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**SCHOLARS, MEDIA AND THEOLOGIAN PERPETUATE MYTH OF
PROTESTANTISM'S 'TWO-PARTY' MODEL OF RIGHT VS. LEFT**

DAYTON, Ohio — Twentieth-century American Protestantism — much like America's political culture itself — has been split into two distinct and "antagonistic camps" by scholars, the media and theologians alike, a fallacy of labeling that has resulted in an "inaccurate and distorted" view of the church, says an American religion expert.

"Dividing Protestants into liberal versus conservative camps, which is what has happened this century, is a flawed way to look at the church," says William Trollinger, co-editor of a collection of essays titled *Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to Present*, published by the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. "The goal of the book is to tell the whole Protestant story."

The two-party model is flawed because it is an "oversimplification of reality," says Trollinger, an associate professor of history at the University of Dayton. "Some groups are liberal on some issues and practices and conservative on others. How can you put them in one category and exclude them from the other? You can't."

For example, Trollinger says African-American Protestants generally embrace a conservative, evangelical interpretation of the Bible, yet in many ways they tend to be politically liberal. Another Protestant group, the Mennonites, also hold to a conservative interpretation of the Bible, yet they are often "peace and justice" social activists.

Reforming the Center evolved from discussions between Trollinger and a colleague, co-editor Douglas Jacobsen, while both were teaching at Messiah College in southwestern Pennsylvania in the early 1990s.

"It became clear to both of us that more and more historians and journalists were talking about American Protestantism in terms of 'conservative' and 'liberal' and 'right' and 'left,'" says Trollinger. "And they were doing the same thing with American culture and politics. This just didn't make sense to us when we looked at the empirical facts."

With a substantial grant from the Lilly endowment, the editors invited a number of the country's leading scholars and religious historians to three conferences in 1994, 1995 and 1996. From these meetings Trollinger and Jacobsen culled those essays that best explored the political, social and religious nuances of American Protestants.

Why has this two-party model pervaded?

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Many religious leaders within the church have perpetuated this dualism, the editors suggest, because they find it easier to mobilize people and raise money by dividing the world into an “us-versus-them” ideology. Religious leaders then can present “one’s own group, the good and the true and the pure, as standing in the gap against an easily identified and unified enemy,” the editors write in the book’s introduction.

Scholars too, Trollinger and Jacobsen write, perpetuate the Protestant two-party paradigm, but for a different reason.

“For those of us who teach about American religion, the primary reason we use the two-party model may be quite mundane. This interpretation is easy to present, and simple for our students to understand. It works in the classroom, even if it badly misrepresents the real world.

Another motive for compiling the book, Trollinger says, was the hope it would encourage the media and scholars to question the two-party division in today’s American political culture.

“The two-party model encourages artificial conflict, neglecting those who may be conservative on some issues and liberal on others,” Trollinger says. “The story is far more complex — and when you start talking to people around the coffee machine, when you start talking to real human beings and not theories, it becomes obvious.”

Trollinger uses the recent Clinton-Lewinsky scandal as example. “Many people found both Bill Clinton and Kenneth Starr’s behavior reprehensible. What do you say about these people? Are they left-wing or right-wing?”

Hoping to attain more than historical and sociological accuracy, the editors write: “As we see it, the two-party paradigm not only has been a limited and distorted descriptor of American Protestantism realities, but, in a sense, it may have contributed to present tensions and polarizing tendencies within Protestantism.

If twentieth-century Protestantism can be understood in “less-divisive and in more accurate and nuanced terms than those of the two-party system, then perhaps it will be easier for contemporary American Protestants themselves to come together in constructive new ways.”

And just maybe, Trollinger adds, if the same understanding is applied to American politics, the country as a whole can come together in constructive new ways.

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For media interviews, contact **William Trollinger** at (937) 229-2827 or via e-mail at trolling@udayton.edu. *Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to Present* is published by the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. For a review copy, call Amanda VanHeukelem at (616) 459-4591/ext. 536.