically from the editorial position taken by the paper,” the ad copy stated. Socially, the magazine sought the crème de la crème, asking its readers,

Who among your friends are the sort who would enjoy regularly reading this journal of religion? That thoughtful layman or laywoman in yonder pew; that liberal-minded deacon across the way, or in some other city, of your own or another denomination; that intelligent Sunday School superintendent or teacher; that judge, that college professor, that high school principal, that physician, that business man who has a mind for ideas as well as profits; that missionary-minded woman, that social-minded merchant whose conversation recently impressed you for its intelligent interest in things religious and ethical—speak or write to them about the Christian Century and get their subscription!

Elsewhere in the insert, the magazine described its audience as “the religious and moral leadership of this continent.” It even noted, “Our subscription list reads like an album of the signatures of the Christian leaders of the nation.” The claim had a circular quality. Did leadership status compel a person to read the Century, or did a Century subscription confer leadership status? Presumably, both.

To attract such folk, the magazine offered the “best obtainable” prizes to its most enterprising subscription collectors. Prizes included three foreign tours, worth $1,000 each; two cars, also worth $1,000 each; two pianos; a combination radio and phonograph set; and two offers of one years’ college tuition, plus cash stipend. The inclusion of 750 smaller prizes brought the total value to $21,700. “These offerings are in every case the absolute best,” the insert averred. “We have made our purchases on no grounds but merit, believing that not only should our subscribers have the best,
but that our own reputation and prestige could not be dissociated from the quality of
the awards we give in this Continental Campaign.” Another 8-page insert, in the
November 12, 1925 issue, featured pictures and promotional copy for the major
prizes, a catalogue of 1920s luxuries.\footnote{This insert ran with unnumbered pages between pages 1412 and 1413 of the November 12, 1925, issue.} The only funding source disclosed for these
prizes was the magazine’s publishers. If the campaign succeeded in generating 30,000
new subscriptions, it would easily repay this investment. With a subscription price of
$3 per year for clergy, $4 per year for laity, and an estimated 75 percent clergy
readership, doubled circulation would have brought in nearly $100,000 for the
magazine. On top of that, with higher circulation, the magazine could have generated
even more revenue by increasing its advertising rates.\footnote{Ad rates are usually calculated on the basis of CPM, or cost per thousand readers. Additionally, magazines with higher readerships attract advertisers that would not bother to place ads in small periodicals. Thus the benefits of increased circulation are significant but difficult to put in exact monetary terms.}

The campaign started well. Two readers responded to the solicitation the day
after it appeared in print. The Reverend Fred C. Schweinfurth, minister of Salem
Evangelical Church in Norwood, Ohio, sent in ten names, and Professor Jerome
Davis of Yale Divinity School submitted five. The Century celebrated both
contributors in its October 8 issue.\footnote{House ad, CC (Oct. 8, 1925), 1258-1259.} Schweinfurth probably never again saw his name
in 18-point type, but Davis, an outspoken Socialist, went on to make national news in
each state and excerpts from letters that accompanied the lists of names, as well as
display ads for the prize products.
Enthusiasm quickly flagged. Toward the end of the year, attention to the campaign in the magazine dwindled, and scant references appeared in early 1926. Finally, on March 18, 1926, the Century printed a one-page “Roll of Honor” listing the winners of the contest.  

The eleven top prizes (an extra car had been added to the original list) went to seven ministers, including Edward Scribner Ames of Hyde Park Christian Church and the University of Chicago; a Chicago graduate student; the secretary of the Massachusetts Universalist Convention; a well-known social worker, who competed under a pseudonym; and Miss Anne Guthrie, general secretary of the Chicago YWCA, who led all contestants with 180 subscriptions collected. Only one

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person, the Rev. W.L. Absher of Salt Lake City, won a state award for helping his state reach at least 75 percent of its quota of doubled circulation. His 83 subscriptions more than doubled Utah’s base of 40. The Century had promised three awards for the top campaigners in every quota-matching state, but apparently no one else met the goal. The magazine also granted eleven appreciation awards for subscribers who submitted at least 50 names each. The cost of the prizes awarded came to $8,535, but the subscriptions collected by prize-winners totaled just 2,308. The magazine never published complete results of the campaign, but it is unlikely that it netted more than 5,000 subscriptions.

Although the campaigns of the early 1920s failed to push circulation above 35,000—the magazine’s cruising altitude ever since—they significantly diversified the Century’s audience. In 1916, non-Disciples subscribers had been rare enough for Morrison to remark on seeing their names. By the end of the 1920s, Disciples readers constituted a minority. “As I remember it,” Morrison wrote in 1928, “the first substantial body of recruits was from the Congregationalists. Then came the Presbyterians and Baptists and Episcopalians, with proportionate representation from the less numerous denominations, and significant numbers of public leaders who could hardly be classified as churchmen at all.”25 The largest group of readers in 1928 claimed Methodist affiliation, even though Morrison had not originally considered promotion to that church worthwhile. The question was not one of interest or affinity; he merely thought their numerous and robust denominational periodicals would have exhausted “the loyalty if not the capacity of thoughtful Methodists.” With the

exception of the high number of Baptists, despite the apparent lack of a targeted
Baptist paper, the *Century* attracted about the audience one would expect given the
periodicals in which it advertised. Churches to which the *Century* did not market
itself—Roman Catholic, fundamentalist, holiness, and Pentecostal, to name a few—
neither supplied subscribers nor merited consideration. In Morrison’s mind, as in the
minds of many early 20th century Protestant leaders, these bodies did not even rank as
“less numerous denominations.”

Also in the 1920s, the *Century* saw a sharp rise in library subscriptions.
Princeton Theological Seminary’s holdings of the magazine date back to 1920.
Colgate-Rochester Divinity School’s collection begins in 1921. Yale University and
the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill retain issues going back to 1922,
Duke University and Texas Christian University to 1923, and Northwestern
University, Southern Methodist University, the University of California at Berkeley,
and even then-fundamentalist Wheaton College to 1924. The flurry of library
subscriptions predated the *Century*’s listing in the *Readers’ Guide to Periodical
Literature*, begun September 1929, so indexing cannot account for the increase. More
likely the *Century*’s own appeals hit their mark. In February 1923, for example, a
full-page ad invited readers to place the *Christian Century* ($4), the *Independent* ($3),
or both journals ($6) in their local libraries, thereby providing “The best reading …
for the largest number … at the least cost.”

26 Advertisement, CC (Feb. 8, 1923), 187.
have originated with subscribers, librarians among them, or this public appeal might have followed private attempts to generate library subscriptions.27

Library circulation constitutes a substantial but understudied component of a publication’s profile. Today, circulation managers regularly estimate pass-along readership on top of paid subscriptions, but no records document the number of people who read a copy of a magazine in a library. This lack of data could produce a significant undercount of Century readership. By the 1970s, fully thirty percent of the Century’s subscriptions mailed to libraries, where each copy could be read by anywhere from zero to dozens of readers.28 Many subscribers first encountered the Century at college or seminary, so its availability in these places had tremendous strategic importance.

Less tangibly, easy access to back-issues of the Century has surely shaped research on American Protestantism. As of January 2008, nearly 3,000 libraries reported holdings of The Christian Century. Almost as many libraries reported holdings of the Century’s leading evangelical competitor, Christianity Today, but the numbers for other past and present magazines across the Protestant spectrum were far lower: The Christian Herald, the most widely circulated Protestant news and general interest magazine of the early twentieth century, 304 libraries; Our Sunday Visitor, a Roman Catholic weekly with the largest circulation of any religious periodical in the same period, 121 libraries; Moody Monthly, the nerve center of pre-World War II fundamentalism, 63 libraries; The Sunday School Times, leading paper of the massive

27 Several librarians wrote in 1928 to congratulate Morrison on his 20 years’ editorship. For some of their letters, see chapter 4.
Sunday school movement, 59 libraries; and the Bridal Call, the print component of Pentecostal phenomenon Aimee Semple McPherson’s ministry, just 3 libraries.29 The mismatch between archival resources and the contents of newsstands, post offices, and living rooms of the past complicates scholarly attempts to assess periodicals’ importance or influence.

### 3.2 Editorial expansion

Morrison the businessman might have stumbled with the Continental Campaign, but Morrison the editor had hit his stride by the mid-1920s. The magazine’s editorial maturation can be described as a search for increased breadth, quality, and prestige without the loss of religious distinctiveness. In each of these areas, Morrison’s personal, sometimes idiosyncratic, vision guided development, though other factors—including the ideas of other members of the Century’s growing staff—impinged as well.

In Morrison’s telling, the editorial transition from denominational journal to undenominational journal entailed little strain. “The problem of re-orienting the Century for its broader mission was not difficult,” he wrote in his autobiography. “No essential change in our message was necessary, though the contents of our pages, especially the news department, required an expanded horizon consistent with the avowed ecumenical orientation of our editorial concern.”30 He identified two primary tasks to facilitate the transition. First, he needed to “button-up the paper journalistically,” which involved fairly minor format changes. Second, Morrison

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29 WorldCat, searched February 21, 2008.
30 Autobiography, n1.
endeavored to enlarge and diversify the magazine’s corps of contributors. The knot of Chicago-area Disciples whose names appeared on the January 3, 1918, masthead simply could not report on all developments of interest to the magazine’s newly diffuse readership. Morrison needed more help.

It might seem that dropping the magazine’s denominational affiliation would open up the universe of potential writers, but Morrison encountered the opposite experience. After the magazine became undenominational, he recalled, “We began what proved to be a long period of discovering news correspondents who would sense the kind of news appropriate and interesting to a constituency concerned with events and movements that transcended denominational parochialism by their significance for the whole church.”31 Several aspects of this statement help explain Morrison’s difficulties. How might a correspondent “sense” news? Who could judge what would be “appropriate and interesting” to a growing and changing constituency? Who belonged under the heading “the whole church”? As long as Morrison made basically all of the editorial decisions, he did not have to answer these questions explicitly. “News” was whatever he found compelling, whatever seemed to hasten or impede the coming of God’s kingdom. Hiring writers forced Morrison to articulate thought processes that had, over more than a decade of editing, become instinctive. This process of self-interrogation slowed the search.

For several years, the Century received weekly bulletins from only one corner of the worldwide church, London. On the recommendation of Northwestern University president Lynn Harold Hough, Morrison engaged Edward Shillito to write

31 Ibid., n1-n2.
“British Table Talk,” a column that ran toward the back of the magazine until the author’s death in 1948. Shillito, the well-connected literary secretary of the London Missionary Society, displayed a curious sense of news. A 1923 edition of his column, selected at random, reported on the death of the bishop of Chelmsford, a thunderstorm, an Anglo-Catholic congress, a foreign policy speech, the evangelism of track star Eric Liddell, and assorted London-area lectures and events.32 Despite a journalistic sensibility that did not seem to follow Morrison’s, Shillito endeared himself to the editor and to readers, perhaps primarily for his literary tone. In 1931 Shillito added to his writing duties the Century’s light but searching, pseudonymous “Quintus Quiz” column, a favorite of the magazine’s staff members.33 Shillito might also have made friends in the office by regularly beating his deadlines; at his death, a dozen Quintus Quiz columns awaited publication. For whatever combination of reasons, according to Morrison’s editorial successor, “When the Century’s worldwide system of news coverage was later inaugurated, the Shillito newsletters furnished the model held up before all who joined our corps of special correspondents.”34 This corps grew slowly but steadily over Morrison’s tenure. At his retirement 46 reporters in the United States and abroad contributed news items, some more frequently than others.

Amassing correspondents posed challenges, but finding an editorial associate involved even higher stakes and, consequently, took even longer. Though Morrison described this search as his “most pressing concern” in 1920, four years passed before

32 Edward Shillito, “British Table Talk,” CC (Aug. 9, 1923), 1012-1013.
34 Ibid.
he found the right person. The steps he took, as he recalled in his autobiography, revealed both what he thought of himself and what he thought the character of the magazine should be.

I scanned the whole scene of American Protestantism almost daily, my attention focusing now upon this brilliant theologian, or this editor of a denominational paper, or this parish minister. I read the manuscripts of articles submitted for publication, hoping to find an associate among their authors by asking this question: Does this writer have what it takes to be the kind of an editor of the kind of a paper the Century must be? Has he that depth of knowledge—theological, philosophical, historical, humanistic—which gives him confidence that he knows what he is saying when he says it? Or, is he just a “writer”—facile, clever, interesting, but not authoritative? Or, conversely, given profound scholarship and sound judgment, does he write in a style that commands and holds attention, and leaves the reader informed if not convinced?35

Based on this description, Morrison sought an associate with broad academic learning, great assurance of his own beliefs, a vigorous writing style, and intimate familiarity with the religious scene. In short, Morrison sought someone very like himself. Some additional criteria were so automatic as to escape mention: the associate must hail from one of the churches whose members numbered among the Century’s readership (which, for Morrison, defined the boundaries of the Christian world), must be a proponent of ecumenism and the Social Gospel, must either live in Chicago or be willing to move there, and almost certainly must be male.36 The removal of Disciples affiliation as a hiring criterion increased the importance of all of

35 Autobiography, n2-n3.
36 For a time, before World War I, a female contributing editor named Ida Withers Harrison wrote a column called “Modern Womanhood” for the Century. In A Century of The Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), Linda-Marie Delloff cited this fact and the magazine’s support for woman suffrage and female preachers as evidence of its progressive stance on gender issues, but attention to gender was hardly pervasive and seems to have had little effect on the Century’s thoroughly masculine culture. A look at the masthead and list of contributors for practically any issue during Morrison’s tenure reveals names of men only.
these other qualifications. As the pool of potential applicants widened, Morrison’s criteria sharpened.

One more thing—anyone who would work closely with Morrison must be willing to push himself very hard. Morrison maintained a rigorous schedule of speaking and fundraising while editing the weekly journal. His closest associate before making the full-time hire, Orvis F. Jordan, wrote 5,000 words a week for the Century; edited The Scroll, the publication of the Campbell Institute, through 1919; edited the city section of The Christian Messenger, a publication for churches in the Chicago area; freelanced; and served as pastor of the Evanston Christian Church. Thomas Curtis Clark, who had come to the Century from the Christian-Evangelist in 1911 and was Morrison’s only in-office editorial colleague until 1924, served as poetry editor (and frequent poetry contributor), news editor, copy editor, production manager, office manager, marketer, and head of the Century’s mail-order book and Sunday school curriculum business. In his first two decades of employment, Clark performed all of these tasks for minimal pay. Persons seeking easy employment would not have lasted long at 700 East 40th Street.

Morrison harbored fond hopes of bringing Reinhold Niebuhr onto the Century’s full-time staff. The young pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit had come to Morrison’s attention through his “Christian America” column in the Evangelical Herald and through a letter, published in The New Republic, espousing pacifism. Morrison did not print the first Niebuhr piece he received, an article titled

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37 Orvis F. Jordan, “The Campbell Institute Through Fifty Years,” The Scroll 44.4 (March-April 1947), 4-23.
38 Autobiography, n5.
“The Church versus the Gospel” that had been sent his way by Lynn Harold Hough, but he rejected it in positively fawning tones. “I have every respect for you as a writer and thinker,” Morrison wrote, “and I feel morally sure that if you submit something else which passes your own judgment, it will receive a more favorable consideration.”

Niebuhr did submit something else, a piece with the working title “Romanticism and Realism in the Pulpit,” and Morrison liked it so much that instead of running it as a freelance contribution, which would have meant a byline for Niebuhr but no payment, he ran it as an editorial, which carried no byline but earned Niebuhr $10. Publications seldom use freelance contributions as unsigned editorials, because unsigned editorials are understood to speak with the publication’s own voice, but Morrison made the exception for Niebuhr because he sensed perfect harmony between them. This article, Morrison told Niebuhr in a personal letter, “strikes a note to which my own mind vibrates.”

By early 1923, Morrison was begging Niebuhr to contribute as many articles as he could write. Over the next several years, some of these appeared as unsigned but paid editorials, and others appeared as signed but unpaid articles, as Niebuhr balanced a need for cash with a desire for recognition.

For a time, Morrison successfully moved the bulk of Niebuhr’s journalistic output to the *Century*, but Niebuhr declined Morrison’s offer of full-time employment as associate editor. According to Niebuhr biographer Richard Wightman Fox, Niebuhr was initially flattered by the offer and planned to take it, but several factors...
changed his mind. Sherwood Eddy, head of the YMCA in New York, also sought to lure Niebuhr away from Detroit. Eddy and his close friend Kirby Page, with whom he had founded the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order in 1921, likely sowed doubts in Niebuhr’s mind about Morrison’s politics. Meanwhile, the council at Niebuhr’s church lobbied hard to keep him, even offering to pay for a full-time assistant to carry pastoral duties as Niebuhr’s calendar of writing and speaking engagements filled. Ultimately, a three-day visit to the Century’s offices convinced Niebuhr not to join the staff. Niebuhr came away with a sense that his brand of political opposition to warfare and Morrison’s passion for a legislative campaign (led by Chicago lawyer Salmon Levinson) to outlaw war were incompatible, as were their personalities. Niebuhr would write for Morrison but not work for him.42

Instead, in 1924 Paul Hutchinson came onboard as managing editor. Sixteen years younger than Morrison, Hutchinson shared few of the older man’s biographical details. Originally from Madison, New Jersey, Hutchinson, a Methodist, had studied at Garrett Biblical Institute and DePauw University. He never held a pastorate, but he did serve for five years as a missionary in China, where he edited the China Christian Advocate.43 He later worked as “head of the publicity department of the committee on conservation and advance of the Methodist Episcopal church.”44 Morrison’s and Hutchinson’s circles did not overlap. In a published recollection after Hutchinson’s sudden death in 1956, Morrison professed that he had never heard of him until January 1924, when a manuscript landed on his desk. In fact, Hutchinson had

42 Ibid., 74-75.
44 “Contributors to This Issue,” CC (Aug. 9, 1923), 1015.
published an article in the Century in August 1923, a curious report on a YWCA convention that ran under the title, “Thoughts for Women—1923 Model.” Morrison might have forgotten other details of his early contact with Hutchinson, too, but the men obviously did not know each other well before 1924. Besides, additional details would only have bogged down a good story.

After receiving Hutchinson’s January 1924 submission, the story went, Morrison looked him up and invited him to lunch. In the course of a three-hour conversation, Morrison offered him a job, and he accepted. On Hutchinson’s second day of work, he produced two short editorials that went directly into the magazine. Two days later, he wrote a long editorial, which also went directly into print. Three weeks after this, Morrison took a trip to Europe with his wife, leaving Hutchinson in charge. Morrison described Hutchinson as a “born journalist,” a man who quickly produced clean prose that was “the exact mirror of his mind.” Other colleagues who contributed to Hutchinson’s 1956 Century obituary feature extolled his integrity, kindness, humility, breadth of interest and expertise, and ecumenism.

Reading between the lines of these encomia, a few contrasts between Hutchinson and Morrison emerge. Longtime Century literary editor Winfred Ernest Garrison observed, “By temperament and character [Hutchinson] would have been the last to assume an oracular air as one who spoke with authority, but what he wrote had the authority of carefully checked facts intelligently interpreted.” It might be going too far to read this statement as a subtle jab at Morrison, but Morrison hardly

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45 Paul Hutchinson, “Thoughts for Women—1923 Model,” CC (Aug. 9, 1923), 1009-1011.
shied away from the oracular, and the ability to speak with authority had been one of his main criteria for an editorial associate.

Additionally, managing editor Theodore A. Gill wrote that Hutchinson manifested “both the critical realism (not crape-hanging) which is true protestantism, and the grateful affirmation of creation (not vapid geniality) which is true catholicism.” References to “true catholicism” had appeared in the *Century* for decades, but Hutchinson’s ecumenism, unlike Morrison’s, included actual Catholics. *Time* magazine, which also published a glowing obituary for Hutchinson, noted that, at the time of his death from a ruptured aorta, he had been touring the South to speak in favor of desegregation. *Time* quoted him as saying, “I am going to praise the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New Orleans for the stand he has taken—the archbishop is in serious trouble because of it—and I am going to relate U.S. problems to the long-range missionary interest of all churches, Protestant and Catholic.”

Morrison’s catholicity never extended so far.

Differences between Morrison and his first full-time associate demonstrated the diversity that entered the *Century’s* pages through the enlargement of its staff, but commonalities between the two men revealed more about the magazine’s core characteristics. Morrison was a Republican and Hutchinson a Wilsonian Democrat, but both disdained militarism, championed labor and minority rights, held expansive views of the role of the church in society, and longed for Christian unity. As modernists, both sought to apply the insights of new scholarship and theology to the

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48 “Happy Man.”
49 See, for example, editorial, “Are Catholics Christians?” *CC* (Mar. 5, 1925), 306; Morrison, “Open Letter to Sen. Kennedy,” *Christianity Today* (Sept. 12, 1960), 998, 1012-1013. Morrison published the latter article in *Christianity Today* after the *Century* refused to print it. 132
world’s problems. Also, both frequented the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and possessed fine singing voices, with a special fondness for hymns.50

The editors’ musicality might seem to be a coincidence, but it indicated a shared aesthetic with liturgical and, by extension, ecumenical implications. Managing editor Gill could remark on Hutchinson’s voice and musical taste because he had sat next to Hutchinson in worship and at Orchestra Hall. Morrison and Herbert L. Willett had edited a hymnal together.51 Garrison frequently reflected on music in the Century; a quotation from an article he wrote about Bach served as the epigram for Linda-Marie Delloff’s dissertation on the magazine’s aesthetic.52 According to Delloff, the editors valued art even above science, because art held greater potential to communicate religious verities. In drama, architecture, visual arts, and, of course, music, they found “the revelation of life’s beauty and truth.”53 In important ways, then, the principal members of the Century staff heard the same music of the spheres.

3.3 Standing alone

As the Century expanded in the 1920s, its publishing sector contracted. The liberal, church-related magazines that Morrison considered his journal’s closest peers “went down in this decade like tenpins on a bowling green.”54 Only the Century survived, avoiding the pitfalls of secularization and denominational retrenchment.

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52 Delloff, “God as Artist.”
53 Ibid., 29.
54 Autobiography, m7.
Toughened by many lean years, the magazine was even able to swallow some of its competitors.

As mentioned previously, media historian Frank Luther Mott placed at the top of his typology of religious magazines The Independent and The Outlook, designated “magazines of comment and literature with church backgrounds.”55 These two reigned as prestige periodicals at the end of the nineteenth century, flagships of the New England Protestant establishment. Both had made more than their share of history as well.

The Independent began first, in 1848. Congregationalists launched the title as a link to members of their church who lived outside New England. In addition to its founding publisher, Henry Bowen, who also was a founder of Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church, the magazine’s early staff included Plymouth pastor Henry Ward Beecher and his apprentice and parishioner, Theodore Tilton. The Independent quickly became the country’s “leading evangelical weekly” as its circulation reached 70,000 in the early 1860s.56 Beecher contributed religious pieces in the form of sermons and addresses, while Tilton, a Radical Republican, stocked the pages with political and literary content. Some observers accused the magazine of being too secular, but as historian Richard Wightman Fox pointed out, sentimental Victorian poetry and fiction, antislavery writing, and Republican rhetoric blended almost seamlessly into

56 Richard Wightman Fox, Trials of Intimacy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 188.
liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century. Beecher’s and Tilton’s texts coexisted comfortably, as did the two men.\footnote{Ibid., 188-189, 192.}

Then came the affair. The details and timeline remain murky—Fox could not resolve them in an entire book—but by the mid-1860s Beecher seems to have been carrying on with Tilton’s wife. Tilton might have been unfaithful, too. Beyond the bedroom, Tilton’s radical political views grated first on Beecher and then on Bowen. Beecher left the \textit{Independent} in 1866 and set up another magazine, the \textit{Christian Union}, as its rival. Despite this professional parting from Bowen, Beecher conspired with the publisher in 1870 to dismiss Tilton as editor of the \textit{Independent}. Beecher’s \textit{Christian Union} rapidly eclipsed the \textit{Independent}, rising by 1872 to a circulation of 130,000. Soon afterward, as the sex scandal engulfed its editor, the \textit{Christian Union} fell into bankruptcy. Beecher’s friends propped up the magazine financially, Lyman Abbott joined the staff as editor, and, after falling to 20,000, circulation rebounded.\footnote{Charles H. Lippy, ed., \textit{Religious Periodicals of the United States: Academic and Scholarly Journals} (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 409.}

Backed by bluebloods, both the \textit{Independent} and the \textit{Christian Union} (which changed its name to \textit{The Outlook} in 1893) landed on their feet. Historian Henry F. May ranked the \textit{Independent} and \textit{Outlook} just below the \textit{Nation}, \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, and \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} as components of “a solid front in defense of American nineteenth-century culture.”\footnote{Henry F. May, \textit{The End of American Innocence} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 75.}

These two “fortresses,” as May called them, withstood scandal, staff turnover, and early financial instability, but they could not survive the 1920s. The \textit{Independent} began the decade with circulation more than 100,000, but debts mounted and
circulation fell. Around 1926 the editor, Dr. Hamilton Holt, asked Morrison to call on him during a trip to New York. Though the *Independent* still counted a readership of 75,000—more than twice that of the *Christian Century*—Holt offered to sell the magazine and its subscriber list to Morrison for $15,000. Morrison recalled being astonished but intrigued. As he mulled it over, however, an advisor counseled, “‘Don’t do it. … Gain your own circulation by the merits of the *Century* itself; it will be slower, but it will be healthier.’” Morrison declined the offer. In 1928, with just 12,000 subscribers left, the *Independent* was forced to merge with its one-time archrival, the *Outlook*.

Seeking a lifeboat, the *Independent* instead lashed itself to a sinking ship. The *Outlook*, after enjoying a heyday with Theodore Roosevelt as editor in the early 1910s, also languished in the 1920s, with its circulation falling from more than 100,000 in 1921 to fewer than 67,000 in 1928. The combined *Outlook* and *Independent* struggled on until 1932, when it went bankrupt.

Although the Depression and broad cultural shifts contributed to the collapse of these two paragons, the lesson Morrison learned from their demise was to beware secularization. In his autobiography, Morrison wrote reverently of Lyman Abbott

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60 Autobiography, m11.
62 Because advertising revenues are tied to business expenditures and circulation revenues are tied to disposable income, magazines do generally fluctuate with the economy as a whole. The correlation is not simple, however. The number of monthly magazines and the aggregate circulation of all American magazines grew throughout the 1920s. Aggregate circulation dipped between 1929 and 1935, but it had rebounded higher than the pre-Crash level by 1937. (See Peterson, 58-59). Within these broad trends, titles followed sometimes surprising trajectories. Several venerable nineteenth-century magazines collapsed around the time that the *Outlook* and *Independent* did, but others, such as *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic*, survived. Meanwhile, new titles with similar demographic profiles arose. As one example of a publishing counter-trend, *Fortune* magazine launched in February 1930, with the dust of the stock market implosion still thick in the air. So many factors can contribute to the health or
and his contributions, in the *Outlook* and elsewhere, to a Christian rapprochement with evolution. “But when this particular crisis in Christian thinking had been passed,” Morrison stated, “the *Outlook*’s contribution to religion faded out.” When Morrison encountered Abbott’s son Ernest Hamlin Abbott, who had succeeded him as editor of the *Outlook*, on a trip to the warfront in 1918, Morrison found the young man uninterested in religious questions. Morrison remembered, “It was not long after this that the *Outlook* passed from the Abbott family into a secular control—and soon into its own dissolution.” The *Independent*, in Morrison’s estimation, had long been more “churchly” than the *Outlook*, but under Holt it too had lost this focus in a vain search for wider circulation.

Morrison would not make the same mistake. Of the decision to reposition the *Century* as undenominational, he wrote, “The change we were contemplating did not imply that in leaving the denomination we were leaving the Church catholic and embarking on a course of general journalism as did the *Outlook* and *Independent*. On the contrary, we were determined to be all the more in the Church catholic by avowing our undenominational character.” In a 1938 anniversary article, he made this point more colorfully.

I recall with many an inward chuckle, one morning some ten or a dozen years ago when the business manager came into the office to tell of a dream he had had that night. It seems that I was drowning in Lake Michigan. He and my editorial colleagues were standing on the shore, having exhausted all their efforts to rescue me. I was just going down for the third and last time, but

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63 Autobiography, m10.
64 Autobiography, m12.
before the water covered my mouth I thrust up my hand and cried, “Keep it religious! Keep it religious!”

Morrison explained that “it” meant the *Century* and admitted that the temptation to secularize—and thereby greatly increase circulation, income, and prestige—had been strong in the 1920s.

By 1938, Morrison had seen the secularized *Outlook* and *Independent* fail. Nonetheless, he retained the assumption that a publication could trade religious affiliation for cultural capital. Against charges that the *Century* had in fact made this trade, though, Morrison could offer both the content and the survival of his magazine as evidence. The issue in which Morrison reflected on his 30 years as editor featured long articles by Yale church historian Roland Bainton (on a Christian unity conference at Utrecht) and Methodist minister Stanley Lowell (on reluctant Jewish converts to Christianity in Vienna), as well as church news, advertisements for church products, and reviews of numerous books on religion. This lineup diverged sharply from publishing trends. In the 1920s, articles dealing with religion, as indexed in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*, had fallen to 10.7 per 1,000 (from 21.4 per 1,000 in 1905), and the portion of articles favorable to religion had fallen to 33 percent (from 78 percent in 1905). Over Morrison’s tenure the *Century* came to resemble secular opinion journals in some significant ways, explored below, but it never lost its Christian identity.

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Morrison believed that the *Outlook* and *Independent* had doomed themselves by pursuing unfruitful editorial policies. By contrast, he attributed the decline of the *Century’s* solidly religious peers to misguided denominational policies. After the *Congregationalist* and *Advance* lost their subsidies from the Congregational publishing house, Pilgrim Press, they merged and became, according to Morrison, “frankly an official organ for the promotion of the denominational interests.”67

Internal church documents confirmed this assessment:

> This fundamental obligation to represent the denomination made more imperative by the combining into one paper *The Congregationalist* and *The Advance* … naturally imposes certain clearly defined limits beyond which the paper cannot go and fulfill the denominational duty. It must carry from week to week material not eagerly sought and quickly appreciated by the average reader of periodicals and magazines. It cannot be an *Atlantic* or an *Outlook* or a *Saturday Evening Post.*68

The *Continent*, a Chicago-based Presbyterian magazine, lost its funding from the McCormick family and, unable to secure any money from its denomination, ceased publication in 1926. In the 1930s the Methodist church combined several of its papers, including the one Morrison deemed the “most radiant of all Methodist papers—the *New York Christian Advocate,*” into a single, centralized *Christian Advocate*. In the span of about a decade, then, all of the church-related magazines whose status and quality Morrison had once hoped to match in the *Century* either folded or succumbed to “the bane of most religious journalism—headquarters mentality.”69

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67 Autobiography, m2.
69 Autobiography, m2-m3.
Morrison considered captivity to denominational interests inimical both to journalism and to ecumenism, the two causes dearest to his heart. At their best, the religious magazines whose deaths he lamented had “freely fared forth in discussion of what we now call ecumenical interests … [and] had broadened their horizon to include the whole church.” Unfortunately, “This wider orientation was incompatible, journalistically speaking, with propaganda for specific missionary, educational and other denominational programs, for which gifts of the churches had been solicited.” As church budgets tightened with the onset of the Great Depression, leaders could no longer justify supporting independent-minded, money-losing periodicals with funds that could otherwise be used for, say, ministers’ salaries. Ecumenical magazines could not rely on donations, either, as “it became increasingly difficult to secure from private sources the necessary financial support to maintain these journals when the denominational motive could no longer be appealed to.” In short, as far as Morrison was concerned, the Century’s ecumenical peers “failed because they were too good journalistically and not good enough denominationally.”

With this diagnosis, Morrison highlighted two aspects of what religious historian Robert T. Handy would later call a “spiritual recession” that began before the stock market crash of 1929. Surveying the same “major denominations” with which Morrison and the Century concerned themselves, Handy found declines in missionary enthusiasm and support, Sunday school enrollments, attendance at Sunday evening services, evangelism, and clergy status. When economic depression swept like a hurricane over weakened church edifices, decreasing the income on which

70 Ibid., m6-m7.
parishioners might tithe while dramatically increasing the burden of social services carried by congregations, American Protestantism responded by “slashing budgets, … halting benevolent and missionary enterprises, dismissing ministers, closing churches,” and discontinuing magazines. Only expenditures that promised to bring in funds or warm bodies survived. Independent journalism and ecumenism missed the cut.71

Morrison caught a few magazines before they fell. In 1926 the editor of the Christian Work approached Morrison with a buyout offer. Morrison called the New York-based magazine “a weekly of a high order, supposedly strongly entrenched with a predominantly Presbyterian tradition and circulation.” Despite accounting irregularities at the Christian Work that were disclosed at the time of the buyout offer, the Century acquired its roughly 15,000 subscribers in return for paying off the magazine’s “substantial” debts. It turned out that half of its subscribers already took the Century, so Morrison lost on the deal, but he professed that he “did not regret our cooperating with its sensitively honest managing editor in his desire to close out the paper without embarrassing consequences.” In 1933 the Century absorbed the Baptist, formerly called the Standard, which had for many years shared a building in Chicago with the Century. A “loyal but intelligently liberal Baptist paper,” according to Morrison, the Baptist, like the Presbyterian Continent, had lost its external funding and could not secure (or possibly did not want) denominational funding. The next year, the Century absorbed The World Tomorrow, the monthly publication of the

pacifist Fellowship Of Reconciliation. Morrison did not indicate whether he had paid for the Baptist. He acquired The World Tomorrow for free.\textsuperscript{72}

One of the lessons Morrison learned from these business deals reinforced the advice he received about the possible acquisition of the Independent: Don’t do it. “The absorption of these three papers brought no substantial increase in our circulation,” he admitted.\textsuperscript{73} Morrison was not singularly unlucky. Almost by definition, any magazine seeking absorption has an anemic subscriber base. Additionally, in competition for subscribers and advertisers, magazines labor to develop brand loyalty, sometimes (as in the case of the Century, the Christian Standard, and the Christian-Evangelist) by attacking rivals. Subscribers who develop loyalty toward one magazine, and who might concurrently have developed suspicion of other titles, usually respond poorly when another magazine is substituted for the one to which they chose to subscribe. Magazines retain only about 20 percent of subscribers inherited through absorption, compared to 40 to 60 percent of their own subscribers in a normal renewal cycle.\textsuperscript{74} Having faced these figures, Morrison never bought another magazine. The Century did not absorb another title until 1970, when it continued the British Protestant magazine New Christian, which offered access to a

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., m4-m5. Absorbing a magazine, or acquiring its subscribers, differs from the acquisition of a title by a publisher. When the Century absorbed the Christian Work, The Baptist, and World Tomorrow, these magazines ceased publication. Their subscribers stopped receiving them and began receiving the Century instead. The Century, as a publishing company, did not grow by acquiring other titles and continuing them separately as, for example, Christianity Today did when it acquired Campus Life from Youth for Christ in 1982 and continued publishing it under its original title.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., m5.

different geographic market and, as far as tone and design, closely resembled the Century already.\textsuperscript{75}

Contraction in the religious publishing sector also informed Morrison’s journalistic sensibilities, especially his understanding of the relationship between a periodical and its readers. Because he wrote his autobiography long after his retirement, it is impossible to determine when he fully developed this understanding, but his reflections on the downfall of the Century’s religious rivals demonstrated a sophistication far beyond that with which he started his editorial career. “True journalism rests upon what is called in the jargon of the craft ‘reader interest,’” he wrote. “By this term is meant the voluntary response of the subscriber when he finds in the periodical what he wants or feels the need of, in contrast with such reading as is pressed upon his sense of duty.”\textsuperscript{76} Through spending the first decade of his editorship grasping for readers and donations, and through watching magazines that failed to generate sufficient “reader interest” die, Morrison learned how to steer a course between his prophetic, sometimes overbearing vision for the Century and the popularity the magazine needed to survive. He developed a sensitive ear to balance his booming voice.

While the Century gained little profit from absorptions, Morrison deemed them intangible successes. That the Christian Work, Baptist, and World Tomorrow considered the Century “the appropriate heir of their prestige,” Morrison wrote, “was

\textsuperscript{75} Century contributing editor Alan Geyer explained the back-story of this merger in “A Quadrennium Remembered,” CC (Oct. 11, 1978), 941-942. According to Geyer, wariness of American expansionism followed by a British postal strike caused most British readers acquired through the merger to drop their subscriptions soon afterward. The editor of New Christian, Trevor Beeson, stayed on as a foreign correspondent for the Century.

\textsuperscript{76} Autobiography, m7.
a real legacy, though an imponderable one.” The buyout offer from the *Independent*, though rejected, was even more flattering. Morrison had led the *Century* from the small field of Disciples journalism into the much bigger field of Protestant journalism, and, far from suffering in the transplantation, the magazine shot up to overshadow the competition. From this elevation, Morrison spied new peers and rivals: *The Nation, The New Republic, and The Commonweal*.

### 3.4 Cultural competitors

The *Century*’s “definite and important place” in American culture, asserted rather than proven in 1920, had become much clearer by the early 1930s. The magazine had outgrown the insular world of Disciples journalism. It no longer competed with the *Outlook* and *Independent* or with elite, left-leaning denominational papers, because these no longer existed. It never sought to challenge mass-circulation titles like *Collier’s* or *Literary Digest*. Instead, it stood as the distinctively Protestant counterpart to liberal secular and Roman Catholic newsweeklies. The *Century* defined this realm as its mature field of competition through design, editorial, and advertising cues.

The key title in this field was *The Nation*. Founded in 1865, *The Nation* in 2008 called itself “America’s oldest weekly magazine, the flagship of the left & now the country’s most widely read journal of opinion.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it set the tone, visually and editorially, for learned, emphatic, liberal journalism. Wide readership is a recent phenomenon for the magazine; it has

77 Autobiography, m6.
78 Publisher’s description, Amazon.com, accessed March 24, 2008.
consistently lost money and, for most of its history, reached only a meager audience.\textsuperscript{79} Henry May, after praising its editorial style as “adequately technical and yet not impenetrable to the layman,” noted that owing to its “usual stark honesty, the \textit{Nation} in 1912 claimed only 6,000 weekly readers; it had never wanted many, and it demanded the best.”\textsuperscript{80} In other words, \textit{The Nation} always possessed more cultural capital than actual capital, and pursuit of the former complicated pursuit of the latter.\textsuperscript{81}

Despite the financial risks, all of the other magazines discussed here copied the \textit{Nation’s} look, editorial grid, and overall approach. This is a common pattern in journalism. As Pierre Bourdieu noted, “Like political parties, newspapers must endlessly work to maximize their clientele, at the expense of their closest competitors in the field of production, through more or less disguised borrowings of themes, formulae and even journalists, without losing the core readership which defines them and gives them their distributional value.”\textsuperscript{82} For journals to compete with each other, in other words, they must first establish that they are playing the same game.

\textsuperscript{79} The magazine is supported by a network of donors, The Nation Associates. The group’s homepage claims that the magazine “loses money in even the flushest of times.” http://www.thenation.com/associates/index.mhtml (accessed March 24, 2008).
\textsuperscript{80} May, 73.
\textsuperscript{81} Pierre Bourdieu observed this conundrum: “Intellectuals and artists are thus divided between their interest in cultural proselytism, that is, winning a market by widening their audience, which inclines them to favour popularization, and concern for cultural distinction, the only objective basis of their rarity; and their relationship to everything concerned with the ‘democratization of culture’ is marked by a deep ambivalence.” \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste}, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 229. On the chronic unprofitability of magazines of opinion, see Mark Hulsether, \textit{Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993} (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 231-232.
\textsuperscript{82} Bourdieu, 234.
In 1914, *The New Republic* declared itself “frankly an experiment … an attempt to find a national audience for a journal of opinion.” A “sister journal” to *The Nation*, it drew contributors of texts and monies from the same East Coast intelligentsia and sought a similar audience of book-loving progressives. Though their paths have diverged, the two magazines seriously discussed a merger in 1949-1950, in the hope that pooled resources would better cover the costs that persistently threatened both unprofitable titles. Political differences prevented the marriage.

A different set of well-educated and wealthy patrons bankrolled *The Commonweal*, which was launched in 1924, but this lay Catholic magazine emerged from the same matrix. It stole one of its first assistant editors, Helen Walker, from *The New Republic*, and it consciously adopted that periodical’s character. At a fortieth anniversary symposium, George Shuster, who joined the staff of *The Commonweal* soon after it began publication, recalled of the early years, “We insisted on being as highbrow as *The New Republic*. Very few people objected to *The Commonweal* in those days in terms of doctrine or even in terms of being a lay organ, but they detested the notion that we were going to be highbrow.” This insistence was not a business decision. Shuster admitted, “It cost us a good deal in terms of subscribers and in terms of good will.” The choice of *The New Republic* (and, by extension, *The Nation*) as a model instead indicated cultural aspirations, a desire to enter certain conversations at a certain level. With initial investment of about $300,000, *The

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83 *The New Republic* (Nov. 7, 1914), 1.
*Commonweal* had the luxury to pursue this identity—as the Catholic *New Republic*—while slowly growing an audience.86

*The Christian Century*’s connections with these magazines had less to do with personnel than with visual and structural developments (Bourdieu’s formulae). As noted, the *Century* was powerfully shaped by the distinctive heritage of Disciples journalism. The *Century* was never merely a generically Protestant periodical seeking to reach an even more generically white, educated, upper-middle-class audience. Even so, by the early 1930s, the *Century* looked and frequently sounded a lot like *The Nation, The New Republic,* and *The Commonweal.* A comparison of the four magazines’ March 9, 1932, issue—a date selected at random within a period of relative stability for both the country and the publications—reveals the similarities that characterized this cultural niche.87

The first thing one notices is visual simplicity. Covers displayed the publication name, date, and headlines; no pictures. Type-treatment covers were certainly cheaper to produce than the illustrated covers of, for example, *The Saturday Evening Post,* and they also could be printed on the plain, rough paper stock all four magazines used. But the reasons for the plain covers were not merely financial. These covers made the magazines look more like academic journals than like consumer magazines, the “slicks.” They were invitations to education rather than entertainment.

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87 Sociologists might call this similarity between the periodicals isomorphism, the tendency of institutions in a given field to resemble each other, intentionally or unintentionally. See, for example, Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American Sociological Review* 48.2 (Apr. 1983), 147-160. Sociology would move from this observation of similarity to discussion of the reasons for it. I, however, am more interested in the results—the shared traits.
They embodied May’s claim that *The Nation* and its kin would rather attract a few serious readers than a gaggle of dilettantes. They sought to engage the mind rather than merely catch the eye.

Visual simplicity reigned within the pages as well. The March 9, 1932, issue of *The Nation* included one small, pen-and-ink drawing of presidential candidate Albert Cabell Ritchie; a few other issues that year included half-page or full-page editorial cartoons. Otherwise, in *The Nation* and in the other three magazines, the only images appeared in advertisements, which all of the magazines confined mostly to back pages. Even the ads tended to be text-heavy or text-only. None of these magazines used color, and none attempted to reproduce photographic images. A typical editorial page featured two columns of text introduced by a moderately sized (24-point or 30-point) headline and an enlarged, dropped initial capital letter. Except for the magazine’s name in the folio at the top, inside pages of the four magazines were virtually indistinguishable.

The editorial grid varied only slightly from title to title. All of them began each issue with three to four pages of short, unsigned editorials commenting on news items from around the world, followed by one or more longer, also unsigned, editorials. Next came four to five signed feature articles, a few standing columns (including letters to the editor), and finally short reviews. Among the standing columns, the *Century*, *The New Republic*, and *The Nation* each included one wry, pseudonymous contribution, “Quintus Quiz,” “Washington Notes,” and “In the Driftway,” respectively. All of the magazines reviewed books in every issue. Additionally, *The Commonweal* and *The New Republic* also reviewed plays, *The
Nation reviewed architecture and drama, and the Century offered thumbnail reviews of new films. The Century’s multi-page standing column of notes from correspondents, “News of the Christian World,” had no parallel in the other magazines. The Century also stood alone in printing a regular “Verse” section, though The Nation and The Commonweal regularly printed one short poem per issue. Each magazine numbered between 28 and 32 pages, with roughly four, total, given to advertisements.

Within this common structure, the magazines pursued somewhat different editorial agendas, with the two secular publications most closely resembling each other. The Nation, farthest left of the four in its politics, lamented developments—as various as a raid on an alleged Communist meeting in East St. Louis, state-directed birth control in China, and the commercialization of radio—that might delay the beginning of “the revolution.” The New Republic also hoped for radical world change, predicting that the Second World War would end in 1940 with “workers’ republics … established in every important country in the world,” but the magazine generally paid more attention to the concrete (strikes) than the abstract (revolution) and acknowledged the potential dark side of Communism. The World War article, cast as a retrospective from 1945, faulted Russian Communists for siding with “German chauvinists” and “Japanese militarists” in the war and admitted that the 10-year plan sketched out at the conclusion of the war had already fallen badly behind in its quotas.

Compared with these two periodicals, the Century hardly seemed left of center. Its pages spoke frequently of “liberalism,” but by this it meant “Christianizing
the social order,” a project that would include expanded government regulation and welfare programs as well as continued philanthropy by industrialists and leadership by churchmen. The Century’s measured approach to reform guided its thoughts, expressed in a short, unsigned editorial, on how America might meet its need for low-income housing: “The Karl Marx houses in Vienna are a model for the world, though it should be said that such houses cannot be made profitable to the investor. The most likely answer to the problem in this country is by some sort of public initiative in mass planning and production, using standard types and materials.”88 Such a proposal might create a stir at a city council meeting, but it would hardly enflame the proletariat. The Century’s theology, a subject that predictably attracted no attention in The Nation or The New Republic, was far more revolutionary. The lead feature article in the March 9 issue continued three theologians’ ongoing “Conversation About God,” which mulled whether God existed, whether he was personal, and whether humans could know anything about him.89 These questions could arouse as much passion in a church setting as the other magazines’ Communist sentiments could arouse in a union meeting.

Regarding politics, The Commonweal lay to the right of the Century. Its lead feature, “Relief for the Unemployed,” proposed massive federal intervention in the economic crisis, but the proposed mechanism for this intervention was an old-fashioned bond issue. The author cited with approval Woodrow Wilson’s last article, “The Road Away from Revolution,” which rooted reform in a belief that “Our

civilization cannot survive materially unless it be redeemed spiritually.” 90 A far cry from “Workers of the world, unite!” Elsewhere in the issue, the editors expressed deep suspicion of Soviets and their propaganda. “Idealists of many ages and revolutions of many sorts are justified in history,” the unsigned editorial admitted. “But that idealism is no guarantee of judgment, and revolution no guarantee of rightness, is a fact that it is important to state from time to time, with all due gentleness.” 91 Regarding theology, The Commonweal pushed different boundaries than the Century but with similar force. Its pages sought to reconcile humanism and Catholicity, evolution and the teachings of the Fathers, community identity and American integration. The issue’s first news item, praising a national conference of Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic leaders, even placed The Commonweal farther along than the Century on one Morrison’s key markers of progress, ecumenism. The Commonweal report on the conference named no Century staffers nor any of the magazine’s University of Chicago friends as participants.

As evidence that their distinct editorial programs nonetheless permitted the magazines to engage in conversation with one another, all four gave prominent attention in the sample issue to the same foreign policy story. At the beginning of March 1932, Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson sent a letter to Senator William Borah obliquely threatening an American diplomatic and, if necessary, military response to Japan’s shelling of Shanghai. Each magazine printed an unsigned editorial on the subject; all of the writers hoped that Stimson’s gesture would calm the Asian situation and prevent the United States from getting too heavily involved. The

90 I. Maurice Wormser, “Relief for the Unemployed,” The Commonweal (Mar. 9, 1932), 511-512.
Nation and The New Republic adopted generally negative postures toward Stimson, criticizing him for even raising the possibility of American intervention in someone else’s problem. The Century and The Commonweal found more to commend by placing Stimson and the Japan question in a broader context of foreign relations.

Picking up on a minor thread in the Stimson letter, which called for a united western front opposing Japanese expansionism, the Century titled its editorial, “Does Europe Want Peace?” Relatively unconcerned about the details of Asian politics, the Century instead pined (as it so often did) for cooperation among brothers, in this case Americans and Europeans. The Commonweal wondered whether Stimson’s mildly interventionist stance toward Latin America would pave the way for greater American involvement in the Pacific as well. The editors’ readings of Stimson did differ, but not so significantly that a reader would feel jarred moving from one magazine to another. If the writers had participated in a roundtable discussion, one would expect a stimulating, nuanced exchange, not a shouting match or mutual incomprehension.92

Sometimes the magazines engaged each other directly on their editorial pages. For example, as the 1932 presidential election neared, the Century praised a Commonweal article for arguing that, despite the Vatican’s stance against European socialism, intelligent American Catholics could vote for socialist candidate Norman Thomas if they wanted to.93 In fact, Century editors and Commonweal editors read each other’s work closely, and both positive and negative comments appeared

93 Editorial, “Can Roman Catholics Vote for a Socialist?” CC (Sept. 14, 1932), 1091.
frequently in both publications. In 1925 The Commonweal had fought the Century fiercely over whether Catholics were Christians. The protracted exchange of editorials hearkened back to the Century’s earlier tussles with other Disciples publications in the sense that partisans on both sides were expected to know and care deeply about the outcome of the disagreement. In the religiously charged presidential contest of 1928, the Century and The Commonweal addressed each other almost weekly, fraternally in the early months and with increasing hostility through the fall.

A greater gulf separated the Century from the two secular magazines. The Century more frequently referred to New York and Chicago daily newspapers than to either The Nation or The New Republic, but a May 1932 editorial quoted at length from a New Republic article on a mine strike and a June 1932 book review cheered New Republic editor George Soule for making “the most lucid and disarming contribution to economic liberalism that has yet appeared.” Editorials before and after the 1932 election seriously (and sympathetically) considered the political importance of Socialist Party candidate and Nation contributing editor Thomas. Additionally, a few months after The Nation printed an editorial on the economic crisis titled “The Way Out,” the Century ran an article series on the same subject with the same title; it included a contribution from Paul Blanshard, who in 1932 co-wrote a book with Thomas on political corruption.94 Century references to The Nation and The New Republic had been more numerous in 1928, when the Century had been dismayed that

two journals it admired endorsed a wet Catholic, Al Smith, for president.\textsuperscript{95} \textit{The Nation} and \textit{The New Republic} had repaid the \textit{Century}’s interest by placing subscription ads in its pages in the 1920s, but they basically ignored it in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{96}

Subscriptions and advertisements constituted final points of comparison for these journals. All four reported circulations in a similar range in 1932: \textit{The Commonweal}, 21,820; \textit{The New Republic}, 25,000; the \textit{Century}, 30,846; and \textit{The Nation}, 35,436.\textsuperscript{97} As judged by the contents of the March 9 issues, these readers shared interests in politics (especially reform), books, and the arts. As judged by the ads at the back of each magazine, however, the readers moved in separate worlds. Readers of \textit{The Nation} and \textit{The New Republic} likely bumped into each other on tours of Soviet Russia, at L.I.D. Dance for Rugged Individuals (whatever that was), and at the Charles Chaplin film festival at the New School auditorium, all of which advertised in both magazines. \textit{Commonweal} readers preferred pilgrimages to Israel and Rome, and they patronized Catholic schools like Regis College in Weston, Massachusetts, and The College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. The \textit{Century}, though it had spun off a preachers’ magazine, \textit{The Christian Century Pulpit}, in 1929, still catered to an overwhelmingly clerical audience. It advertised hymnals, devotionals, “books with a Lenten message,” seminaries, rolling partitions, and pulpit and choir gowns. If earlier ads for \textit{The Nation} and \textit{The New Republic} had netted any

\textsuperscript{95} Editorial, “Independents and the Election,” CC (Sept. 13, 1928), 1098-1099.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{The Nation} also at least once responded to a \textit{Century} editorial on its own editorial page, December 8, 1926.
subscribers, at least some *Century* readers also kept an eye on labor strikes, Russia, and the New York arts scene, but Protestant churches consumed most of their energy.

Given these differences in audience, the *Century* never competed directly with *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, or *The Commonweal* in the way it had once competed with *The Christian Standard* and *The Christian-Evangelist*. The magazines fought for different hearts and minds. In the sense of competing for status, cultural relevance, and the right to be heard, however, the mature *Century* very clearly squared off against the other liberal newsweeklies. To use Bourdieu’s language, through visual and editorial similarities these magazines cultivated in their readers common tastes, which in turn served to authorize and reinforce claims to prestige.98 The same people might not have read all four magazines, but the same kind of people did—the educated, the liberal, the urbane, the reformers, the influential. Even as the dust settled on the collapse of elite religious journalism, Morrison in many ways gained the audience he had always wanted.

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98 Bourdieu, 231.
4. Measuring Influence

Calling a magazine “influential” entails making a host of assertions about its audience. This might seem an obvious point, but most tributes to The Christian Century’s importance have touted the quality of the magazine’s content but have said nothing about its reception. In 1932, for example, Gaius Glenn Atkins of Auburn Theological Seminary claimed, “No history of American religion from 1920 to 1930 could be written without acknowledging its influence. A representative issue (May 8, 1924) features ‘Our Pagan Idea of Property,’ a meeting of the English Conference on Politics and Citizenship, a study of the Church in Rural Ohio, news of the Christian World and extensive book reviews. The editorial comment is pungent and provocative.”¹ All of Atkins’ statements about the Century’s breadth, verve, and even influence might be true, but they are not logically sufficient. No periodical, however vigorously written, can be influential if not enough people—or not enough of the right people—read it in a way that somehow changes them. To gauge the Century’s prominence, then, one must not merely analyze the messages sent by the editors but endeavor to learn who received those messages and how. Who constituted Morrison’s audience, and how did they respond to him?

For a variety of reasons, reception questions resist satisfactory answers. First, the researcher encounters source problems. While reams of editorial messages sit neatly bound in library stacks, audience responses are scattered, fragmentary, and opaque. Published letters to the editor, tightly filtered and edited, provide scant insight into the minds of subscribers. Even basic circulation demographics for the Century under Morrison’s leadership cannot be determined, because a later business

¹ Gaius Glenn Atkins, Religion in Our Times (New York: Roundtable Press, 1932), 274.
manager reportedly destroyed the records from his tenure.\(^2\) Any statements about

*Century* readership in the first half of the twentieth century, then, must be more
suggestive than conclusive.

Fortunately, a cache of letters addresses this source problem. In 1928, the
twentieth anniversary of Morrison’s purchase of the *Century*, the editor spent the
summer in Europe garnering support for the Kellogg-Briand Pact to outlaw
international war. While he was away from the office, the other editors and a few
friends of the magazine decided to celebrate his years of service by soliciting
congratulatory letters from all of the *Century*’s subscribers.\(^3\) Naturally, the request
fell far short of a one hundred percent response rate, but 2,132 letters were collected
and bound for presentation to the esteemed editor.\(^4\) Those letters are mined here for
clues to the makeup and mindset of the *Century* audience. The letters demonstrate
that, while the magazine never attained circulation numbers high enough to guarantee
its influence, its readership included the sort of people who could amplify its message
in religious, academic, and other cultural fields. In other words, the magazine’s small
audience included a lot of the “right” people.

Second, scholars face problems with measuring the impact of media
messages. “Media effects” stands as one of the most hotly contested areas of

\(^2\) This is the belief of Randy L. Bixby, manuscript archivist and curator at Southern Illinois University-
Carbondale, where the papers of the Christian Century Foundation are housed. No ledgers from 1908-
1947 reside in Carbondale or at the *Century* offices in Chicago.

\(^3\) “Celebrating Dr. Morrison’s Twenty Years,” CC (July 12, 1928), 873-4.

\(^4\) *Testimonial to Charles Clayton Morrison* (5 vols.), MS1255, Special Collections, Regenstein
Library, University of Chicago. All letters cited in this essay can be found in these volumes, which are
organized alphabetically but feature no page numbers. In a few instances, spelling or punctuation has
been corrected for readability.
communication studies. On one end of the media effects continuum is the “hypodermic theory,” which envisions a passive audience taking in whatever media messengers dish out. Scholars have largely abandoned this theory, but it continues to inform public policy debates about subjects like campaign finance reform and commercial sponsorship of children’s television. In both of these arenas, activists seek to control the messages transmitted, believing that no other defenses can prevent those messages from shooting straight into viewers’ minds. At the opposite end of the continuum lie “minimal effects” theories, which posit that audiences actively sift and filter media messages, taking in only those messages that conform to their established beliefs. Jeremiads about the fragmentation of news—especially on the Internet, where viewers of any persuasion can find “information” to suit their tastes—follow this line of thinking. Between these extremes range all sorts of theories that attempt to assess the push and pull between content providers and consumers, weighing the susceptibility of different audiences, the polysemy of various media, and the relative volume of media voices on specific topics. Despite decades of research, it remains unclear whether, to cite just two prominent examples of questions in this field, violent cartoons create violent children or anti-drug commercials discourage substance abuse. Given this widespread uncertainty, conclusions about the impact of the Century on its readers must be tentative as well.

Two theoretical insights address the effects problem. First, Pierre Bourdieu offers the concept of homology, which is a structural similarity or rapport between

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cultural producers and consumers. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argued that the link between a cultural product (such as *The Christian Century*) and its audience need not be intentional or demonstrably causal in order to be significant. In other words, it is not necessary to know whether *Century* editors enjoyed hypodermic access to readers’ minds, or which of many possible filters readers peered through, to be able to describe some of the magazine’s effects on its audience. Cultural similarities attracted the magazine and its readers to each other, and looking at the relationship built on that attraction yields insights into both the interests of the audience and the influence of the magazine.

Bourdieu’s concept helps explain how the *Century* amassed an ecclesiastically broad but culturally narrow readership. Less directly, it supports the claim made here that the *Century* served that readership less as a conduit of new information than as a shaper of group identity. *Century* editors endeavored to provide content that would promote specific beliefs and actions, but what they actually accomplished was to create a non-geographic community of readers with shared tastes that would eventually be seen—by insiders and by observers—as representative of a Protestant consensus, later labeled the mainline.

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6 “In the cultural market—and no doubt elsewhere—the matching of supply and demand is neither the simple effect of production imposing itself on consumption nor the effect of a conscious endeavour to serve the consumers’ needs, but the result of the objective orchestration of two relatively independent logics, that of the fields of production and that of the field of consumption. There is a fairly close homology between the specialized fields of production in which products are developed and the fields (the field of the social classes or the field of the dominant class) in which tastes are determined.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 230.

7 Peter W. Williams, for example, in the chapter “‘Mainline’ Protestantism in the Later Twentieth Century” in *America’s Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 356, lists *Century* readership among the 20 characteristics of the mainline.
Communication theorist James W. Carey more explicitly explored the role of media in creating communities. In a 1975 essay, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” he complained that Western thought had long been dominated by a transmission view of communication, whereas a ritual view would better express the role and importance of American media. The transmission view focuses on editors and texts and yields the kind of thinking evinced by Gaius Glenn Atkins, who assumed that the quality of editorial content proved the *Century’s* success. The ritual view, derived from religious thought (especially the ideas of Émile Durkheim), “sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action.” Journalism, far from merely conveying “the facts,” works like dance and chant to project community ideals onto chaotic reality. In this way, media create “an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process.”

In the case of the *Century*, the social process was the creation and reinforcement of a certain kind of Protestant identity. Receiving the *Century* in the

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8 James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 13-36, esp. 18-19. Durkheim’s foundational ideas on ritual appeared in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912, English trans. Joseph Swain, 1915). On the subject of symbols creating community, and community creating a sense of order, see also Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 166: “Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality, and one which tends to establish a *gnoseological* order: the immediate meaning of the world (and in particular of the social world) depends on what Durkheim calls *logical conformism*, that is, ‘a homogeneous conception of time, space, number and cause, one which makes it possible for different intellects to reach agreement.’ … Symbols are the instruments *par excellence* of ‘social integration’: as instruments of knowledge and communication … they make it possible for there to be a consensus on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order.”
mail, reading it, and quoting from it were ritual acts through which subscribers participated in the community of Christians who shared this identity. For some readers, the Century also served as a touchstone for the formation of local and familial communities.

This emphasis on shared culture is amply illustrated in the 1928 anniversary letters, in which subscribers celebrated a magazine that they frequently quarreled with, politically and theologically, yet welcomed into their homes as an old friend. According to these letters, the Century did change its readers, but not primarily by changing their minds. Rather, the magazine conferred status on its readers, giving them membership in a club where interesting people stopped by to spark lively conversations. It also established markers of in-group identity while keeping outsiders out. The magazine’s content mattered, but not because it gave readers startling new information or altered their voting patterns. The real importance of the Century to the emerging mainline was its ability to create a community within whose boundaries a rapidly changing world made sense.

4.1 The right readers

By 1928, Morrison had built the Century up from a Disciples of Christ publication with 600 mostly Midwestern readers to a national magazine with 35,000 readers, of whom only a minority were Disciples.9 Though that expansion was impressive, the Century remained only a mid-size player among religious titles. The largest-circulation religious periodical in America by far was Our Sunday Visitor, a weekly Roman Catholic paper with 500,000 readers. Two Roman Catholic monthlies

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also easily cleared the quarter-million mark, *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* with 334,159 and *Extension Magazine* with 283,566. A few Protestant Sunday school quartelyes posted similar figures, for example the interdenominational *Standard Bible Lesson Quarterly* with 352,000 subscribers and the *Methodist Advanced Quarterly* with 283,285. The largest title in the *Century’s* category, Protestant weeklies, was *Forward*, a magazine for Presbyterian youth and families, with 286,582 subscribers. Next came the *Christian Herald*, an interdenominational, general interest publication with 218,974 readers. *Lutheran Young Folks* reached 105,391 readers each week, and the interdenominational *Sunday School Times* reached 93,400. The *Century* ranked well above the mean for religious periodicals, many of which needed only three or four digits to report their circulations, but it clearly did not attain its “most influential” reputation by virtue of sheer numbers.10

While the *Century* could not claim millions of readers, it could boast of having the attention of some well-placed individuals. One contributor to the anniversary letter collection, in thanking Morrison for stimulating his thinking, put it this way: “And the best of it is that what you are doing for me, who do not matter so very much, you are also doing for thousands of others, some of whom matter a great deal, all of whom together assuredly will matter a lot.” This man who claimed not to matter so much was William C. Graham, a professor of Old Testament at the University of Chicago. Biblical studies lay at the heart of the fiercest religious controversies of the 1920s, and the University of Chicago, which had been founded

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10 All 1928 circulation figures are derived from *N.W. Ayer & Son’s American Newspaper Annual and Directory* (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayer & Son, 1928), 1353-1362. Some listed figures were exact, as reported by the publishers, and some (including the circulation for *Our Sunday Visitor*) were estimates.
by an Old Testament scholar, carried prodigious weight.\textsuperscript{11} Graham was precisely the kind of person whose allegiance mattered to the \textit{Century}.

The pedigrees of the men who launched the anniversary letter campaign indicated the spheres the magazine penetrated. In 1928 Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick served as professor of practical theology at Union Seminary and as pastor of Park Avenue Baptist Church. Fosdick enjoyed the patronage of John D. Rockefeller, who funded his church and had paid for the distribution of Fosdick’s 1922 sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” to every Protestant minister in America, a campaign that made Fosdick the country’s most famous theological liberal. Dr. Charles W. Gilkey, a professor of preaching at the University of Chicago Divinity School and a university trustee, led Hyde Park Baptist Church. He went on to become Dean of Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, the multi-denominational Gothic cathedral on campus. Methodist Bishop Francis J. McConnell championed the Social Gospel through his many books and organizational activities. In late 1928 he was unanimously elected president of the Federal Council of Churches. William E. Sweet, a self-made millionaire, was a leader in progressive politics and in the Congregational Church. He served as governor of Colorado from 1923-1925 and eventually became a public relations officer in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise was prominent in both Reform Judaism and American Zionism, and he was active in dozens of peace, labor, and religious organizations. Fosdick, Gilkey, McConnell, Sweet, and Wise all received fat paragraphs in the 1928 edition of \textit{Who’s Who in America}, as did Morrison.

\textsuperscript{11} See, for example, William J. Hynes, \textit{Shirley Jackson Case and the Chicago School}, Society of Biblical Literature Centennial No. 5 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980).
Dozens of other notables, mainly but not exclusively drawn from the ranks of the country’s Protestant elite, responded to the call for letters. Samuel McCrea Cavert, general secretary of the Federal Council of Churches, expressed his “extravagant admiration” for Morrison’s work. Henry Sloane Coffin, the president of Union Theological Seminary who had appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1926, thanked Morrison for his “inestimable service.” Ralph W. Sockman, star of the NBC radio program *National Radio Pulpit*, joined the “chorus of cheers.” Best-selling author Charles Sheldon (*In His Steps*, 1896) counted it a “happy privilege” to congratulate his fellow writer. University of Chicago Divinity School heavyweight Shailer Mathews welcomed the *Century* as “a real leaven in American church life.” International Y.M.C.A. secretary Sherwood Eddy noted that the magazine’s “influence reaches far beyond the boundaries of our own country.” Henry W. Luce, Presbyterian missionary to China, vice-president of Peking University, and father of Time, Inc., founder Henry R. Luce, wished Morrison “all joy as you think of a great task well-done.” Social Gospel firebrand Harry F. Ward sent a hand-written note that professed, “When our children see and feel at work in their world a more vital, ethical religion than we know, it will be in no small measure because of the work that you have wrought in the past twenty years.” Morrison received salutations from college presidents, editors of other religious magazines (including *The Christian Herald*), pastors of major metropolitan churches, and the governor of New Jersey. If these correspondents read the *Century* as closely and quoted from it as liberally as they indicated in their letters, they extended the magazine’s reach far beyond its subscriber base.
Of course, the majority of *Century* subscribers traveled in more modest circles.\(^\text{12}\) Without circulation lists, it is impossible to describe those readers in any detail. The only sample available is the anniversary letters. There is no way to determine whether the 2,132 subscribers who wrote to congratulate Morrison were demographically analogous to the subscriber base as a whole, but they varied significantly in their social situations, and they displayed a wide range of connections with and reactions to the *Century*. The letters open a window on the magazine’s readership at the midpoint of Morrison’s tenure, permitting a complex view of the publication’s meaning and significance.\(^\text{13}\)

The greater part of Morrison’s audience consisted of men like R.E. Thompson of East Rochester, New Hampshire, a self-described “obscure pastor in the M.E. church.” Clergy represented about three-fourths of the magazine’s audience, despite Morrison’s insistence that it was “not a preacher’s magazine.”\(^\text{14}\) The audience was

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\(^{12}\) Ranking in influence between the nationally known figures cited in the above paragraph and the pastors who constituted the bulk of the *Century*’s readership stood another important group, denominational bureaucrats. Peter J. Theusen remarked on the bureaucratization and professionalization of the Protestant mainline in the early twentieth century, noting, “Already by the 1870s, many of the reform and mission agencies of antebellum Protestantism had consolidated into larger denominational bureaucracies; by the turn of the century, these structures were being staffed by increasingly specialized personnel working within elaborate tiers of church commissions, including offices dedicated to social reform. The typical executive working in these church offices was more cosmopolitan than the average parish pastor: he had several advanced degrees, had authored at least one book, had traveled a great deal, and was much better paid.” Theusen, “The Logic of Mainline Churchliness,” in Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, eds., *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 27-53.

\(^{13}\) To obtain a representative sample of the population of letter writers, I coded every eighth letter in the collection. I gathered data on 254 of the 2,132 letters. This data included the name of the sender, home city and state, institutional affiliation and job title (if given), and content codes including personal memory of Morrison, mention of specific articles or columns, placement of magazine issues upon reception (on the desk, on the coffee table, etc.), use of magazine in ministry, expression of disagreement with the magazine, and use of the words “liberal,” “modern,” or “progressive.”

even more overwhelmingly male than clerical; less than 10 percent of the names on the anniversary letters were identifiably female. New Hampshire was a bit of a geographical stretch, but in Morrison’s 20 years the Century had significantly extended its audience north and east of its Chicago home. Of subscribers who sent anniversary letters, 25 percent hailed from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. Another 30 percent lived in the upper Midwest (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio). Though letters arrived from addresses throughout the United States and Canada—and from as far away as Dunedin, New Zealand—readers were concentrated in the northeastern quadrant of the country. This distribution is consistent with the distribution mapped as part of the magazine’s 1925 Continental Campaign (see figure 3.1). As for The Reverend Thompson’s church affiliation, the Methodist Episcopal Church supplied more subscribers than any other denomination, though the magazine was read in so many denominations that the plurality was small. Among letter-writers who gave their affiliations, Congregationalists ranked second, followed by Presbyterians. The affiliations ranged much further than these blueblood bodies, however, to include Baptists, Disciples, Episcopalians, Jews, Unitarians and Universalists, at least one Reorganized Latter Day Saint, and representatives from the Reformed Church in the United States, the United Church of Canada, and various non-denominational congregations.

15 In the sample of letters, 253 included names, and 22 of those were identifiably female. Many letter-writers gave only initials and last names, but based on epistolary conventions and other information in the letters, it is unlikely that the initialed letters came from women.
16 Morrison noted in 1928, “I am told that our Methodist subscribers lead all the rest!” “The First Twenty Years (Editorial Correspondence),” CC (Oct. 11, 1928), 1220-1222.
17 Only about half of the letter-writers in the sample gave a religious affiliation. The sample included 22 identified Methodist Episcopal readers (plus an additional 3 readers from the Methodist Episcopal Church-South), 16 Congregationalists, and 11 Presbyterians. All other groups had fewer than 10 mentions.
A man like R.E. Thompson wielded only a fraction of the cultural power exercised by a man like Henry Sloane Coffin, but both belonged to a broad cohort that, as Professor Graham wrote, “assuredly will matter a lot.” They were male leaders in churches where leadership required education and conferred status.18 They were white. They lived in the north and east. To use Bourdieu’s term, they displayed homology with Morrison and the kinds of people who wrote for the Century. What sociologists Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney wrote of the Protestant mainline applies, generally, to the world in which Morrison, Thompson, and Coffin jointly operated: “Here popular religious impulses work themselves out. Here the dominant ethos of the country takes shape. Here large numbers of lives are influenced.”19 Influence, however, is a slippery thing, as a closer look at the letter writers’ reasons for reading and ways of using the Century reveals.

2.2 Entering the fold

Many well-wishers took the opportunity to tell Morrison how they had first encountered his magazine. The most-repeated stories mentioned personal connections, other periodicals, or school ties. Such connections fleshed out the institutional aspects of the homology between magazine and readership. Often, the periodical and the people simply showed up in the same places.

18 C. Luther Fry, for example, noted the preponderance of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Northern Baptists, and Unitarians listed in Who’s Who in 1931. Commenting on this study, William R. Hutchison wrote, “it makes little difference whether mainline male persons were enormously influential or were greatly overrecognized. (I think both explanations are correct.)” Hutchison, Between the Times (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.
A few readers knew Morrison quite well. The letter collection included a Western Union telegram from Spokane, Washington, sent by “Aunt Evelyn.” It also included a handful of notes from people who remembered Morrison from his youth or school days, such as Hermon P. Williams of Paterson, New Jersey, who wrote, “Dear Charlie: That was indeed a thrifty plant that we cultivated in the oldtime Midland Club at Drake. We knew it was full of blossoms but of course could not tell when or where they would burst forth. We are looking today upon you as the prize bloom of the bunch.” Harold G. Barr, minister of Liberty Christian Church in Liberty, Missouri, harbored different youthful memories:

Back in Council Bluffs, Iowa as a boy I used to hear of Charlie Morrison – another good boy gone wrong. (It was rumored he was a higher critic, which no one understood but everyone feared.) At Drake I heard various estimates: For some Mr. Morrison was another example of how great universities make one disloyal to “our plea,” for others he was just a plain heretic, but again Dr. Morrison was a great, scholarly gentleman and pioneer.

Intrigued by the reports, Barr began to read the Century, which initially infuriated him. “Later,” he wrote, “the jars did not affect me so violently. … Now, if the Christian Century ever contains anything radical, I fail to find it.”

Organizational connections linked Morrison with other readers. The Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, for example, included Morrison and correspondents Sherwood Eddy, Kirby Page, Samuel McCrae Cavert, Francis J. McConnell, Justin Wroe Nixon, Daniel Poling, and Harry Ward. A sort of Social Gospel think tank, this group held retreats and conferences from 1922 to 1928, when it voted to dissolve into the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Leaders of the FCSO might not have known each other intimately, but they would have had numerous opportunities for both formal and informal interaction, especially at summer
conferences held at Olivet, Michigan. Another little town in Michigan, Pentwater, hosted regular gatherings of Disciples leaders who had bought land together and built a row of cottages in the early 1900s. Chicago Disciples luminary Edward Scribner Ames, whose congratulatory missive mentioned that he had known Morrison since childhood, posted his letter from Pentwater.

Another category of readers recalled hearing Morrison speak. Morrison had begun preaching as a boy, and even after he left the pastorate to edit the *Century* he kept up a busy schedule of guest preaching and public lectures, especially as he became heavily involved in the effort to outlaw war. James M. Irvine of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, wrote, “Probably your editorship of the Christian Century has meant more to me than to most of your readers because of the fact that when I was a member of the Congregational Church at Wilmette, Ill., I had the pleasure of hearing you preach during the absence of the pastor one sermon. You see, therefore, I like not only your writing, but your preaching.” N.A. Miner of Madison, Wisconsin, who wrote in a shaky hand and professed to be 99 years old, remembered hearing Morrison speak at the Beloit College chapel during a Congregationalist annual meeting. After this, the *Century* became for Miner “a necessary companion” to his denominational magazine, *The Congregationalist*. Ralph F. Weld had recently met Morrison in his hometown of Middleton, Connecticut, and had been so impressed by both the man and his anti-war crusade that he likened Morrison to William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the nineteenth-century abolitionist paper *The Liberator*. J.W.

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Hawkins of Harrington, Maine, sent in a three-page letter recounting his
disappointment when Morrison was unable to speak at a banquet at his college, his
excitement upon hearing Morrison during a later speaking tour, and the exhilaration
of sitting on the platform at another of the editor’s addresses. Hawkins called the
latter experience the “greatest privilege concluding an unostentatious college life—on
the ‘auditorium’ platform with classmates, notables and dignitaries of the school and
clergy listening to and looking at the tall, singular form of Mr. Morrison silhouetted
against the audience … well I guess I was thrilled! Naturally I have had a sort of
personal regard for *The Christian Century* since that week.”

A larger group of readers came to the *Century* by way of other periodicals. In
1926, the *Century* absorbed the struggling liberal magazine *Christian Work* and
inherited all of its subscribers.\(^{22}\) Rev. Edwin Shaw, professor of philosophy and
religious education at Milton College in Milton, Wisconsin, traced his subscription
journey from Henry Clay Trumbull’s *Sunday School Times* to Lyman Abbott’s
*Outlook* and forward: “When the *Outlook* failed to satisfy I found help in the
*Christian Work* with Frederick Lynch as the editor. When the *Christian Work* was
swallowed up in the *Christian Century* I was not wholly disconsolate, for with
Charles Clayton Morrison I find sane intelligent religious guidance in my advancing
years.” A handful of other letter writers also mentioned *Christian Work* as their
pathway to the *Century*; that merger was big enough news to merit coverage in *Time*.

Other roads led to the magazine as well. Mrs. Robert O. Boller of Kansas City,
Missouri, first noticed quotations from the *Century* in the Religious and Social

\(^{22}\) “Religious Messages,” *Time* (April 5, 1926). Online at
October 8, 2007.
Service columns of *The Literary Digest*. She wrote to the *Digest* to find out the *Century*’s address, then became a subscriber. Edward Laird Mills of Portland, Oregon, spied advertisements in *The New Republic* “which in the name of the *Christian Century* exhorted the reader to keep his religious thinking abreast of his other thinking. This struck me as being a good idea and I subscribed for the *Century.*”

The most common story of discovering the magazine took readers back to their college or seminary days. E.K. Higdon, writing from Manila, Philippines, recalled that the *Century* was a “much discussed heretic publication” at Disciples-affiliated Eureka (Illinois) College, but Higdon read it anyway because his pastor was *Century* contributor Alva W. Taylor. Higdon went on to graduate work at Yale and noted that the *Century*, “no heretic journal in that atmosphere, was read eagerly by students and faculty.” Helen T. Perry reported that the *Century* was sometimes called “the student’s Bible” at Union Theological Seminary. The magazine’s reception fell somewhere between these extremes at Boston University School of Theology, according to Miles H. Stotts, pastor of Washington Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. “[O]f course the Christian Century has been on the ‘green carpet’ many times there,” he wrote. “It has, however, never been mine to see her go off completely defeated. We might scrap over one article and exalt over another.” William L. Manny of The Methodist Parsonage, Paw Paw, Illinois, encountered the magazine at Garrett Biblical Institute in 1922. Joseph Myers, managing editor of *The Christian*, told Morrison he “became a disciple of your pen in theological seminary days at Lexington, Ky.” Similar stories dotted the letter collection.
Another version of the school story highlighted a familiar circulation-building strategy for religious periodicals: gift subscriptions to graduates of seminaries and other church-affiliated schools. The Century might have offered some short-term gift subscriptions itself, as it had to friends of subscribers back in 1908-1909. At least some of the graduate gift subscriptions mentioned in the anniversary letters were financed by wealthy friends of the magazine. George H. Jones of Long Beach, Mississippi, described himself as “a young minister, just out of one of our best seminaries of the South.” He and the other members of the class of 1927 received the Century as a gift from “some generous man,” and while he did not care for the magazine at first, by mid-1928 he considered it indispensable. Mildred Lacy of Johnson City, Tennessee, received a gift subscription upon graduating from Scarritt College for Christian Workers, a United Methodist school in Nashville. Several Boston University graduates mentioned graduation gift subscriptions as well. In addition to the schools already named, letter writers remembered meeting the Century at institutions such as Culver-Stockton College, Oberlin College, McCormick Seminary, McPherson College (Kansas), Palmer College (Missouri), Rochester Theological Seminary, Southern Methodist University, and Western Seminary.

Encountering the Century at college or in seminary had a profound effect on many of Morrison’s correspondents. Some writers even credited the Century with saving their faith. “The ‘Christian Century’ has been the greatest single influence for keeping alive my faith in the Church’s intellectual integrity and social conscience,” confessed John M. Moore of Parkville, Missouri. “I count it very fortunate for me that I became acquainted with it during those days of transition in college when it was

23 See, for example, “Glad Tidings,” CC (Feb. 20, 1908), 115.
easy [to] turn away from the [faith] in search of consistent idealism.” C.W. Longman of Chicago first glimpsed copies of the *Century* at his home church in Iowa, but the magazine’s impression deepened after he left home. “[A]s I went away to a typical Disciple college of the time,” he wrote, “the note which continued to sound in the pages of the paper made possible by yourself and Dr. [Herbert] Willett, and those of like mind, became the means of my real, individual salvation.” Another writer found his entire young adult life mapped out in the pages of the *Century*:

> It was the spirit which I breathed in the pages of that magazine which made me dissatisfied with the forms of expression which the religion which I knew in college and in the smaller churches took, and which eventually sent me to Yale. There is no doubt about it—if I had not come under the influence of *The Christian Century* I would never have found myself in the Yale Divinity School, and therefore never have discovered those gateways of the spirit which lead to larger service.

> Now I am thinking of giving up my pastorate and going into student work abroad, and again I find that *The Christian Century* is giving expression to the dim instincts of the new outlook in missionary work which I feel and for which I am questing as I seek to do the will of God. You have been a schoolmaster leading this young preacher to Christ.

That correspondent was Harold Fey, writing at the time from the First Christian Church of Hastings, Nebraska. He would go on to serve as a missionary in the Philippines, as executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and, from 1956 to 1964, as editor of the *Century*.

These testimonies bore out the fears and hopes that had been a major theme in modernist Christian texts such as Walter Rauschenbusch’s *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) and Fosdick’s sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” (1922).

Fosdick had stated, “As I plead thus for an intellectually hospitable, tolerant, liberty-loving church, I am, of course, thinking primarily about this new generation. …
Ministers often bewail the fact that young people turn from religion to science for the regulative ideas of their lives.”24 The Century caught at least a few members of the “lost generation” right in the middle of this turn and redirected their energies to Christian ministry. What the young modernist ministers found out in the parish often made the Century even dearer to them.

4.3 “I could not live without it”

If stories of encountering the Century at school sounded a consistent refrain in the anniversary letters, stories of using the Century in ministry often added a second verse. The most poignant tales came from readers ministering in rural or Southern settings. For them, the Century constituted the only link to the kinds of people and conversations they had found so stimulating in college or seminary. To return to the matter of demographics, Southern readership, though small, might be over-represented in the letters. One might be a casual reader of the Century in Chicago or Boston, but in Georgia or Appalachia, taking the magazine meant taking a bold and likely controversial stand.

Rural ministers were not the only sort who professed dependence on the Century. Ralph Sockman, the radio preacher, began his letter by claiming, “I should have to go back and dig up literally hundreds of my old sermons to discover and recall all that The Christian Century under your leadership has contributed to me.” He judged that Morrison’s magazine stood as “the touchstone of the preaching profession.” Fellow New Yorker Lee H. Ball, associate minister at Grace Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote, “The Christian Century is bread to me; I could not live

“I am always putting your pages and editorials under levy for sermons, and mid-week discussions.” In October 1929, Morrison launched a spin-off monthly, *The Christian Century Pulpit* (from 1942 just *The Pulpit*), to meet this need more directly. It initially featured full texts of submitted sermons—any subscriber could send in a text—and two pages on which Morrison commented upon “The Event of the Month,” “The Book of the Month,” and “A Thought for the Month.” Over time *The Pulpit* took on a stronger resemblance to its parent, adding more book reviews and feature articles on the work of ministry. Apparently, poachable sermons were not the only resources pastors looked for in a magazine.

Many letter writers alluded to the *Century’s* usefulness in ministry, but very few gave any details as to which parts of the magazine were useful or how they used them. Miss Eleanor M. Closson of Norristown, Pennsylvania, provided one of the most complete accounts of the *Century’s* applications:

As a Social Worker, I cannot afford to neglect it because of its messages by the Christian leaders in that field, and the news of their activities.

To grow in the Christian life one must have inspirational messages from those who have had a vital and sound religious experience.

To be a useful citizen it is necessary to know the unbiased opinion of the outstanding Christian citizens on the issues before the people.

Because it is impossible to read all the books which are worth reading, one is inestimably benefited by having at his disposal very complete Book Reviews of competent men.

More typically, writers merely gestured toward the magazine’s abilities to inspire spiritually and stimulate mentally. The generality of such praise did not lessen it, however. G.S. Lackland of Stone Church in Meadville, Pennsylvania, thanked
Morrison for challenging ministers to “make the Kingdom of God more real to men” and for “stir[ing] the pool, when many of us were inclined to relax in contentment despite our spiritual lameness.” His assessment of Morrison’s impact: “You have occupied thousands of pulpits.”

Some young writers explicitly cast the *Century* as a conduit of continuing education. J.W. Hawkins, the man who once shared a platform with Morrison, recalled of his own experience, “A first year Theologue practicing preaching in a Summer Church must economize in everything, including literature, but must, at the same time, carry the best substitute for the Seminary library.” Unimpressed by his landlady’s *Encyclopedia Britannica* and denominational paper, he made do with *The New York Times*, *The Literary Digest*, and the *Century*, which he felt “would be indispensable for open-minded, informed preaching even in a rural church.” J.D. Martin of Lebanon, Indiana, subscribed to several Presbyterian weeklies after his 1920 graduation from McCormick Seminary in Chicago, “but at the end of a year on a small town parish I was feeling very keenly the need of something else.” He chanced upon an advertisement for the *Century* and requested a sample copy. “I felt like the man who found the treasure hidden in a field,” he wrote. “I hastened to cancel all but two of my other subscriptions and buy this one.” J.D. Langenes lamented that while ministering to a small church in Dazey, North Dakota, for the summer, “I have access here to no library and to no books, except the few that I was able to bring along. I have no fellowship with persons of my own particular interests. Therefore you can well appreciate how eagerly I await that breath of intellectual fresh air coming through the mail every week.”
An acute sense of isolation permeated many of the letters. For some writers, the isolating factor was education. George C. Pullman of Chicago had returned from service in World War I with hopes to further the interdenominational cooperation he had witnessed in the trenches. He began a subscription to the *Century* and tried to apply its insights in his small denomination. The attempt failed. “Because of resultant crucifying antagonism on the part of leaders who, though conscientious, had never spent a day in college, I was compelled to leave,” he wrote ruefully. A ministry among graduate and professional students affiliated with a new Chicago Y.M.C.A. proved more congenial. Irvis G. Snyder of Monroe, Pennsylvania, wrote “as one who has spent practically his entire ministry in a remote rural community along the foot hills of the Allegheny Mountains, among a good people, but whose conception of religion is largely the traditional Fundamentalism.” He did not mention where he had gone to school, but he clearly carried the memories with him. He told Morrison, “You have been rendering an invaluable service to those of us who have been called to labor in the more remote and isolated fields of the Kingdom. I miss the companionship of my ministerial brethren and the joy and inspiration of close contacts with educational institutions. This is beautifully provided for us through your paper.” J.W. Roberts, associate editor of the *Oskaloosa (Kansas) Independent*, assessed his surroundings more harshly: “On the intellectual ice floe of this bit of a Kansas village, I am revived each week by the *Christian Century*, which comes like a winged messenger dropping nourishment for mind and soul. The diet is not always palatable, but it contains the vitamins.” Men like these clearly felt a closer
companionship with Morrison and other *Century* writers than with their immediate neighbors.

As Snyder’s letter hinted, theological commitments also separated many *Century* readers from their parishioners and from other leaders in their denominations. Specifically, many readers felt like apostles to the benighted Fundamentalists. Quinter M. Lyon, graduate of Princeton Seminary, served as Sunday school editor for The Brethren Publishing Company in Ashland, Ohio. He wrote, “Your paper is liberal. My training is conservative. My denomination is conservative. What I write must be conservative, --almost ‘fundamentalist.’ But I could not do very well without your paper. Our social and ethical message is the same.” William L. Manny, the Methodist minister in tiny Paw Paw, Illinois, mingled chagrin with hopefulness:

Among the members of the church that I now serve are so many who swear by the Pentecostal Herald, or similar publications, that I cannot promise a large increase in the circulation of the Christian Century, but you may be sure that these people hear [a] liberal interpretation of Christianity preached every Sunday, and in time it may bear fruit, both in the type of Christianity here, and in the welfare of such periodicals as yours.

Lorenz M. Thomas II, minister with the Methodist Episcopal Church-South, sent a cheerful note from another front, telling Morrison, “Your editorials reach into the very heart of the ‘enemy’s territory’, for Dayton is the county seat of Rhea County in which my four-point circuit is located.” He referred to the site of the 1925 Scopes Trial. Despite the outcome of that trial and the general lack of liberal sympathies out his way, Thomas was optimistic that several other members of his conference would take advantage of the *Century* subscription offer he had forwarded to them.
Geographic loyalties could be intensely divisive. Less than 10 percent of the anniversary letters came from former states of the Confederacy, plus negligible representation from border states, and these letters seethed with an embattled tone. Some Southern writers, like Thomas, drew the lines between themselves and their neighbors. For example, Kenneth B. Bowen of Covington, Kentucky, cast Morrison as his champion against the forces of darkness, writing, “For twenty years you have made a conservative world read your liberal message and like it.” Other Southerners found themselves opposed to Morrison as often as they took his side. D.P. McGeachy, a self-described “old fashioned Southern Presbyterian preacher” from Decatur, Georgia, commented, “Down this way we don’t always agree with you, and we shrewdly suspect that sometimes you don’t agree with us.” Francis O. Wyatt, writing from the First Congregational Church of Eagle Rock, Louisiana, took a similar complaint much further: “I love you but I don’t like you. I use your hymnal and don’t like most of it. I read your editorials and books and disagree with them most of the time.” The hymnal would have been *Hymns for the United Church*, which Morrison edited with University of Chicago biblical scholar Herbert Willett and published with The Christian Century Company in 1919. The book entered a crowded field and was hardly a bestseller; one wonders why Wyatt used it at all, if he found it so distasteful.

Indeed, sharp expressions of frustration with Morrison and the *Century* constituted the most curious strain running through the letters. These notes were not like letters to the editor, which are intended for publication and commonly take issue with one or more articles in a magazine. Their sole aim was to offer congratulations,
and all of their authors were people who paid for the privilege of reading the *Century.* Yet some fifteen percent of correspondents made a point of quarreling with Morrison. Nestor Leght, who gave no address, griped about the magazine, “sometimes it prints what to me are manifest errors.” Emory W. Luccock, writing from Shanghai, China, called the *Century* a “spiritual irritant.” Reverend M. Luther Stimson of Atlanta Theological Seminary confessed that he sometimes got “hot under the collar” while reading it. Charles W. Wood (no address) began his letter, “Will you accept congratulations from a reader who believes you to be fundamentally wrong?” He continued,

I disagree with you heartily. I think your assumption that Prohibition contains something of moral value is quite preposterous. I smile at the naïve way in which you hope to do away with the breaking of peace treaties by signing more peace treaties. And I think your fight for “decency” in the treatment of sex matters is simply silly.

The *Century,* led by lifelong Republican Morrison, staunchly advocated Prohibition until the bitter end, and Morrison’s crusade to end war was what had called him out of the office during the anniversary letter campaign. Wood’s “decency” jab referred to the magazine’s manifest discomfort with the frank discussion and sexual experimentation roiling American society in the 1920s. Morrison seemingly came in for criticism from all sides. Even Chicago modernist Shailer Mathews averred, “I certainly have not always agreed with your editorial policy.”

After venting their spleens, though, almost all of the agitated letter writers hastened to express their sincere gratitude to Morrison—often for precisely the

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25 In the sample, 37 of 254 letters expressed frustration or disagreement with the magazine.
qualities that made them so upset. (An exception was Joseph Pestal of Cuba, Kansas, who was so incensed by the Century’s endorsement of Herbert Hoover for president that he announced he was dumping the gift subscription cheques that had accompanied the anniversary letterhead “into the waste basket where they belong.” He did not indicate whether he intended to drop his own subscription as well.)

Charles Wood ended his letter, which had begun so crossly, by admitting, “At any rate, you are putting over the best magazine—the one which most accurately reflects these changing times. … [Y]ou are a magazine of Glorious Confusion.” Francis Wyatt, who disliked Morrison’s hymnal, judged, “You are much like certain university professors that make themselves unusually valuable by stimulating lazy students. Most of us need some mental irritation to keep us from getting indolent.” H. Sears Thompson, writing from the Office of the First Presbyterian Church of Ottumwa, Iowa, laid bare his mixed feelings: “My attitude toward your thought has run the gamut from fierce disapproval and antagonism to unbounded admiration. Once in a moment of petulance I discontinued my subscription to the Christian Century. But in the following period of sanity I repented of my action and straightway sent in my $3.00 again.” At least his story had a happy ending.

The prevalence of irritation in these letters supported Carey’s thesis that the transmission view of communication misconstrues periodicals’ significance. Specific content seldom accounted for a reader’s initial attraction to the magazine or continued readership. Readers did not look to the Century to fill their empty heads with new information. They were quite willing to keep reading the magazine despite being
convinced that it was dead wrong. The content mattered, because readers enjoyed the mental stimulation it provided, but if, for example, the magazine had endorsed Norman Thomas instead of Herbert Hoover for president, or had declined comment on sexual “decency,” the overall readership probably would not have changed very much. Explanations of the Century’s influence that center on its breadth of content or its specific social and theological positions cannot account for the phenomenon of the disgruntled yet ardent fan. A ritual view, centered on the creation of community, encompasses both these prickly readers and those, discussed below, whose praise of Morrison bordered on idolatry.

4.4 Love letters

The vast majority of the anniversary letters followed a typical epistolary format, but a few displayed artistic flourish. Women were especially likely to send Morrison not just a congratulatory note but a creative addition to his collection. Emily S. Perkins of Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York, submitted an original hymn tune titled “Morrison.” Lilian Fairchild Wells of Lewiston, Maine, contributed a poem. On the same sheet of paper, another woman at her address, Florence Arnette Wells, added text that read like a toast. Ophelia Minnie Tracy (no address given) sent a poem called “My Toast,” which began:

This is the Century’s birth-day bout,
With twenty candles burning:
It is a Magazine of worth;

27 Naturally, readers who sent in anniversary letters were virtually guaranteed to be continuing subscribers. No record remains of subscribers who got so upset that they did drop their subscriptions. The general stability of the magazine’s overall readership numbers strongly suggests, however, that specific articles or series neither attracted nor repelled large numbers of readers. Current Century editors assume such stability. When asked why people subscribe to the Century, editor David Heim replied, “Because their grandfathers did.” Personal interview, June 30, 2006.
Of merit, hope, and learning!

Miss Emily F. Webster of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, interlaced her handwritten note with quotations from hymns, Scripture, and poetry. Perhaps the most charming artistic item, though, came from a man, E.A. Fridell of First Baptist Church in Fresno, who submitted a caricature of Morrison drawn from the fond memory of a trip two years prior.

![Caricature of Charles Clayton Morrison, by E.A. Fridell.](image)

Though drawings and poetry were rare, outpourings of affection for Morrison appeared quite frequently. These came almost exclusively from men. Thomas Adams, pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Amsterdam, New York, began, “Here is an insignificant preacher all packed up to move from Amsterdam to Alexandria Bay,
N.Y. But … I am not too busy to tell you sir,--I was going to say,--that I love you.”

C.W. Longman, one of the young men whose relationship with the *Century* deepened in college, told Morrison, “you are my spiritual father.” In a note addressed to “Beloved Leader and Helper,” C. Julian Tuthill (no address), speaking for readers like himself who were dissatisfied with religious magazines before the *Century*, wrote,

> When we found the Christian Century, we found a paper with a person. We shall go with that man until we die, if he will but take good care to outlast us, God help him! When we join the post-mortals, we humbly hope to be among those who see him crowned for working out his own salvation by such valiant efforts to advance the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Robert John Chrystie, pastor of State Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Bristol, Rhode Island, first praised Morrison’s paper and his work, by which he meant the editorials Morrison wrote for the *Century*. Then he continued, “Regarding *yourself, personally*: The paper has been a continual reflection of the strong, manly, attractive personality of its honored head; a personality that marks you as one of the outstanding religious leaders of the twentieth century” (emphasis in original). A few decades after the heyday of muscular Christianity, some of that movement’s emphases continued to resound among at least this *Century* reader.

Assuming knowledge of an editor based on long familiarity with his magazine is not uncommon. Rajat Neogy, a leading African journalist in the 1960s, once wrote, “One cannot ever remove the personal factor when discussing magazines. They are physically and finally the products of their editors.”²⁸ The affection that warmed the letters to Morrison, though, seemed unusually intense. It is difficult to imagine, for example, subscribers gushing in a similar manner to Herbert Croly, founding editor of *The New Republic*. In his memoir *Coming of Age with The New Republic*, historian

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Merrill D. Peterson recalled finding the magazine’s coverage of the Farm Security Administration fascinating and an article on the last American killed in the Spanish Civil War heartrending, but he never expressed an emotional connection with the magazine or its editors—even though he credited TNR with shaping his scholarly career.29

The religious content of the *Century*, reinforcing the religious and ritual qualities of publications in general, might have accounted for the difference in degree of attachment, for the most extreme examples of praise in the letter collection deployed explicit biblical and theological language. Eunice D. Martin, echoing the standard opening of an evangelical conversion narrative, told Morrison, “I accepted the *Christian Century* as my mentor a long time ago.” O.W. Auch Moedy of York, Nebraska, disdained the notion that the *Century* was just a magazine and suggested instead,

The ‘Christian Century’ is like a bunch of personal letters from real men to you, and you have had them bound and sent to me. Somewhere you have acquired that wonderful personal touch. There was a man in the East, years ago that had the perfection of this power. He could make tax collectors leave their jobs and follow him, and you are getting that power more and more.

In these sentences, Moedy likened the *Century* to the New Testament epistles and Morrison to Jesus Christ. A.R. Boone, pastor of the Congregational Church in Wessington Springs, South Dakota, pushed further, sending Morrison a paraphrase of Psalm 23 that began, “The Christian Century is my Helper; I shall not want,” and ended, “Surely the Christian Century shall follow me all the days of my life, / And I shall labor in gratitude to thee forever.” The paraphrase included half-humorous

elements to soften the overall effect, but it nonetheless substituted the *Century* for God.

From the recognition of Morrison as a personal friend and spiritual leader (if not as divinity incarnate), it was a short step to the creation of communities centered around his magazine. This was especially true for women. The women who wrote to Morrison expressed different kinds of isolation than did the men, and they seemed to have found different ways to use the *Century* to overcome that isolation. The magazine helped some women bridge the gap between themselves and the better-educated men in their lives. Nellie J.G. Fender of Chicago confessed, “Not having had a college education myself and having three sons who are securing university training, I consider the Christian Century one of my greatest aids in being an intelligent mother to children whose advantages have been different than mine.” Isabella Macdonald Alden of Palo Alto, California, explained that her late husband had been the head of the English department at Stanford, and her grandson had just graduated from the same institution. Through them, both *Century* subscribers, she had gained acquaintance with Morrison and was thus able “to join the grateful chorus which is being centered to greet your home-coming.”

Even when educational differences were not mentioned, several women—and a few men—cited the *Century* as a force that brought their families together. On one letter, below the signature of Sarah D. Wyckoff, M.D., of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, appeared her mother’s signature and the note: “Mother, you have no more alert or appreciative reader than she is, at eighty to-day, August 14, 1928.” Charles H. Anthony of Watertown, New York, assured Morrison that the *Century* was
“[t]he one paper that is invariably read by every member of the family.” Elizabeth H. Burhoe of New York City wrote, “I can assure you that in my family and among my friends, each issue incites a healthy discussion of many important questions. Altogether the magazine has created a forum in my home.” Several other letter-writers, mostly women, also mentioned their efforts to share the Century with friends in order both to stimulate conversation and to expand the magazine’s readership. Additionally, Morrison learned of his work being discussed at such venues as Helena M. Cotton’s World Peace discussion club and Mrs. Robert O. Boller’s current events class in the Women’s Council of Paseo Christian Church.

Less specifically, female and male letter-writers alike thanked Morrison for putting them in touch with a larger, more cultured, and more thoughtful world. That world included both Century authors and other Century readers. H.C. Gossard, dean of men at Nebraska Wesleyan University, professed, “To all of us the paper has meant a good deal in many ways. The fellowship it has offered with kindred spirits, and the stimulations for honest, clear thinking, have meant much to your friends.” Miss Lou Ella Miles, a 1908 University of Chicago graduate who taught high school history in St. Paul, Minnesota, beamed, “Altho I am a comparatively new reader I am proud and happy to be numbered with your friends, and in a group including so many distinguished men and women whom it is your honor to have won as friends.” Pride about submitting a letter to Morrison’s anniversary collection—or its opposite, humble questioning whether one’s letter was worthy of inclusion—appeared frequently, and even in repetition it did not ring hollow. Grace Darling Phillips of the
Divinity Library at the University of Chicago merely went to greater lengths than
most to convey a common sentiment when she wrote,

To one who works in a quiet little corner somewhat apart it is very gratifying
to meet people who live in the whirl of activities. To know such, even from
afar, is riches and honor, but to have personal acquaintance with a great leader
and find the privilege of being friends with him—Ah, that is to supplement
one’s own lack and enter into precious possessions. His wealth of culture,
thought and action overflows to those who know him.

James W. Carey did not explore editorial hero-worship in his ritual view of
communication, but it fits the interpretive scheme. Typically, readers can only offer
those who produce magazines subscription checks and possibly the names of new
subscribers. The Morrison anniversary afforded opportunity to pay tribute, offer
thanks, and sing praises—the same activities that are the highlights of many religious
ceremonies.

4.5 Influence

To repeat an earlier point, the content of the Century was relevant to its status
and influence. The magazine’s biggest story of 1928 was the outlawry of war, and
that was the story mentioned most often (positively and negatively) by letter writers.
At least a few subscribers had begun taking the magazine precisely to read about this
issue; it is entirely possible that some subscribers dropped the magazine over the
same subject or let their subscriptions expire after it moved on to other topics.
Furthermore, several of the letters cited above (and many more not cited here)
attested to the Century’s power to change minds. Harold Fey chose a graduate school
and a profession based on his reading of the magazine. G.S. Lackland presumably
preached more of the Social Gospel because of Morrison’s call to “make the
Kingdom of God more real to men.” George Pullman got kicked out of his church for siding with Morrison on ecumenism. Historian William R. Hutchison had a point when, under the subheading “The Spread of Liberalism” in his book *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, he called the *Century* “the prime journalistic medium for liberal and modernist ideas.”30 There is some justification for taking the growth of pacifist, Social Gospel, and ecumenical ideas within white American Protestantism as proof of the *Century’s* influence.

Nonetheless, this idea-based theory of influence collides with two significant barriers. First, according to the anniversary letters, a good portion of the *Century’s* subscribers disagreed with the magazine a good portion of the time. Second, many letter writers lamented that practically no one else around them agreed with the sentiments of the *Century*. If the *Century’s* 35,000 subscribers could not be counted on to align themselves with the magazine’s editorial positions, and if many of those subscribers were unable to win converts to the magazine’s liberal plea, then any claims about the *Century’s* ability to spread its ideals through the more than 20 million-strong (in 1928) universe of white Protestantism must be modest. As historian Brooks Holifield noted in his sweeping history of the clergy in America, *God’s Ambassadors*, “The average Protestant minister in the 1930s stood with the conservatives.”31 Strong claims of far-reaching liberal influence in the first and second thirds of the twentieth century reveal more about academics and church

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31 E. Brooks Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 222. Holifield continued, “One survey of 1,000 urban congregations in 1932 discovered that 16 percent defined themselves as fundamentalist, 48 percent as conservative, and 34 percent as liberal. Their clergy probably shared these orientations, but if the survey had included small towns and the countryside, conservative domination would have been overwhelming.”
leaders looking back than about Protestants who walked through those years facing forward. Holifield’s statement is a welcome sign that historiographic winds might be shifting.

Rather than changing thousands of minds, the anniversary letters attributed a very different kind of influence to Morrison and the Century. The magazine offered readers a “place” to belong, one where membership had its privileges and its responsibilities. This is what magazines do best. New York Times staff writer David Carr, in a 2002 interview with NPR’s “On the Media,” remarked, “Magazines are aspirational in their format. You’re supposed to be able to see yourself when you look at [them].” Carr spoke specifically of magazines with photographic covers, such as Cosmopolitan, but the text covers of The Christian Century had a similar effect.

Writing in the 1984 retrospective volume A Century of The Century, James M. Wall recalled his own first impressions of the magazine he would edit from 1972 to 1999:

> It is possible that like so many undergraduate students I had earlier run across the magazine in doing library research. But it was not until I enrolled at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology that I recall regularly seeing this rather foreboding periodical, whose cover each week notified readers of four or five topics that awaited within. Having spent the previous six years in various forms of journalism, my first impression was that The Christian Century could use a design artist. But my second impression was the one that stuck: Here was world Christianity presented with a sophistication that challenged the parochialism of my southern Methodism.

Before a shift toward graphically rich covers (begun January 1, 1969, with a black-and-white photo of impoverished Brazilians), Century covers featured only headlines, previewing the conversations inside and inviting readers who wished to listen in on

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those conversations to turn the page. That ritual act moved readers closer to their aspirations—to be on the cutting edge, to know the world outside their parish, to be part of an exciting group of people doing mighty work for the Kingdom of God. These desires, far more than mere membership in the seven mostly northern denominations later grouped together under the label “mainline,” gave this small, elite group a distinctive identity.34

34 George Marsden, for example, defines the mainline as “the major American denominations such as American Baptist (Northern Baptist), United Methodist, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., United Church of Christ (including earlier Congregational), Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, some Lutherans, and others associated with the Federal Council of Churches and its successor, the National Council of Churches.” Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8, fn 1.
5. The Shifting Center

On July 16, 1941, Charles Clayton Morrison typed a letter to “Reiny” that read, “You will not believe me when I say that I still treasure the memory of our friendship and am deeply pained that you seem willing to allow it to be shattered. I do not myself intend to write ‘finis’ over it.” Three days later, Reinhold Niebuhr, by that point a former contributing editor to the Century, typed a letter to “Dr. Morrison” that included the passage, “I note your protestations of continued friendship but friendship does not exist by fiat but lives in life and deeds. You can get no moral advantage of me by generously claiming to be my friend when I say a friendship has ended.”¹ That Niebuhr considered the relationship over while Morrison did not reflected more than a difference of opinion between two sharp-minded men. Morrison believed that the tradition he and his magazine represented opened its arms wide enough to encompass all, and he could not understand why anyone would rebuff its embrace. Niebuhr, though, had had enough of a tradition that patted him on the back with one hand and punched him in the nose with the other. Morrison would not acknowledge that his open mind wielded a fist, so Niebuhr walked away.

This rupture illustrated that the liberal Protestant consensus Morrison had labored his whole career to build stood on a flawed foundation. Increasingly over the interwar years, and more dramatically as war descended, some of these flaws became apparent to close observers like Morrison and Niebuhr. This chapter probes three of the weak spots. One, liberals’ faith in debate as the path to agreement and progress

¹ Charles Clayton Morrison to Reinhold Niebuhr, July 16, 1941; Niebuhr to Morrison, July 19, 1941. These and all other personal letters cited in this chapter are found in the Reinhold Niebuhr Papers at the Library of Congress.
proved over-optimistic. Two, liberal Protestant leaders at mid-century did not have a critical mass of followers. Three, the denominationalism embedded in the logic of the *Century* and its constituency constantly frustrated ecumenical aspirations, infinitely delaying consensus. These mounting internal and external challenges to the liberal Protestant establishment, especially the critique from Niebuhr, exposed the self-interest of leaders who routinely claimed disinterest. As awareness of these cracks dawned on Morrison, he attempted to plug them with universalizing and triumphal rhetoric, but such rhetoric also called attention to the problems. The more Morrison asserted his own authority, and that of the *Century*, the less he could exercise that authority with seeming effortlessness. The collapse of Morrison’s relationship with Niebuhr was but one instance of widespread fragmentation.

5.1 The limits of debate

When Morrison “discovered” Niebuhr as a writer in 1922 and began printing his contributions in the *Century*, Niebuhr gained prestige through the relationship. The periodical in which much of Niebuhr’s writing appeared at the time, *The Evangelical Herald*, circulated mainly within his Evangelical and Reformed denomination and had practically no library visibility. The *Century* offered Niebuhr a national and interdenominational audience, including many academics and church leaders. Additionally, instead of standing out as a man with an unusually large agenda

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2 In June 2008, WorldCat listed just seven libraries with holdings of *The Evangelical Herald.*
for a minor denominational publication, in the *Century* Niebuhr shared pages with writers whose horizons stretched as far as his own.³

Niebuhr blended in so well with the *Century*’s ethos early on, readers would have had no inkling of the ideological concerns that kept him from accepting Morrison’s offer to join the staff. In Niebuhr’s March 12, 1925, article, “Shall We Proclaim the Truth or Search for It?” he displayed just the sort of empiricism and optimism that Morrison—who had for a while run a news-commentary column titled “The World Is Growing Better”—loved. Niebuhr, averring that beliefs must be “continually tested in experience and reinterpreted in the light of new truth,” judged, “On the whole liberalism has steered a commendable course between fundamentalism and modernism, avoiding arbitrary dogmatism on the one hand and connivance with naturalism on the other.”⁴ As Morrison admitted in his autobiography, he spent most of his career searching for precisely this balance. It must have been gratifying to him that a young star spotted evidence of success.

Niebuhr’s 1928 column “The Confession of a Tired Radical” gave the *Century* audience its first glimpse of the issues that would eventually drive writer and editor apart. Niebuhr began the piece by expressing hope that his tiredness would someday give way to a rejuvenated radical spirit, but at the time of his writing, the dog days of an interwar summer found him “fed up with liberals” who had developed a “habit of confessing the sins of their group from which they imagine themselves emancipated.” The liberals of whom Niebuhr wrote expressed abject sorrow for the

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⁴ Niebuhr, “Shall We Proclaim the Truth or Search for It?” *CC* (Mar. 12, 1925), 344-346.
sins of the white man, thus portraying all other whites as bigots and themselves as saints. They saw oppression as a white, Western trait, failing to notice that oppressed people of any race tend to become oppressors themselves if given half a chance. At root, the liberals denied that “[a]ll human groups are essentially predatory and tend to hold desperately to their privileges against the pressure of the underprivileged who demand a fairer share of the blessings.”

Morrison never published a comment on the piece. He was away at an outlawry of war meeting in Paris, from which he exultantly cabled to the home office, “Today international war was banished from civilization.”

Morrison emphatically did not share Niebuhr’s ennui.

Despite Morrison’s inattention to “Confessions of a Tired Radical,” he recognized that Niebuhr had begun to advance ideas he did not share, and he sought to use this to his editorial advantage. In addition to printing edgy Niebuhr articles on their own, Morrison cast Niebuhr as the provocateur in point-counterpoint article series, beginning with a printed exchange between Reinhold and his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, in March 1932.

Except in its decorum, the fraternal war modeled the kind of dispute Morrison had enthusiastically presented in the *Century* since the days of the Disciples baptism battles. Back then, despite the editor’s protestations that he endeavored to present discussion that was constructive rather than controversial, printed exchanges frequently devolved into sharp words and personal attacks. By casting itself as the premier forum in which major questions of theology, politics, and

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ministry could be debated, a place “as free as a university classroom,” the *Century* constantly ran this risk.  

At its best, Morrison’s magazine created a “‘congregation’ … built on dialogue, on an exchange of different insights and an exploration of divergent views.” At less than its best, the *Century* could be as insular and petty as the average church in crisis. In such moments, the *habitus*, or intellectual and cultural dispositions, of the *Century* contributors restricted rather than opened discussion and consequently undermined the magazine’s highest intentions. The devolving relationship between Morrison and Niebuhr showed both men, and the *Century*, at decidedly less than their best.

An argument buried in the correspondence pages of the November 9, 1932, *Century* served as a warm-up for the hostilities that would end this relationship. Niebuhr came out swinging, faulting the magazine’s sprawling October 26 editorial, “The Stakes in the Election,” for seeming “to be filled with political confusion and to be oriented by only the slightest understanding of the economic scene in America.” Niebuhr gave an even harsher assessment of the proposal, put forth in an October 19 editorial, for a “disinterested” third political party that would field no candidates but deliver intelligent votes to back the most progressive and patriotic causes. Niebuhr called this plan “pure moonshine”—a term sure to rankle such an ardent

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8 Continental Campaign announcement, CC (Sept. 24, 1925).
Prohibitionist as Morrison, who wrote or at least contributed to both editorials. Nearly two columns of “Editorial Comment” (again, presumably written by Morrison) followed Niebuhr’s letter, asserting that Niebuhr’s complaints arose from “some misconception” and a fear that the disinterested party would challenge Niebuhr’s party of choice, the Socialist party.

This response ignored Niebuhr’s real criticism, which was that “disinterested politics” is an oxymoron, because, “All history proves the futility of expecting that men of power will divest themselves voluntarily of their power and their privilege.”

Though the notion “disinterest” had a long pedigree in American Protestantism, stretching back to the “disinterested benevolence” that Samuel Hopkins and other successors of Jonathan Edwards adjudged both the sign and fruit of salvation, in Niebuhr’s estimation, disinterest served merely as a mask for self-interest. Only those who felt secure in their social position could pretend to have no stake in political struggles.

11 Authorship of unsigned editorials is often impossible to determine, and such pieces frequently encompass the ideas of more than one person. Still, I have a number of reasons for assuming that Morrison wrote these editorials and the later editorial response. One, the pieces reflect Morrison’s favored issues. Two, as a hands-on editor, he maintained a strong interest in shaping the magazine’s political statements. Three, when Niebuhr objected to a June 21, 1933, editorial, Morrison decided to “adopt the editorial as my own” (Century, July 26, 1933, p. 951) and defend its position in a two-part “Editorial Conversation” (Century, July 26, 1933, pp. 950-952 and August 9, 1933, pp. 1006-1008). This indicates that Morrison played a big enough role in crafting the editorial to attach his name to it. At any rate, Niebuhr assumed Morrison was responsible for the Century’s editorial content and habitually directed his letters of complaint to Morrison—even when, as in the case of the Century’s unfavorable review of Beyond Tragedy in 1938, Morrison had not been involved. In response to Niebuhr’s letter of complaint, Century literary editor Winfred Ernest Garrison wrote, “Your letter of February 28 addressed to Dr. Morrison, who is now in Texas, has come to my desk. As you very well know, Dr. Morrison does not give his personal attention to the selection of reviewers or the editing of reviews for The Christian Century. Will you kindly place on me whatever blame accrues in connection with the review of your BEYOND TRAGEDY” (letter, March 4, 1938, Reinhold Niebuhr papers).

Eventually, the *Century* caught on to the magnitude of this challenge.

Niebuhr’s more expansive exploration of power politics, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, earned him a barbed rejoinder from the magazine’s handpicked reviewer. Theodore C. Hume, a Congregational minister and (soon to be former) friend of Niebuhr’s, did not seek to cut the author off at the ankles. He applauded the book as saying “something that needed to be said” and admonished, “no one whose conscience has been kindled by the flame of Niebuhr’s social passion can afford to delay its reading.” But Hume also inflicted one truly unkind cut, writing near the beginning of the review, “To call this book fully Christian in tone is to travesty the heart of Jesus’ message to the world.”

This comment, in Niebuhr’s opinion, transgressed the boundaries of civil dispute. No longer able to take cover behind disinterest, the liberals at the *Century* displayed power overtly, and Niebuhr took offense. His revealing letter to the editor, published two weeks after the review, dealt less with Hume’s critique of his argument than with what he perceived as an excommunicatory attitude. The letter included this paragraph:

> I must confess that [the “travesty” sentence] makes me wince and at the same time repent of the many times that I, in my salad days of liberalism, read people out of the kingdom of God for disagreeing with me. My conclusions are not in accord with liberal Christianity. I believe that liberalism has sentimentalized the message of Jesus beyond all recognition. But I fail to see why that should make my book unchristian in tone. I am trying honestly to find the relevance between the message of Jesus and the problems of our day.

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I may be mistaken in my conclusions, but my conclusions have no unchristian motive or purpose.\textsuperscript{15}

By the end of his letter, Niebuhr had turned the charge “unchristian” back on his accusers: “I have discovered since writing my book that the liberalism of American Protestantism has turned into a rather hard orthodoxy which turns vehemently upon every heretic who questions its assumptions.” Remarkably, Hume, who had been given the chance to respond to Niebuhr’s letter in the same issue, missed the point. Niebuhr had accused liberals, Hume and the \textit{Century} in particular, of fighting dirty; he probably sought an apology. One can only imagine, then, what he made of Hume’s cheery response: “As a humble pupil of a great teacher, the only motive for my agonized outburst was to offer Reinhold Niebuhr a chance to associate himself openly with the Christian fellowship which he seemed to have deserted. That he has done so unequivocally in his letter gives occasion for nothing but rejoicing.”\textsuperscript{16} Hume either did not sense that liberalism and its big-tent aspirations were under attack, or he sensed this so acutely that the only response he could offer was denial.

Morrison let Niebuhr run in the June 7, 1933, issue, giving top cover billing and two and a half editorial pages to “A Christian Philosophy of Compromise.”\textsuperscript{17} The gift came at a price, though. Niebuhr’s article appeared without a contrasting companion piece to blunt its assault on “simple,” “naïve,” “sentimental,” “complacent” liberals, but Morrison held his fire for only two weeks. Then, in the

\textsuperscript{15} Reinhold Niebuhr, “Dr. Niebuhr’s Position,” CC (Jan. 18, 1933), 91-92.
\textsuperscript{16} Hume, “From Mr. Hume,” CC (Jan. 18, 1933), 92.
\textsuperscript{17} Niebuhr, “A Christian Philosophy of Compromise,” CC (Jun. 7, 1933), 746-748.
June 21 issue, Morrison took the unusual step of devoting the lead editorial, typically reserved for commentary on a major news event, to knocking Niebuhr down.\textsuperscript{18}

From \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society} and Niebuhr’s “stimulating and provocative” June 7 article, Morrison extracted a “skeleton” of Niebuhr’s thought, which he determined to consist of “the impracticability of the ethics of Jesus,” “the need to embrace force in our social philosophy,” and “the erection of religion upon the impossibility of absolute goodness.” Though Morrison alleged that this thesis could be tackled from a number of angles, he opted to focus only on Niebuhr’s interpretation of Jesus’ law of love. In Niebuhr’s view, correctly reported by Morrison, humans were too selfish to practice the perfect law of love, but they could be motivated to approximate its selfless ideal. Morrison countered that even Jesus did not embody the ideal love Niebuhr described; Jesus loved others the best he could, given the finitude of his human state, and he merely called us to do likewise. No internal barriers impeded this effort, only external, and therefore malleable, circumstances. “The Christian ideal of love is an attainable ideal—that is the truth which Christianity must proclaim or cease to be Christian,” Morrison wrote. “If it is not attainable in the conditions of present day living, the imperative task of Christians is to change the conditions so that it will be attainable.” Morrison had learned Dewey’s lessons well.

Niebuhr drafted a point-by-point rebuttal of Morrison’s critique, touching off a surprising exchange of friendly fire. Morrison printed Niebuhr’s letter and his own

\textsuperscript{18}Morrison, “Is Christianity Practicable?” \textit{CC} (Jun. 21, 1933), 805-807. Morrison did not sign his name to the editorial but accepted authorship in the “Editorial Conversation” with Niebuhr that began in the July 26, 1933, issue of the \textit{Century}. 200
point-by-point refutation, not in the correspondence section of the magazine, but as
the editorials in the July 26 issue.\textsuperscript{19} The content of the pieces was not, on the whole,
remarkable; Niebuhr accused Morrison of misrepresenting his thesis, and Morrison
accused Niebuhr of splitting hairs and twisting words in an effort to wriggle out of the
corner into which he had backed himself. The most amusing portion of the debate
came when Niebuhr challenged Morrison to display some real Christian benevolence
by offering free \textit{Century} subscriptions to poor parsons. Morrison countered this one
frivolous paragraph with a full page of whining that magazine editors were poor
enough themselves, and besides, the \textit{Century} was doing so much to advance Christ’s
kingdom that it should not be jeopardized by misguided charity. That a magazine
editor would defend both his editorial position and his business strategy in print was
odd. That he would defend them against his own contributing editor was truly bizarre.

5.2 The breaking point

For the next several years, Morrison stuck to his strategy of encouraging
debate within the pages of the \textit{Century}, with the goals of keeping the content of his
magazine vital and of working toward eventual Protestant consensus. This strategy
took the form of continuing to print Niebuhr’s views in the article pages while
criticizing them in the review pages. Niebuhr’s articles, on topics as varied as Karl
Barth, social justice in the American South, Catholicism, and war in Asia, frequently
swam against the magazine’s editorial current but seem not to have ruptured any
relationships. As late as 1937, Niebuhr wrote to his wife about sharing “a nice lunch

\textsuperscript{19} “An Editorial Conversation,” \textit{CC} (Jul. 26, 1933), 950-952.
with Morrison and [Century managing editor Paul] Hutchinson” in Chicago.\(^{20}\) The accumulation of negative book reviews, however, perturbed Niebuhr greatly.

The beginning of the end of Niebuhr’s relationship with Morrison transpired when the Century published a hostile review of Niebuhr’s Beyond Tragedy in 1938. The reviewer, Edwin T. Buehrer, an undistinguished pastor from Maine, charged Niebuhr with concocting a tedious diatribe out of specious philosophy.\(^{21}\) The review was acid enough, and it was poured onto an already raw wound. Moral Man and Immoral Society had earned nothing but condemnation in the Century in 1933.

Niebuhr’s next book, Reflections on the End of an Era, received a decent review in 1934—written by Morrison himself—but then came under attack from a freelance writer who indicted Niebuhr for taking “morbid pleasure in making [religion] absurd.”\(^{22}\) An Interpretation of Christian Ethics provoked a sarcastic review in 1936 that accused the author of seeking “refuge in paradoxical obscurantism” and chasing his subject down a “blind alley.”\(^{23}\) Smarting from all of these stings, Niebuhr dashed off what must have been an irate letter to the editor about the Buehrer piece.\(^{24}\)

Century literary editor Winfred Ernest Garrison unfortunately did not have Niebuhr’s review history in mind when he responded to the missive. Niebuhr had addressed his complaint to Morrison, but as Morrison was out of the office, and reviews were Garrison’s department anyway, Garrison drafted a reply. Garrison

\(^{20}\) Reinhold Niebuhr to Ursula Niebuhr, January 26, 1937.


\(^{24}\) Niebuhr’s letter is not in his collected papers, but according to Garrison’s reply, it was addressed to Morrison and dated February 28. The date of the issue in which the review appears was March 2, but magazines regularly mail before their cover dates. It is also possible that Niebuhr received an advance copy.
admitted that Buehrer had not been his first choice for reviewer but otherwise hit Niebuhr right back. In response to Niebuhr’s claim that Buehrer misrepresented him, Garrison wrote, “Not having read the book, I do not know about that. But it seems to me that no inaccuracy in his representation of you can be more than a match for that of your representation of him.” Garrison also chided Niebuhr for being unable to stomach serious criticism. He even placed some of the blame for the bad review on Niebuhr, suggesting that the only way to prevent such occurrences was “eternal vigilance—on the part of reviewers to understand what is written, and on the part of authors to write so as not to invite misunderstanding.”

Niebuhr did not save a copy of his response to Garrison’s counterattack, but according to Garrison’s second reply Niebuhr used the words “sneering,” “contemptuous,” and “an element of malice.” Garrison apologized “for giving that impression” and attempted to drop the matter.

Five days after Garrison sent his second letter, Morrison returned to the office and discovered the mess. In an effort to straighten it out, he wrote another letter to Niebuhr, in which he played the role of the disappointed parent. “I have read the letters that have passed between you and I greatly regret not only the apparent outcome of your exchange, but the tone of the writing,” he wrote. He agreed that Buehrer botched the review but argued that it served a good purpose: “a review written by one who is not only critical but lacking in full understanding may provoke controversy which in the end will prove more illuminating than a single friendly review would accomplish.” He also agreed that Garrison, not knowing that “fate has been unkind to your books in our pages,” mishandled the ensuing correspondence, but

25 Garrison to Niebuhr, March 4, 1938.
26 Garrison to Niebuhr, March 11, 1938.
he alleged that Niebuhr erred just as seriously by getting so testy. “I must say that you are dead wrong in reading his letter as either sneering or contemptuous,” Morrison clucked. “He was really going to the mat with you in a spirit which assumed utmost intimacy of personal understanding. … He assumed that he could argue the matter with you in a head-on manner, which if I had been at home I could have told him was quite out of the question.” Despite heaping more coals on Niebuhr’s head, Morrison hoped that his letter, coupled with future acts of good faith, could erase “any slightest tension between you and any of us personally or between you and The Christian Century.”

Niebuhr neither forgave nor forgot. When the Century, through the pen of Methodist minister and scholar Harold Bosley, shredded Niebuhr’s Christianity and Power Politics in January 1941, Niebuhr rehashed the whole book review saga in correspondence with Morrison. Morrison retorted that he was sorry Niebuhr brought up the subject, “as if it were relevant,” and noted that, bad as it was, the Bosley review “perhaps saved you from a worse one which, as I remember, I was prompted to write but did not.” Niebuhr’s reply to this, if he wrote one, is not archived, but his lingering frustration dramatically erupted later that year.

In February 1941, Niebuhr, joined by other figures at Union Seminary in New York, launched an eight-page, biweekly newsletter called Christianity & Crisis. It emphasized the urgency of the titular crisis (Hitler’s threat to the free societies of the

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27 Morrison to Niebuhr, March 16, 1938.
28 Harold Bosley, “Illusions of the Disillusioned,” CC (Jan. 1, 1941), 14-16. Niebuhr’s letter of complaint is not archived in his papers, but Morrison’s July 16, 1941, letter to Niebuhr indicated that he responded to such a letter. Morrison declined to print any of the correspondence in the Century.
29 Morrison to Niebuhr, July 16, 1941.
North Atlantic) by setting the word in italicized capital letters.\textsuperscript{30} With the tagline “A Bi-Weekly Journal of Christian Opinion,” the periodical claimed to dispense with pieties and get down to the sometimes dirty business of theologically informed political engagement. The journal looked a lot like the \textit{Century}, targeted the same audience, and, according to religion scholar Mark Hulsether, adopted as its basic mission “to convert as many \textit{Century} readers as possible and neutralize the rest.”\textsuperscript{31} Niebuhr biographer Richard Wightman Fox described \textit{Christianity & Crisis} as displaying toward the \textit{Century} “[t]he likeness of a blood relative, but the animus of a rebellious child.”\textsuperscript{32} Niebuhr’s magazine seldom called the \textit{Century} out by name, but the tussle for loyalty was evident in the list of \textit{Christianity & Crisis}’s sponsors, which included such long-time \textit{Century} contributors as Methodist academician Lynn Harold Hough and Social Gospel activist Francis J. McConnell.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Christianity & Crisis} switched to a more sedate typeface with its twenty-third issue, Dec. 29, 1941. After World War II, it expanded its definition of “crisis” as well.

\textsuperscript{31} Mark Hulsether, \textit{Building a Protestant Left} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 26.

At the North American Ecumenical Conference in Toronto, held June 3-5, 1941, Niebuhr delivered an address that irritated pacifists, including Morrison, who was in attendance. On his return, Niebuhr penned an article for *Christianity & Crisis* linking the pacifist Churchmen’s Campaign for Peace Through Mediation to the isolationist America First movement. “Only vegetables are completely rooted to their own soil,” he sneered. He also accused Christian pacifists of loving Hitler more than
they loved their interventionist fellow believers. Niebuhr never named Morrison, but a direct hit on both pacifism and ecumenism could not miss a powerful editor who wholeheartedly endorsed both.

Morrison’s editorial response to Niebuhr’s article struck the penultimate blow to their nearly 20-year relationship. Morrison spent half of his July 2, 1941, editorial, “A Strain on the Tie That Binds,” defending the Churchmen’s Campaign from the taint of association with America First. He spent the other half castigating Niebuhr, his fury exceeding anything Niebuhr had dished out. According to Morrison, Niebuhr’s article was “an outrage upon the fellowship of Christian brethren” and “a perfect illustration of the evil spirit which it was the aim of the Toronto conference to cast out.” Niebuhr resorted “to a logic of misrepresentation designed to put pacifists in the category of either bigots or fools.” He and his interventionist ilk must be told “to make sure that their propaganda is kept within the bounds of Christian fellowship and truth.” And it was not just Morrison who thought this way. “[T]he whole church knows” that Niebuhr’s sketch of the pacifists veered sharply from reality, he wrote. “[A]ny fair-minded reader” would deem Niebuhr’s argument “perverse.” Niebuhr offended “[t]he ecumenical spirit which is abroad in the church today” and “the mind of the church as a whole.”

Though less explicit than his call in 1932 for a disinterested third party in American politics, Morrison’s equation of his pacifist position with the mind of the

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33 Reinhold Niebuhr, “Pacifism and America First,” Christianity & Crisis (Jun. 16, 1941), 2-6.
34 For a sample of Morrison’s advocacy of these causes, see “Churchmen’s Campaign Gets Flying Start,” CC (May 28, 1941), 707, and “A Possible Road to Peace,” CC (Jun. 11, 1941), 774-775.
35 “A Strain on the Tie That Binds,” CC (Jul. 2, 1941), 853-855. The article was unsigned, and Morrison referred to it in his July 16, 1941, letter to Niebuhr as “our editorial.” Niebuhr, though, pinpointed Morrison as the author in his July 19, 1941, letter. Morrison did not contradict this assumption.
church found him again ducking behind the screen of disinterest and universality. Morrison claimed not to speak for himself, or for a mere faction, but for everyone on the side of the angels. He sincerely believed that the future of Protestantism lay in pacifism and ecumenism, but he had also come to believe what many of his admirers had told him in the 1928 letters—that he embodied the essence of the Century, which in turn embodied the essence of progressive Christianity. After all, he had for decades written unsigned editorials for an undenominational journal. He not only acted well within the “bounds of Christian fellowship and truth,” but, as moderator of a highly visible forum, he determined where those bounds lay.

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu described the tensions inherent in a project like Morrison’s. Bourdieu distinguished myth, which is “collective and collectively appropriated,” from ideology, which is presented as universal but actually reflects the concerns of elites. Communication, he posited, is the sphere where, through careful alchemy, the interests of those with power are made to seem like common wisdom for the common good. He continued,

The dominant culture contributes to the real integration of the dominant class (by facilitating the communication between all its members and by distinguishing them from other classes); it also contributes to the fictitious integration of society as a whole … and finally, it contributes to the legitimization of the established order by establishing distinctions (hierarchies) and legitimating these distinctions. The dominant culture produces this ideological effect by concealing the function of division beneath the function of communication.

Communication, in other words, performs many tasks simultaneously. Through communication, members of the dominant culture keep up with each other and establish their insider status. Theirs are the voices heard in discussion. Because theirs
are the voices heard, and because they clothe their opinions in a rhetoric of
disinterest, they seem to be speaking for everyone. Outsiders’ perspectives are not part of this communication. Unable to take a hearing for granted, they “define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture.” In what is said, who says it, and where, social order coheres.  

As seen elsewhere in Bourdieu, “the authority conferred by being recognized, mandated by collective belief” constitutes a nearly unassailable claim to power. That Morrison used a claim to universality as a support for pacifism identified his move even more clearly as a transaction in symbolic capital. Bourdieu distinguished the visions of the dominant and the dominated: “on the one hand, freedom, disinterestedness, the ‘purity’ of sublimated tastes, salvation in the hereafter; on the other, necessity, self-interest, base material satisfactions, salvation in this world.” The locus of salvation would have held specific theological valences for both Morrison and Niebuhr. Still, in 1941 Morrison commonly spoke of freedom (from entanglement in war), disinterestedness (in politics), and purity (of Christian life), while Niebuhr commonly spoke of the necessity of taking action and of navigating competing interests in order, quite literally, to save the world.

By July, the friendship was over. Niebuhr’s first letter about Morrison’s editorial is not among his papers, but Morrison’s reply, dated July 16, indicated that it contained “considerable emotion.” Morrison’s reply was largely devoid of emotion but full of superiority. Near the end, after criticizing Niebuhr’s representation of

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38 Ibid.
pacifists and explaining why Niebuhr deserved every dart Bosley had hurled in his review of *Power Politics*, Morrison wrote:

> It is presumptuous and impertinent of me to say so, but I think you make a mistake in personalizing these matters too sharply. Instead of writing “finis” over a friendship, it seems to me that the more admirable course is to “take it” and come back—in this case either with a defense of your position or with an apology. In my judgment, you owe an apology for the article which we criticized, but that will have to stand as an ex parte judgment until your side of the case is heard.

To the end, Morrison held out hope of reconciliation through dialogue, if only the merely personal could be set aside in the service of larger causes.

Niebuhr held no such hope. Niebuhr’s July 19 letter to Morrison explained,

> “[I]t is practically impossible for people who hold positions almost diametrically opposite … either to be fair to each other or to seem to be fair to the other side.”

Further, “The fact that our political differences are rooted in even profounder differences in theology and world view makes it even more difficult to be fair.” Worst of all, Morrison failed to recognize that he was being unfair, because he had succumbed to “the unconscious self-righteousness of the whole pacifist wing of the church.” Morrison had to represent Niebuhr as the barbarian storming the gates of “the church as a whole,” rather than as one combatant meeting another, because Morrison pretended to be above the fray: “you can not admit being in it,” Niebuhr wrote, “for if you did where would your nice warless world be.”

> Despite Morrison’s highest sentiments, Niebuhr complained, conflict—be it personal, theological, or geopolitical—simply would not go away. In fact, pretending that peace existed, and

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39 Niebuhr to Morrison, July 19, 1941.
fabricating consensus through the use of phrases like “the mind of the church as a whole,” only made conflicts worse.

Regarding debate, Morrison approached it in a classic liberal manner. Never willing, nor desirous, to unlearn everything he had absorbed from his graduate school mentor John Dewey, he thought that dogmatic presuppositions could and should be checked at the door of the debating salon so that conversation inside would produce reasonable, testable, widely acceptable conclusions.\(^40\) An active proponent of ecumenism as well, he valued the interaction of Christians from disparate backgrounds and predicted that this interaction would lead to unity. In a 1928 column, he described his (and his magazine’s) governing principles as “uncompromised freedom of utterance” and “sympathy with modern progress.”\(^41\)

Despite his frustrations with the Disciples of Christ, he retained the tradition’s belief that bureaucratic accretions could be sloughed off and the universal message of Protestantism recovered, if only people of good faith committed themselves to the project. He even believed that a conference had solved the eternal problem of war.

Niebuhr cared more about setting his own terms for debate than about including everyone. His terms, in contrast to Morrison’s, presupposed intractable conflict among the debaters—and across the globe—and did not place at a moral disadvantage anyone who accepted this situation. Niebuhr’s terms also included explicit avowal of his own bias, an avowal Morrison would not make. Longtime Century contributing editor Dean Peerman, in the retrospective book *A Century of the*

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\(^40\) Morrison described his debt to Dewey, as well as his attempts to move beyond it, in “How My Mind Has Changed,” CC (Nov. 8, 1939), 1370-1374.

\(^41\) Morrison, “Editorial Correspondence: The First Twenty Years,” CC (Oct. 11, 1928), 1220-1222.
Century, pinpointed this as the insoluble issue between Niebuhr and Morrison. When Niebuhr charged the Century with misrepresenting his arguments and attacking him personally, Morrison and his staff “argued that liberalism, contrary to its critics, is not a system of doctrines but simply a method of inquiry—a free method unbound by orthodoxy’s rigid and authoritarian norms.” Niebuhr disagreed, holding instead that the Century “was wrong in reducing theological liberalism to a method, for liberalism manifestly had doctrines and presuppositions of its own.” Morrison’s heirs at the Century would eventually adopt Niebuhr’s view.42

Morrison would not, at the time, admit to this fault. Following his graduate study, he considered himself to be “thoroughly immunized against every form of rationalism, apriority, or speculation of any kind based upon dogmatic or authoritarian premises."43 Only much later in life, after finding himself dissatisfied with what he considered to be liberalism’s thoroughly empirical and naturalistic Christianity, did Morrison conclude that the Dewey revolution “consisted essentially of the shift … from one controlling concept to another."44 Commitment to deriving all knowledge from experience shut the door on both the revealed knowledge of the Christian tradition and the transcendent experiences of less cerebral believers. Faith in progress through education could not explain the mutual destruction of the world’s best-educated people in two devastating wars. Conflict resolution through dialogue worked only with a limited range of voices and someone’s strong hand on the volume dial. The empirical system that had once promised liberation to a boy from Iowa

44 Ibid., 17.
years later threatened the retired magazine editor with social anarchy and personal loss.

5.3 The edifice of establishment

The war of words between Niebuhr and Morrison raised a number of important philosophical, political, and theological matters that have received attention in several places. Particularly relevant here, the controversy helped bring into focus the two men’s conflicting views on the contours of Protestant consensus in America. Morrison had clear views on who should be included in this consensus, how debate would produce consensus, and what a united American Protestantism should do. Niebuhr agreed on some counts and disagreed on others as he, too, pursued the dream of a center-left Protestant consensus constructed along the lines of what would later be labeled the mainline.

As noted, when the Century expanded beyond its Disciples base, it did not expand in all directions equally. The staff, contributors, and readership drew more and more heavily from the Methodist ranks beginning in the 1920s. The pattern of news coverage, however, told a different story. For nearly Morrison’s entire tenure, the magazine published a column toward the back of each issue called “The Larger

Christian World” or, later, “News of the Christian World.”\footnote{This column grew out of reporter Orvis F. Jordan’s column of Chicago news, which from Morrison’s purchase of the magazine onward was a fixture at the back of each issue. By 1917 the column, still written by Jordan, bore the title “The Larger Christian World: A Department of Interdenominational Acquaintance.” A separate column of denominational news ran under the heading, “Disciples Table Talk.” By 1920 the two columns were called “News of the Christian World: A Department of Interdenominational Acquaintance” and “News of the Disciples.” Neither carried a byline. “News of the Disciples” disappeared in the early 1920s. As the Century built its corps of correspondents, various authors’ names began to appear with their contributions to the ongoing “News of the Christian World.”}

A survey of the contents this column, beginning with the first “undenominational” issue of the magazine and proceeding at ten-year intervals until the year of Morrison’s retirement, turned up an evolving core of churches that merited attention.\footnote{The church news column originally ran only one page per issue. To accumulate a roughly equivalent sample, I examined all four December issues in 1917, then only the first December issue of the subsequent years. By 1947, the column ran to 12 pages, with considerable space for ads.} In 1917, Episcopalians (along with the Church of England, the only foreign body regularly reported upon) and Presbyterians dominated the landscape, getting twice as many mentions each as the next church in line, the Methodists. In 1927, Presbyterians leapt to the fore, with Congregationalists ranking second. By 1937, a more balanced lineup appeared, with Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and, for the first time, Lutherans all clustered at the top. This distribution essentially continued through 1947. Surprisingly, given the Disciples roots of the Century, this tradition did not figure prominently on the magazine’s map of the Christian world.\footnote{In 1917, Disciples news still dominated the other columns of the magazine, and Disciples news occupied a separate column. Even after the Century became more genuinely “undenominational” and such coverage disappeared, the Disciples occupied little space in the news column.}

The lineup of contributors to the magazine’s first installment of its “How My Mind Has Changed” series in 1939 served as an excellent field guide to its universe. One of Morrison’s grandest editorial achievements, this series filled the magazine’s pages throughout the year with well-written and weighty, yet personal, reflections.
from 34 “prominent leaders of religious life and thought” assembled across confessional lines.49 The 1939 package surpassed its predecessor, the 1928 “What the War Did to My Mind” series, or any of the successive “Mind Change” installments, in size and scope. It brought to life Morrison’s vision for the Century as the place for intelligent discussion among American Protestants and friends (including one non-American and one non-Protestant). The series dazzled, but its depth came at the expense of breadth.

Morrison initiated the series with a letter inviting potential contributors to ask themselves, “Has any fundamental or transforming change taken place in my thinking about religion in the past ten years? If no radical or significant change has occurred in my thought, what is my attitude toward the change or trend which I observe taking place in the thinking of others?” These questions pressed on Morrison and, he believed, the entire church, because the preceding decade, “a period of intensive and profound transition,” had produced “much bewilderment.” As a result, “[p]eople wish to know what is going on in the minds of their leaders, not merely in terms of their public discourses, but in the more intimate terms of personal experience.” In other words, the time had come for a “free exchange of experiences, a kind of testimony meeting” to assess the state of Christian thought. Using the editorial “we,” but signing his own name at the bottom, Morrison concluded the letter, “We have every reason to

believe that this will be the most intriguing as well as the most fruitful expression of religious thought which has appeared in the history of *The Christian Century*.\(^{50}\)

The list of contributors (see table) sent contradictory messages. On the one hand, their titles and institutional connections trumpeted the strength of the dominant culture. The group, selected from those writers considered by the *Century* staff to be among “the most interesting minds in the modern church,” included professors and administrators at prestigious colleges and seminaries, denominational hierarchs, and leaders of large urban congregations—people from the same milieu (and, in some cases, the same people) as those who had congratulated Morrison on his editorial anniversary in 1928. Many had delivered endowed lectures. Nearly all had published books; one, Lynn Harold Hough, had published 33 books in 31 years.\(^{51}\) Even in this august assemblage, Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr stood out. Both later appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine—not the only measure of stature, certainly, but an honor that few academics in any field could claim.\(^{52}\)

**Table 5.1: Contributors to 1939 “How My Mind Has Changed” Series\(^{53}\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Luther Adams</td>
<td>Professor of the Psychology and Philosophy of Religion, Meadville Theological School, Chicago, Ill.</td>
<td>September 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Scribner Ames</td>
<td>Dean of the Disciples Divinity House and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy in the University of Chicago; Minister University Church of Disciples, Chicago</td>
<td>March 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl Barth</td>
<td>Formerly Professor of Theology at the University of Munster, later at Bonn; now exiled from Germany and living in Basle, Switzerland</td>
<td>September 13 and 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{50}\) Ibid. All quotations come from a letter Morrison sent October 3, 1938, and reprinted at the beginning of the October 4, 1939, reflection piece. He followed this reflection article with three more in successive issues.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 1195.

\(^{52}\) Barth appeared on the April 20, 1962, cover; Niebuhr appeared on the cover of the magazine’s twenty-fifth anniversary issue, March 8, 1948.

\(^{53}\) Information culled from Morrison’s summary articles, which appeared October 4, 11, 18, and 25, 1939.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albert W. Beaven</td>
<td>President Colgate-Rochester Theological Seminary, Rochester, N.Y.</td>
<td>June 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Coleman Bennett</td>
<td>Professor of Theology, the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, Cal.</td>
<td>February 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Russell Bowie</td>
<td>Recently resigned a long pastorate at Grace Church in New York City to become Professor of Preaching in Union Theological Seminary</td>
<td>July 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgar Sheffield Brightman</td>
<td>Professor of Philosophy, Boston University</td>
<td>March 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert L. Calhoun</td>
<td>Professor of Historical Theology, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.</td>
<td>May 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert C. Dieffenbach</td>
<td>Religious Editor of the <em>Boston Transcript</em></td>
<td>August 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia Harkness</td>
<td>Professor-elect of Applied Theology, Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Ill.</td>
<td>March 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur E. Holt</td>
<td>Professor of Christian Social Ethics in the Chicago Theological Seminary and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago</td>
<td>August 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.G. Homrighausen</td>
<td>Professor of Religious Education, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J.</td>
<td>April 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Marshall Horton</td>
<td>Professor of Theology, Graduate School of Theology of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio</td>
<td>May 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn Harold Hough</td>
<td>Dean and Professor of Christian Criticism of Life at Drew Theological School</td>
<td>February 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Stanley Jones</td>
<td>Missionary in India and world-famous evangelist</td>
<td>May 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul B. Kern</td>
<td>Bishop in the Methodist Church, Nashville, Tenn.</td>
<td>March 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick D. Kershner</td>
<td>Dean of the School of Religion, Butler University, Indianapolis, Ind.</td>
<td>February 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris S. Lazaron</td>
<td>Rabbi, Baltimore Hebrew Congregation</td>
<td>August 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin Lewis</td>
<td>Professor of Theology, Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, N.J.</td>
<td>June 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halford E. Luccock</td>
<td>Professor of Preaching, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.</td>
<td>August 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarence Edward Macartney</td>
<td>Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.</td>
<td>March 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Alexander Mackay</td>
<td>President, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J.</td>
<td>July 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis J. McConnell</td>
<td>Bishop of the Methodist Church, New York City</td>
<td>April 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.J. Muste</td>
<td>Director, Labor Temple (Presbyterian), New York, N.Y.</td>
<td>May 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinhold Niebuhr</td>
<td>Professor of Applied Christianity, Union Theological Seminary, New York, N.Y.</td>
<td>April 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert W. Palmer</td>
<td>President, Chicago Theological Seminary (Congregational)</td>
<td>June 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold C. Phillips</td>
<td>Minister, First Baptist Church, Cleveland, Ohio</td>
<td>August 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin McNeill Poteat</td>
<td>Minister, Euclid Avenue Baptist Church, Cleveland, Ohio</td>
<td>February 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John C. Shroeder</td>
<td>Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.</td>
<td>July 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willard L. Sperry</td>
<td>Dean of the Divinity School of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.</td>
<td>January 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell Henry Stafford</td>
<td>Minister, Old South Church (Congregational), Boston</td>
<td>July 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Craig Stewart</td>
<td>Episcopal Bishop of Chicago</td>
<td>May 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

217
On the other hand, the Mind Change lineup betrayed significant weaknesses. Despite Morrison’s stated aim to present “a cross-section view of the mind of Christian leadership as of the end of the year 1938,” the contributors represented an even narrower slice of American religion than did the *Century’s* readership, as illustrated by the 1928 anniversary letters. Only one contributor, Harkness, was a woman. Only one, Macartney, could be called a fundamentalist. Only one, Kern, hailed from the South. Several shared hallways at just a handful of universities. The limitations of the aggregate “mind,” or, to use a more capacious term from Bourdieu, *habitus*, embodied in this group would eventually cause a business problem for the *Century*. As Morrison had learned back when he tried to build a subscriber base among liberal Disciples, the audience for these ideas was too small to sustain a magazine on subscription and advertising revenue alone. The inability and, frankly, lack of serious interest on the part of *Century* writers to connect with the average churchgoer permanently capped its circulation and left it vulnerable to competition from periodicals with more populist appeal.

Even within the small segment of Protestantism represented by Mind Change authors, agreement proved elusive. Originally conceived as a 20-part series, the project grew as Morrison and the rest of the *Century* staff sought to include a broader range of persons they deemed “truly representative of the church in general, or of some part of the church, or of some school of thought in the church.” If the church
were more unified, a much smaller group of writers would have sufficed, but by

Morrison’s estimate the preceding decade had been an exceptionally hard one:

The liberalism which had been for nearly a half-century the common presupposition of Christian scholarship had been for the first time effectively challenged in this decade. The earlier inferences which had been drawn from the higher criticism of the Bible had come under critical review. The New Testament presented itself in a new aspect, calling for a radical revision of the prevailing liberal conception of the origin of Christianity. It was in this decade that the optimism which had been associated with the doctrine of evolution was challenged as superficial and unwarranted. A halt had been called to the progressive capitulation of theology to the categories and presuppositions of science. The culture of Western civilization was under fire as based upon a philosophy which was now declared false.54

Morrison refrained from naming names in this litany of challenges, but he had in mind principally the advent of Barthianism, or neo-orthodoxy.55 Morrison, though no fan of Barth, took pride in securing for the Century “the first published expression of the intimate human side of the mind of Karl Barth,” whose “fame and influence are such that every contributor to this series, save one, has mentioned his name or referred to the theological movement which he initiated in the post-World War decade.”56 Indeed, nearly all of the writers did react in some way to Barth, although many of them centered their essays on either a deeply personal event of the preceding ten years, such as conversion or a near-death experience, or on another of the

55 Books on Barth abound and continue to be produced at a rate of several per year. For an introduction to his thought, see Eberhard Busch, The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004). An interesting re-assessment of Barth appeared in the Century almost 50 years after the Mind Change piece: Ronald Goetz, “The Karl Barth Centennial: An Appreciative Critique,” CC (May 7, 1986), 458-463. Barth’s thought is rarely referred to as “Barthianism” anymore, but I use this term because it appeared frequently in the Century in 1939.
56 Ibid., 1197.
decade’s major developments, including the Depression, the New Deal, ecumenical
efforts, Europe’s lurches toward war, or the debate over pacifism.57

Barth posed a formidable challenge to American theological liberalism, but it
was less formidable than the related challenge posed by Niebuhr. Few of the authors
in the Mind Change series affirmed Barth’s attempts to re-assert the sovereignty of
God and the revelatory nature of Scripture, but in general their comments on his ideas
expressed neither panic nor prolonged soul-searching. A foreigner, he wrote from and
about a different world. He also, of course, wrote in German, with English
translations lagging years behind. Morrison guessed that most of the American
authors barely even knew what Barth thought, as evidenced by their “superficial” and
“distorted” encapsulations of his theology.58

Niebuhr, by contrast, rebelled from within the Century’s own household. His
departure assaulted Morrison’s faith in debate as the path to consensus while also
shrinking Morrison’s constituency. Just two years after contributing to the series,
Niebuhr launched his alternative religious forum, in cooperation with an even
smaller, though more ideologically uniform, cohort. The theological and cultural
matrix of Christianity & Crisis was analogous to that of the Century. Its founding
editorial board included two prominent Episcopalians and three prominent
Presbyterians, while various members of the group had institutional ties to the YMCA
and YWCA, the World Student Christian Federation, the Foreign Policy Association,
and schools including Princeton, Yale, Oxford, and Union Seminary. Though its
circulation never approached that of the Century, it found its way to many of the same

57 Grob, 31.
libraries and paneled offices. The *Century* had competition, never an easy fact for an establishment to acknowledge.

5.4 “Can Protestantism Win America?”

The establishment embodied in the 1939 Mind Change series did not crumble under Niebuhr’s critique or collapse during the war so many of its spokespersons had endeavored to avert. Rather, following World War II, evidence abounded that Morrison’s brand of liberal, ecumenical Protestantism had won the day every bit as decisively as American ingenuity and dedication had prevailed in Europe and the Pacific. In spring 1946, President Harry S. Truman addressed 500 Protestant leaders—the “elected or officially appointed representatives” of 25 denominations with a combined 27,000,000 members—at a Federal Council of Churches meeting in Columbus, Ohio. Under the headline “Protestants Close Ranks,” the *Century* editorialized on the meeting, highlighting the general agreement and common cause in evidence. The magazine’s own news report of the meeting, printed in smaller type a few pages later, pointed out the parliamentary maneuvers, committee in-fighting, and political posturing behind this apparent consensus, but even the news report ended with the upbeat observation, “For the first time, a Federal Council meeting was adequately reported by the national press services and the metropolitan newspapers.” Getting noticed, it seemed, was at least as important as getting work done.59

Morrison attracted significant attention as well. By his association with the University of Chicago and the upwardly mobile wing of the Disciples of Christ

movement, and through the success of his magazine, he ensconced himself in America’s dominant culture. In 1941 alone, his name appeared in *The New York Times* eight times: twice in reference to his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as part of a group (including former Wisconsin governor Philip La Follette and Socialist party leader Norman Thomas) urging the senators to keep America out of World War II; once in a list of religious leaders supporting former President Herbert Hoover’s plan to send food aid to Europe; once in a review of his book, *What Is Christianity?* which was adapted from his Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale; three times, including twice on the front page, regarding a conflict with New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia; and once as author of a long letter to the editor on the subject of famine in Belgium.\(^6^0\) Finding one’s name on the front page of America’s newspaper of record, like appearing on the cover of *Time*, is not absolute proof of influence, but neither is it a distinction lightly bestowed.

Nonetheless, at the end of his editorial career, Morrison expressed grave concerns about the religious tradition to which he had given his life. He retained his belief that ecumenical Protestantism constituted humanity’s greatest hope. “Protestantism, historically, takes its faith seriously,” he wrote in 1946. “It regards itself as the carrier of a universal principle of reality and of the ultimate meaning of human existence. … Only such a church can win America to the Christian faith. And

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\(^6^0\) Frederick R. Barkley, “Senators Warned of War in Aid Bill,” NYT (Feb. 4, 1941), 1, 6; Harold B. Hinton, “New Yorkers Say Civil Uprising Will Come Here if We Enter War,” NYT (Feb. 8, 1941), 1, 6; “Religious Leaders Back Hoover Plan,” NYT (Mar. 17, 1941), 8; “New Books in the Field of Religion,” NYT (Mar. 30, 1941), BR12; “Canned Sermon’ of Mayor Scored,” NYT (Nov. 9, 1941), 1, 32; “Mayor’s Sermon Liked by Clergy, But He Gets Some Sharp Rebukes,” NYT (Nov. 10, 1941), 1, 11; “Mayor’s Critic Held Publisher of ‘Pony,’” NYT (Nov. 11, 1941), 18; Charles Clayton Morrison, “Blockading of Food for Belgium Seen as Aid to Nazis,” NYT (Nov. 30, 1941), E9. Although the two February articles began on page 1, in both cases, Morrison’s name was buried on the jump page.
only upon this faith can an enduring civilization be built, in America, and throughout the whole wide world.”61 In the space represented by those ellipses, he filled in thirteen articles that ran under the series heading “Can Protestantism Win America?” between April 3 and July 3, 1946. The series was both a testament to Morrison’s visionary qualities and an obituary for a triumphal phase of Protestant liberalism, or, as Michele Rosenthal phrased it, “both a lament on the state of Protestantism in America and a strategy to preserve Protestant cultural prominence.”62 Even as he looked to the future with cautious optimism, he tethered himself to a historical moment that never was and never could be.

Morrison’s rearguard re-articulation of his dream for American Christianity served as a summation of his ideas over the previous forty years and indicated a few new turns of thought. The series responded to Century field editor Harold Fey’s eight-part, 1944-1945 series, “Can Catholicism Win America?” and addressed Roman Catholicism as one of the two greatest obstacles to American Protestant goals.63 The other force vying with Protestantism and Catholicism for the American soul was secularism, which Morrison identified as the animating spirit behind a wide range of baleful cultural developments. In his attempt to join all of the country’s non-Roman Christians for battle against these enemies, Morrison detailed his program for an ecumenical church that would best exemplify the body of Christ on earth and possess sufficient strength to win America. This program recapitulated all of the major

63 As one of many precursors to this kind of thinking, see Josiah Strong, Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis (New York: The American Home Missionary Society, 1885). Strong, like Morrison, also identified secularism in public schools as a challenge to Protestantism.
emphases of the Century throughout Morrison’s tenure while also nodding to new developments. It was a vision for the consensus he thought could be built on the foundation of people and beliefs brought together in his magazine.

To Morrison, Roman Catholicism threatened the entire American project. An unsigned editorial titled “The Vatican Embassy Fraud” preceded the first installment of his series, and the juxtaposition was more than coincidental. As the editorial noted, the Century had railed against this “ambiguous, disingenuous and unconstitutional diplomatic recognition of a church” since President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s appointment of the first ambassador to the Vatican at the end of 1939.64 Morrison’s anti-Catholicism had much deeper roots, of course, stretching at least to the decline of his Monroe Street church amid rapid neighborhood changes around the turn of the century, and anti-Catholicism must be understood as a prime motivation behind the entire series.65

Morrison only intermittently addressed Catholicism head-on in the series, but what he wrote amply communicated his loathing. The fifth article, “Roman Catholicism and Protestantism,” informed readers of this church’s organized program to win America away from the unsuspecting Protestants, making numerous references to Catholic power. It also identified the Roman church as the prototype for fascism. “Roman Catholicism is a self-enclosed system of power,” he wrote, “resting upon the broad base of the submission of its people, whose submission it is able to exploit for the gaining of yet more power in the political and cultural life of the secular community.” Morrison avoided attacking Catholicism on grounds of ethnicity or

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64 “The Vatican Embassy Fraud,” CC (Apr. 3, 1946), 422-424.
65 On the impact of Roman Catholic immigration on the Monroe Street church, see Autobiography, k1.
theology, challenging instead that its structure, size, and worldview could not coexist
with American democracy as Protestants had constructed it. Catholics were unified,
Morrison warned, and they wanted to remake society in their own image. He missed
the irony of identifying as menacing traits the exact traits he wished to promote
among Protestants.66

Secularism lacked Catholicism’s cohesive agenda, so its threats seemed to
Morrison more diffuse but also easier to combat. Secularism’s chief traps lay in the
realms of public education, science, and commercialized entertainment, each of
which he treated in a separate article. Of these three, Morrison expressed gravest
concern about education, which erred not in its theory or its drive for
professionalization (both legacies of John Dewey) but in its attempt to be neutral
toward religion. Sounding more like a Christian conservative circa 1980 than a
Christian liberal at mid-century, he lamented,

[T]his neutrality is not merely neutral. It is positive. It takes the form of
secularism which, when not overtly hostile to religion, is ignorant of it and
indifferent to it. Protestantism has been consistently loyal to the public school
system. The fact must now be faced that Protestantism has been losing the
mentality of one generation after another of its own youth to a powerfully
implemented system of education whose end product will be a national
community in which Protestantism has, if any place at all, only a marginal
survival position.67

Morrison’s solution—somewhat unexpectedly, given his prejudices—was to install a
Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew at every school to teach about religion without

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66 Morrison, “Roman Catholicism and Protestantism,” CC (May 8, 1946), 585-588. The Century did
not really warm to Catholicism until the Second Vatican Council, but not all of the members of the
staff viewed it as negatively as did Morrison. For example, literary editor Winfred Ernest Garrison, in
Catholicism and the American Mind (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Colby, 1928), agreed that elements of
Catholicism were incompatible with American democracy, but he avoided Morrison’s conspiratorial
overtones.
67 Morrison, “Protestantism and the Public School,” CC (Apr. 17, 1946), 490.
proselytizing for religion. He did not fear apostasy, but religious illiteracy. In the preceding article, “The Protestant Situation,” he had pined for the late nineteenth century, when churchgoers and, to only a slightly lesser extent, non-churchgoers “knew their Bibles, their hymnals, their creeds, their denominational doctrines and histories,” and everyone “accepted the chief premises upon which these convictions rested: belief in God and the acceptance of Christ and the Bible as divinely authoritative.”

That Morrison would express such nostalgia for an era he had labored so long and hard to move beyond indicated some potent mixture of age (he was 71 in 1946) and panic over what he perceived to be the country’s, and the church’s, drift from his ideals.

“The Protestant Situation” was not the only article in which Morrison came across as uncharacteristically cranky and out-of-touch. In “Protestantism and Commercialized Entertainment,” he groused about “the moral effects of the kind of entertainment provided by the moving picture, the radio, the pulp magazines, the drama, the jazz, the comic strip, the newspaper’s exploitation of crime and its endless elaboration of the most intimate and sordid marital revelations in the divorce courts.”

The younger editors at the Century might have felt the same way about these subjects, of course, for Morrison’s complaints reflected his education and social class as much as his age.

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69 Morrison, “Protestantism and Commercialized Entertainment,” CC (May 1, 1946), 553-556.
70 Additionally, media historian Michele Rosenthal suggested that disdain for commercial entertainment resulted from an “ascetic, inner-worldly Protestantism,” which also would have been shared throughout the magazine’s staff and American Protestantism generally. See Rosenthal, 25.
Not that Morrison displayed awareness of these influences. In the ninth article in the series, “Protestant Localism,” he cautioned against a church sponsoring too many social activities, lest the congregation become “smug, ‘clubby,’ and self-centered … a class church, in which only those of congenial intellectual or social tastes feel at home.” In the next paragraph, however, he stated, “Until Protestantism finds the will to build in every local community more stately mansions for its soul—more stately in breadth and height and depth than the competitive and wasteful and parochial-minded local churches which now blight while they bless their local communities—it will not deserve to win America, even if it could do so.”71 In short, he appeared to advocate churches with all the decorum of a downtown club but without the “clubbiness.” This ideal suited his temperament; Fey remembered him as “austere, impatient with small talk and conventional ideas. … Sometimes he would go to lunch with members of the editorial staff but generally he preferred to go to his Union League Club by himself.”72 But Morrison had also taken to heart H. Richard Niebuhr’s arguments in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism.*73 Fellowship of the Rotarian sort seemed to threaten church unity, so Morrison rejected it.

The same article also found Morrison expressing his old University of Chicago biases against a different target. Referring to “the fundamentalists and the premillennialists and the restorationists and the perfectionists and the pietists and all the other forms of this motley fanaticism,” he complained:

Irresponsible schools have lately sprung up like mushrooms overnight and are turning out large numbers of half-baked preachers, intensively indoctrinated with the fantasy or dogma or biblical stereotype which a particular school represents. Wealthy lay men and women who, as a class, are peculiarly susceptible to the appeal of weird or reactionary interpretations of the Scriptures, provide these schools with liberal financial support.74

Again, the younger members of the Century staff probably agreed with Morrison here, as the magazine did not warm to “fanatics” or their schools after Morrison’s retirement.

This dismissive attitude toward conservatives of all stripes left the Century unprepared for post-war developments. At a 1958 fundraising luncheon at Chicago’s Congress Hotel, Harold Fey, who ascended to the Century editorship after Paul Hutchinson’s sudden death in 1956, used language similar to Morrison’s to describe Billy Graham’s newly launched Christianity Today. Fey called that periodical the product of “a highly subsidized neo-fundamentalism,” characterized by biblical literalism, “sectarian adherence to the letter of the law,” anti-ecumenism, a penchant for mass revivalism, cultural colonialism in missions, and a theology that “shuts the gospel from any effective bearing on economics or politics.” To his great chagrin, Fey was requesting extra funds from the Century’s closest allies because Christianity Today, just two years into existence, already exceeded the Century’s circulation by more than 100,000 readers.75

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74 Morrison, “Protestant Localism,” 687-688.
75 Harold E. Fey, Presentation to Private Luncheon, December 3, 1958. Christian Century Foundation collection, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL. Fey noted that Christianity Today reported to Frank Price of Christianity & Crisis a paid circulation of 43,000, but the Century’s own research turned up paid circulation of 26,935 and free circulation of 136,336.
At other points in the series, Morrison demonstrated prescient awareness of trends in American religion that would grow in importance in the decades following World War II. He anticipated that science would increasingly vie with religion for supremacy in the national imagination, and he predicted secularizing consequences stemming from “the extension of the function of the state,” which sociologist Robert Wuthnow identified as one of the primary influences on American religion in the latter half of the twentieth century.76 Anticipating another development about which Wuthnow and other sociologists have written extensively, Morrison also alerted his readers to the growth of a “false tolerance” that recognized no essential distinction between various faiths. He summed up the view associated with this kind of tolerance: “Religion is religion; and it makes little difference what your religion is, so long as you live up to it.” Limiting his discussion to the three faiths on his radar, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, Morrison asserted that one’s religion made a great deal of difference. Ignoring such distinctions struck him as mere “appeasement” of non-Protestant faiths, not to mention a betrayal of Protestantism’s God-ordained mission to win America.77

Far above his glimpses of the future or longing looks toward the past, even above his antipathy toward Roman Catholicism, towered Morrison’s vision for a unified Protestant church in America. He defined it using three key terms:

Ecumenical: in the sense that it is inclusive, intentionally and potentially inclusive, though not necessarily at its beginning actually inclusive, of the whole non-Roman Christian Community. Protestant: in the sense that it rests upon the ecumenical basis of the sovereignty of Christ, and upon no other basis—biblical, creedal or constitutional. A church: in the sense of an organic ecclesial body, operating with the functions so long usurped by its sectarian “churches”; not a “council” of “churches,” nor a “federation” of “churches,” nor yet a mere “invisible church,” but the actual, empirical, functioning church of Christ on earth.78

Unlike any extant churches in 1946, this one would marshal all of Protestantism’s genius while succumbing to none of its fissiparous weaknesses. It would function with the efficiency of a “corporate ecumenical entity” while displaying the grace of an organic body. Following the democratic principle, it would facilitate “a free circulation of truth and error” that was impossible while separate churches carried on separate debates. In their huddled enclaves, Morrison fretted, “Men of otherwise large intellectual caliber become positively hypnotized with a sectarian fixation.” A truly ecumenical church would open eyes, enlarge hearts, increase service, and raise stature. It would call America back to God.

Within Protestantism, Morrison identified just two theological barriers to union: baptism and the episcopacy. He raised and dismissed them in a single paragraph. The first could be “easily reconciled” if churches that insisted on believer’s immersion simply allowed as full members any Christians baptized by a different method in their churches of origin. The second was “really not so difficult” as partisans made it out to be. Episcopalians and, to a lesser extent, Methodists stood on ceremony regarding hierarchies and bishops, but no other Protestants utterly disallowed the historic episcopate. Therefore, by a process Morrison did not detail,

“within a generation” the episcopate could become the equal possession of all ecumenical Protestants. Everyone would gain; no one would lose anything with which they could not bear to part.79

All of these ideas echoed positions the Century had espoused throughout Morrison’s tenure. In the Disciples’ 1909 baptism battles, the magazine had suggested that Disciples were correct in practicing believers’ immersion but averred that insisting on this dogma could only cause disunity. Better for every church to baptize as it saw fit but eschew rebaptism.80 The magazine had taken a similar stance on the episcopacy. Calls for organic, civic-minded, pan-Protestant unity also dated back to the Century’s early undenominational days. A March 7, 1918, article by contributor Edgar De Witt Jones proclaimed, “The church in America needs to call the people to a confession of their sins.” These sins included “fast” living, vanities, pleasures, and “class consciousness.” The best hope for the nation, and the world, was a reunited church. “The evangelical churches have much in common,” Jones continued. “Their agreements are vastly more than their differences.” If Protestants could just take a few cues from their organically integrated Roman Catholic nemeses, they would see that unity could be achieved.81

References to easy reconciliation over baptism and the episcopacy aside, one element of Morrison’s rhetoric that had shifted over time was increased allowance for ongoing debate among ecumenical Protestants. The long battles with Niebuhr likely drove this lesson home. At the opening of the series, he admitted that his conclusions

80 “A Plea for Immersion,” CC (Jan. 20, 1910), 51.
about American Protestantism would lack scientific precision and therefore be open
to argument, “But it is high time that the argument should begin!” Moreover, even
within his projected corporate ecumenical entity, he allowed that differences would
persist. “There will always be diversity of opinion, of creed, of practice, of taste, of
fellowship affinities in the Church of Christ,” he wrote in “The Concept of an
Ecumenical Protestantism.” “Such diversities are not evil; they are good; they
represent growth, and contribute to the spiritual and theological enrichment of the
whole church.” Protestants erred not in reading their Bibles differently—enforced
conformity on that score would make of the Bible a paper pope—not in calling their
officers by different titles, but in dividing the church along such insignificant lines.

As far as Morrison was concerned, whole denominations could continue under
ecumencial Protestantism’s big tent, though he expected most of them to disappear
quickly. His model, one he had long admired, was the United Church of Canada. That
body’s motto, “Not only a united church, but a uniting church,” struck just the
balance of solidarity, internal diversity, and forward progress Morrison urged his
American brethren to pursue.

The identification of the brethren most likely to join Morrison in this program
constituted a second, and more dramatic, shift in his thinking. Morrison’s audience
consisted overwhelmingly of clergy, as it always had, but in 1946 he pitched his
vision to the laity. “No message evokes from an assemblage of laymen so ardent a
response as does the call for a united Protestantism,” he claimed. “This is true in

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84 “The Concept of an Ecumenical Protestantism” part 1, 780.
every part of the country and in every denomination, including the most conservative and traditional-minded.” By contrast, “Only the ecclesiastics, and by no means all of them, frown and look down their noses.” These statements appeared in an article, “The Wasted Power of Protestantism,” that focused on the financial costs of maintaining multiple Protestant churches, missions organizations, and bureaucracies. “Ecclesiastics” had a vested interest in preserving such redundancies, as most of them would lose their jobs in consolidation, but laymen, controllers of the purse strings, could overcome this inertia and revolt. Morrison fervently hoped that they would revolt, and soon: “So long as its denominations continue to function as autonomous ‘churches,’ Protestantism cannot command the public respect which its enormous potential resources and the dignity of the Christian religion should command.” Laypeople could not wait for their leaders to vote themselves into retirement. They must cut off the money to save the church.85

5.5 The impossibility of consensus

If the Century’s majority clergy readership balked at this suggestion of lay revolution, published letters to the editor did not reflect their distress. No angry letters or article-length counterarguments in direct reference to “The Wasted Power of Protestantism” appeared in subsequent weeks. This lacuna could reflect essential agreement with Morrison among his readers, or editorial suppression of dissent, or it could indicate that his plan was so outlandish readers could scarcely muster a reply. Analysis of published letters from 1946 supports the third hypothesis.

Published letters about most components of the Protestantism series expressed assent and enthusiasm. In the May 22 issue, C. Moody Smith of Asbury Methodist Church in Asheville, N.C., wrote, “I have just read your first article in the series. ... The argument is on! You have made a good start. The discussion should do us all good, else what is a democracy for?”86 After the series ended, John Foster Dulles, a prominent figure in international diplomacy, global ecumenism, and at Christianity & Crisis, wrote, “I have been reading with close attention your series of articles. ... I hope that these will be published in book form. They are powerful and to the point.”87 Between these two letters, Morrison received praise for his attacks on Roman Catholicism, his concern about public schools, his anti-sectarian views in “Protestant Misuse of the Bible,” and his initiative at tackling such a weighty subject as the future of American Protestantism. Such letters depicted a close homology between Morrison and his readers.

Some letters, however, communicated disjuncture. Several readers took issue with the editor’s anti-Catholicism, and a few questioned whether “Can Protestantism Win America?” was really the most useful question to ask. One letter gently mocked Morrison for his suggestion that faith and science hold a conference at which to reason together, noting, “‘faith’ and ‘science’ are wanting both in anatomical structure with which and chairs on which to sit.”88 Small quibbles about word choices and overgeneralizations popped up in predominantly positive letters as well.

86 C. Moody Smith, “Can God Win America?” letter to the editor, CC (May 22, 1946), 659.
Less overtly contrarian, but more inimical to Morrison’s project, were the letters in which correspondents exempted their churches from Morrison’s critiques or suggested alternate, explicitly denominational solutions to the problems he raised. For example, in response to Morrison’s public school plan, Marcus Koch of the Lutheran Church at Canoga Park, California, faulted Morrison for ignoring the successful model of Lutheran parochial schools. After Morrison identified as one of Protestantism’s key flaws the anachronistic and undignified names of its many branches, an Episcopalian and a Congregationalist separately wrote to say, in effect, that everyone else’s church names were erroneous, but theirs correctly expressed the Bible’s guidelines for communal Christian life. Regarding Morrison’s call for Protestant congregations to unite, H. Oscar Stevens of the First Presbyterian Church in Utica, Ohio, offered a detailed plan under which churches in various cities would sell all but one building, unite under whichever denominational name had been assigned to cities beginning with the letter of their own (Presbyterian for Amity and the rest of the A’s, Methodist for Batesville and the rest of the B’s, and so on), and divide benevolences according to envelope numbers pre-assigned to the federating churches. Stevens was trying to help, but he succeeded instead in previewing all of the logistical headaches that would accompany any serious attempt to turn Morrison’s plans into reality.

Letters submitted in reference to the Century’s coverage, outside the “Can Protestantism Win America?” series, of several denominational merger talks in 1946

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91 H. Oscar Stevens, letter to the editor, CC (Jun. 19, 1946), 784.
underscored this point. Hopeful articles about proposed Presbyterian-Episcopal cooperation prompted numerous letters from Presbyterians and Episcopalians explaining why such a merger never could or should occur.\(^9^2\) An exasperated Baptist objected to the *Century’s* “utterly biased interpretation” of a Northern Baptist Convention meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and compared the entity that might be created from such a meeting not to heaven on earth, but to the Leviathan, an image *Century* managing editor Paul Hutchinson had recently used in a book warning the world about totalitarianism. “The only Baptist unity which dawned at Grand Rapids was the unity of an all-powerful bureaucracy, patterned after the Leviathan concept of the totalitarian state, and the only fitting designation of it would be, ‘a monster in the making,’” hissed E.M. Harrison of Woodlawn Baptist Church in Chicago. And he referred only to cooperation within one branch of one Protestant denomination.\(^9^3\)

Morrison pressed on undaunted. In the eleventh article in the series, he pleaded,

Surely Protestantism is not permanently condemned to the fate which now holds it in the bondage of sectarian impotence. Is there no hope that its leaders—its parish clergy, its bishops, its huge secretariat, its theologians, its editors of denominational organs will free themselves from the narrow limitations of an official headquarters mentality and look out upon Protestantism as a whole? “The world is my parish,” said John Wesley. What Protestantism now needs is that the leaders of its denominations shall say, more modestly, but more realistically, “Protestantism is my parish.” With such an ecumenical outlook these leaders could make articulate the yearning in the hearts of the laity for an ecumenical Protestantism. Instead of devoting themselves to the conjuring up of reasons why an ecumenical Protestantism is impossible, should not the reasons that make its achievement imperative spur them to find the way? There is a way. There must be a way. And Protestantism, if it is to win America, must find it.\(^9^4\)

\(^9^2\) See, for example, letters from J. Merion Kadyk and Charles E. Vermilya, CC (Aug. 14, 1946), 992.
Elsewhere, Morrison wrote of the need for a conscience for Protestantism, a voice that could “discipline its freedom of dissent” and express the fullness of its mind.\textsuperscript{95} He clearly envisioned the \textit{Century} as that conscience. He bequeathed this belief to Harold Fey, who told his audience of potential donors in 1958 that American Protestantism needed the \textit{Century} because it alone spoke for “free ecumenical Christianity” and served as “an instrument on which a Protestant consensus can be hammered out.”\textsuperscript{96} But all of the components of the magazine’s distinction rendered this goal impossible. The \textit{Century} identified with elites. It reveled in perpetual argument. It defined itself as “representative” because it espoused high ideals, not because it enjoyed grassroots support. It provided confirmation to the like-minded more than information for an ever-widening circle. Because of its distinctive identity, it could not be all things to all people.

Furthermore, the \textit{Century}’s underlying logic, from the convention news coverage to the biographical notes on contributors to the institutional identification of correspondents to the back-page advertisements, was thoroughly denominational. It achieved a measure of universality more by aggregating particulars than by eliding them. In this sense, “undenominational” meant nearly the opposite of a word associated with twentieth-century evangelicals, “nondenominational.” In the same period during which Morrison labored to fashion a liberal Protestant consensus, the fundamentalists about whom Joel Carpenter wrote in \textit{Revive Us Again} searched for common ground by a different route. Liberals worked to the top of denominational

\textsuperscript{95} Morrison, “Protestantism, Thou Ailest Here, and Here!” 651.
\textsuperscript{96} Fey, Presentation to Private Luncheon.
structures—the seminaries, commissions, and congregations that supplied the 1939 Mind Change authors—and then reached out to sympathetic souls in their own echelon. Fundamentalists, denied positions of institutional power, created parallel organizations in which denominational affiliation mattered less than theological and social views. Liberals worked through church structures, while fundamentalists worked around them.97

Morrison was hardly the only man of his era to project onto the chaotic American landscape a vision of consensus. Niebuhr and his associates at Christianity & Crisis had a somewhat different view of Christian unity, but they too dreamed big. This period saw the rise of the “consensus school” in American history as well. Surely, America was more homogeneous immediately following World War II than it would become, especially after the re-opening of immigration in 1965, and surely religious authority was more concentrated in select denominations and institutions. Only small populations did not fit Will Herberg’s Protestant, Catholic, Jew categories, and Joel Carpenter’s conservatives still flew largely under the national radar. Still, hindsight should not take mid-century consensus rhetoric at face value. Morrison communicated his vision of ecumenical Protestant dominance powerfully, but he could not make it true.

5.6 Conclusion

It is vital for religious historians to remember that mainline aspirations belonged only to a small elite. Attributing these aspirations to entire denominations—

or, with less justification, conflating “mainline” and “mainstream” religion—gives Century-style Protestantism more power than it actually wielded. Mainline Protestantism did exhibit many hallmarks of establishment, as its constituency worshiped in elaborate urban sanctuaries, heard its preachers on the radio, and read in both secular and religious media about its leaders’ meetings with noted politicians and businessmen. Nonetheless, though reporters at Time and Newsweek seemed unaware of the fact, the influence of The Christian Century was limited to a small sector of American Protestantism, and by Morrison’s retirement in 1947 that sector had begun to lose its grip on cultural authority. Not until the 1960s would observers really take note of the rupture between the mainline and the mainstream, but slippage occurred earlier, in part because the bond between them was never airtight.

In 1976, religious historian Martin Marty wrote, “Mainline religion had meant simply white Protestant until well into the twentieth century.”98 With the idea of “born-again” Christianity just dawning on the national news media, and the political mobilization of conservative white Protestants scarcely begun, such a statement seemed plausible. But if the term “mainline” conveys any of the ideas or class aspirations that the Century promoted and its readers supported, this equation cannot be true. A decade later, religious historian R. Laurence Moore contended, “The alleged influence of theological modernism in the twentieth century has been vastly overrated, and the strength of the basic theological positions associated with Fundamentalism has not oscillated nearly so wildly as some accounts of twentieth-

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Yet most interpretations of post-World War II developments in American Protestantism—narratives of the meteoric rise of evangelicalism and precipitous decline of the mainline—still assume a center-left consensus at mid-century. Morrison’s rhetoric of representation continues to persuade.

If the mainline was never mainstream, however, both standard storylines of the latter half of the twentieth century begin in the wrong place. If the Century represented large ideals but a relatively small community—a group closer in size to its 35,000 readers than to the millions who attended the churches with which those readers were affiliated—the height from which the mainline ostensibly fell was not quite so high after all. Similarly, if Protestants on the Fundamentalist-evangelical side of the theological continuum lacked not numbers but spokespersons prior to World War II, their postwar emergence on the public scene is less surprising.

Focused as they were on harbingers of their desired millennium, writers at the Century simply did not see where the majority of American Protestants were moving—or, perhaps more accurately, where they were standing still. Many of the journalists on the Century’s contact list and the scholars at its contributors’ home institutions made the same mistake. Noting the narrowness of this shared vision does not diminish its elegance or passion, but it does argue, against Morrison, for a

100 An undated document in the Christian Century Foundation Archives (Box 258, folder 8) listed the names and addresses of religion editors at Time, Newsweek, the Associated Press, International News Service, Religion News Service, United Press Association, The Christian Science Monitor, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune, three other Chicago papers, and leading dailies in Birmingham, Kansas City, Louisville, Minneapolis, and Nashville. These editors received press releases from the Century (as, for example, the announcement of Morrison’s retirement), likely copies of the magazine, and possibly other correspondence as well.
renewed emphasis on photographic as opposed to interpretive description. Rhetoric alone, whether found in the *Century* or any other periodical, cannot offer a complete picture, and at times rhetoric deliberately obscures reality. Viewing either the mainline or the mainstream in American religion with any clarity requires additional lenses.
Epilogue

Although Charles Clayton Morrison remained a presence in the Century offices after his retirement, staying on as a contributing editor and serving as editor of the spin-off magazine for ministers, The Pulpit, his era had passed. Ownership of the magazine was transferred to the newly organized Christian Century Foundation, the trustees of which offered him a buyout package of about $100,000. Morrison rejected the offer, revising the amount down to $60,000 in order to provide a pension for Thomas Curtis Clark and to promote the financial health of the foundation. The foundation launched in a somewhat tenuous position, because Morrison’s exit severed the Century’s last ties to the Disciples of Christ—specifically, the magazine’s last claim on William H. Hoover’s fortune. A fundraising letter from new editor (and Christian Century Foundation trustee) Paul Hutchinson to the Owen L. Coon Foundation expressed both immediate need and the ongoing importance of denominational support for the un-denominational Century:

[T]o reach beyond the limited lay circulation which we have, somebody will have to take the initiative in moving us off dead center. You will forgive me I hope if I say that this person will be a Methodist. My accession to the editorship of the Christian Century places a Methodist in what is generally agreed to be the most influential editorial chair in American Protestantism. During Dr. Morrison’s editorship, it was three members of his denomination, the Disciples of Christ, whose support enabled him to lift this paper from obscurity to its present position of influence. But their help was designed to end when Dr. Morrison’s editorship ended, and now the new regime is on its own. I do not expect that all the help we will need will come from Methodists, but I hope to be in position to assure members of other churches that members of my own denomination believe in what we are doing.

The Owen L. Coon Foundation did not give Hutchinson the support he sought, so the Century found itself, as it has so often under Morrison, attempting to grow its
circulation rapidly while quietly asking friends for help. Circulation held steady after Morrison’s departure, to the remaining editors’ great relief, but the magazine fell far short of its goal to reach 100,000 subscribers by 1950.1

Morrison, though retaining a $4,000 salary for continued editorial efforts, turned his energies toward continuing his defense of American Protestant supremacy though another organization he co-founded in January 1948, Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. This effort found Morrison allied with liberals including Edwin McNeill Poteat of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School and Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam but also with the kind of fundamentalists he once roundly denounced. The Century applauded POAU in the early years, and Harold Fey’s “Can Catholicism Win America?” series was republished as a POAU pamphlet, but the next generation of Century writers distanced themselves from this strident nativism. In a particularly nasty letter archived in the Christian Century Foundation collection, Catholic-baiter extraordinaire Paul Blanshard expressed fear that young Martin E. Marty, who had begun writing for the Century in the early 1950s, might convince others at the magazine that Roman Catholics were not really a threat. Blanshard called Marty naïve, an “evasionist.”2

The two Morrison stories still circulated at the Century offices more than 50 years after the editor’s departure confirmed the sense that twentieth-century religious

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1 Information collected from documents in Box 214, folder 1, and Box 218, folder 1, Christian Century Foundation Archives, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL.
history ultimately passed the old man by. In 1960, John F. Kennedy’s run for
president aggravated Morrison immensely. He wrote a scathing piece warning
Americans of the consequences of voting for a Catholic, calling the candidate “John
S. Kennedy” throughout. (Century editors joked that the “S.” must have stood for
“sonofabitch.”) The Century refused to print the piece, which wounded Morrison
deeply. He published it in Christianity Today instead.

A few years later, in reflection on a World Council of Churches event that
included representation from the Eastern Orthodox world, Marty and editorial
colleague Theodore Gill wrote an article suggesting that Christian ecumenists ought
to reach out more to the Orthodox, even if this meant slowing down some of their
efforts. Morrison, Marty recalled, stormed up the steps to the Century editorial offices
and demanded to know what the young men thought they were doing, extending the
ecuminal umbrella over the Orthodox. Gill countered that, by the definition
Morrison had proffered in his own writings, the Orthodox must be included in
ecuminal efforts, for in their churches, too, the spirit of Christ was formed.
Morrison fumed, “If you wait for the Orthodox, I might not live to see the beginning
of Christian unity!” Morrison was 93 at the time, and already blind.³

It was not Morrison’s provincialism, though, that lived on as his legacy at the
Century, but rather his ardent and often eloquent support for the causes that captured
his heart. Aside from the dated item three, every aim on the following list of
emphases for the magazine in its fiftieth anniversary year, 1958, maintained the
founder’s finest ideals:

³ Personal interview with Martin E. Marty, September 11, 2007.
1. Helping build the church as a free and voluntary community, especially by promoting Christian unity and the ecumenical movement, and by reporting and discussing Biblical and theological inquiries.

2. Raising and commenting on issues of civil and religious freedom, and standing in state and church for democratic liberty and responsibility.

3. Upholding American Protestantism and the separation of church and state wherever their defense is right and useful.

4. Extending the Christian world mission through building the church, through economic and social development, through Christian study of and challenges to the various cultures, including our own, and through political reconciliation.

5. Reporting on and analyzing Christian evangelism in local churches, in communities and wider areas, and in vocational and cultural associations, with special reference to the mission of the church and the deepest needs of twentieth century man.

6. Seeking out and interpreting trends in public and religious education of significance for the church and for the highest in Christian character and public morality.

7. Describing and evaluating Christian social action in racial brotherhood, in economic and social justice, in international good will.

8. Providing a channel of expression for the individual Christian with a vital and creative concern, or for other persons who have something of prophetic worth to say, especially if their points of view challenge conformity to prevailing opinions.

9. Reporting on and expressing convictions about the important news of the Christian world, including news about ideas as expressed in books and drama.

10. Offering a Christian commentary on national and international affairs.

As the Century continued to build on Morrison’s groundwork, it became a vocal proponent of civil rights for Japanese Americans during World War II and for African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1963, the Century was the first major periodical to publish the full text of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” a quotation from which still hangs in the magazine’s lobby as a reminder of one of its greatest achievements.

Morrison’s magazine has not lived to see Christian unity or a truly Christian century. Its provincialism and arrogance at times impeded its goals, but it presses on.

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4 Material for 50th anniversary scrapbook, Box 220, folder 6, Christian Century Foundation Archives.
It has recently returned to its roots as a publication for ministers, adding columns on preaching the lectionary and increasing coverage of pastoral matters. The imperialism associated with pretended universality has abated. It serves churches, rather than an imagined single church, as the voice of a creative minority. It is mainline, not mainstream. And yet, like the Protestant mainline, it possesses a rich heritage that stands as an endowment for many more years of meaningful work.
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