“So, what is the Mainline?” Anyone who has taught a course on American religious history has heard this question numerous times, and usually more than once during the course of a semester. On the surface, this seems to be an easy question to answer. The Mainline is made up of the “Seven Sisters” of American Protestantism: the Congregational Church (now a part of the United Church of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Convention, and the Disciples of Christ. The name itself derives from the formation of the Federal Council of Churches in Philadelphia in 1908, where the influence of the Pennsylvania Railroad helped give birth to the term. As a group, these denominations represent a diverse Reformation Era heritage, have traditionally exhibited differing theological and liturgical emphasis and preferences, and, since the nineteenth century have been the dominant cultural representatives of how and where the majority of American Christians, the largest faith tradition in the United States, worships.

And yet, there is more to the question than the textbook answer will satisfy, a deeper concept and reality that students sense intuitively. For the majority of Americans in the twenty-first century, the Seven Sisters no longer reflect where they worship. After all, missing in the textbook definition are Roman Catholics as well as Protestant denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and Assemblies of God. According to the 77th Annual Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches in 2009, the Seven Sisters had a total membership of around 21.2 million (with the largest denomination being the United Methodist Church at 7.9 million members). By comparison, the Roman Catholic Church claimed a membership of 67.1 million; making it the largest church in the nation. The Southern Baptist Convention, the second largest denomination in the survey, had a membership of 16.2
Simply put, the Seven Sisters, from a numerical standpoint, are no longer the majority denominations, and thus no longer the face of American Christianity.

How did this happen? The simple answer is Mainline decline, a topic that has received a good deal of scholarly attention. The thrust of most critiques is that the Seven Sisters, beginning in the early- to mid-twentieth century, began sacrificing doctrinal and theological orthodoxy in order to be more “appealing” and “relevant” to a changing and emerging “modern” American society and culture. In short, they stopped trying to shape culture via orthodox Christianity, and instead began to be shaped by it, liberalizing doctrine and theology in order to appear more welcoming. Christians in America, so the classic thesis goes, then began flocking to denominations and churches that were more orthodox or “conservative,” prompting not just a short-term shift but a demographic one as well. Not only did these denominations attract more members but those members also tended to be younger and more apt to have larger families than those who remained in the Seven Sisters.

The decline thesis is compelling. It surely captures many aspects of the dilemma in which the Seven Sisters find themselves as the twenty-first century begins, and it may even hold a warning for the larger denominations and congregations of the present. However, the theory raises as many questions as it answers. One of the problems with it is the use (while not wholly inappropriate) of political terms such as “liberal” and “conservative” to describe individual actors as well as entire denominations. If the Mainline is “liberal,” and Roman Catholics are “conservative” theologically, then it would stand to reason that Methodists (for example) would be supporters of the Democratic Party, while Catholics would be the backbone of the Republican Party. And yet, what we find is a good deal of theological diversity within denominations, and thus a good deal of political diversity as well. Taking the above two denominations as examples, Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush are both United Methodists, while John Kerry and Bobby Jindal are both Roman Catholics. If anything, the inclusion of political terms obscures more than it illuminates, taking the focus off of other factors (ranging from congregational and pastoral preference, family membership traditions—which are compounded by cross-denominational marriage—and congregational availability/location), which are at least as important, if not more so, than denominational pronouncements and stances.

Having offered this critique, this book is not just another chronicle of Mainline decline, though that is, to be sure, an issue discussed in the pages that follow. Rather, it is an attempt to capture the history of the Mainline. The
Seven Sisters were not the first nor are they likely to be the last “Mainline” in America’s religious history. The Mainline is best viewed not as a single, solitary collection of denominations but as the most culturally influential and demographically representative group of denominations at a given historical moment. Such an understanding allows for continuity as well as change within that membership, and it also invites studies of American Christianity that avoid being saddled with debates over political terminology within doctrinal (both denominational and foundational) disputes, while respecting the diversity that theological discussion has produced. Understanding the history of the Mainline opens the door for a greater appreciation of the role of religion in American life and for new lines of study into its future.

If this historical insight is both evident from the record and even desirable as a tool of inquiry, then why has it been largely neglected? Even at the height of their power, some questioned the Seven Sisters’ exclusiveness, arguing that other branches of Christendom, particularly Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox Christians, needed to be included. So, why are the Seven Sisters still widely counted as the Mainline if they no longer have the numbers (or clout) to back it up? There are several possible answers to these important questions, some of which will be explored in this book. But the crux of the answer centers on the concept of being a majority (or dominant cultural force), perceptions attached to that status, the coveted and comfortable place it became for its members, and what it means to lose that position, all of which is made more complex by the question of who gets to make such a categorization to begin with.

From an academic perspective, majority status is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, if a denomination is seen as part of the Mainline, there is little need (unless a scandal erupts) to spend time researching and writing about it because it is assumed that “everyone” already knows about or is a part of the denomination. If work is done, it is likely to focus on particular figures that helped form or influenced the denomination, or its rise to majority status, or even on important congregations within the denomination. In the American context, according to the historian Martin Marty, this has caused academics to slight Protestantism. And while works of this type can all be important, insightful, and useful, they do not often get at what it means to be part of the Mainline. Perhaps the closest we have come to a study of the Mainline is David Sehat’s recent work The Myth of American Religious Freedom. Sehat never engages the Mainline as the Mainline (indeed, he never invokes the term), though he does a fine job of discussing the interactions of religion, politics and the law in American life and culture.
The other edge of majority status flows from the idea that the majority is of little interest, because it is the majority. Many academics, always on the lookout for new scholarship trends, have gravitated to studying groups or denominations on the margins of the Mainline. This includes works on New Religious Movements (NMRs), established denominations that are not part of the Mainline, and popular religious devotions, as well as sensational sects and cults. Like those who study the rise of Mainline denominations, these scholars are making important contributions to our knowledge about religion in America, including offering key insights as to why some people opt out of mainstream religious culture and expression. And yet, by not focusing on the majority, there is a failure to engage how most Americans have experienced and do experience religious life. Thus, readers will look largely in vain for discussion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Unitarians or their Universalist co-denominationalists, Christian Science, or “sects” of any kind in these pages. Our focus here will be on the majority.

Because there is value in majority status, those who have once been a part of it are reluctant to give it up. Here then, is the reason why the Seven Sisters work so hard to remain considered as the Mainline, despite more than three decades of talking about Mainline decline and despite denominational membership figures that argue for a reconfiguration or reconceptualization. Part of this is tradition; after all, they were once the Mainline, and some continue to lay claim to this position via nationally known leaders or by their prominence in certain areas of the country. That tradition also affords them a certain “bank of goodwill” in the larger public (including among journalists) memory. They are, after all, the denominations from which people have “always” sought answers. And part of the Seven Sisters’ appeal as the Mainline comes from their continued dominance of local, state, and national pan-denominational groups, boards, and organizations that can speak officially to the press on an issue for all member denominations and congregations, no matter how controversial the issue or statement may be. This is a function usually reserved for the majority, and provides an easy way to “know” what Christians think.

The problem is that these organizations are vestiges of a different time, when the Seven Sisters were the Mainline. To say that the National Council of Churches (the successor to the Federal Council of Churches) speaks for all Christians historically, or even for all members of the Seven Sisters today, simply does not hold up to scrutiny. Roman Catholics, for example, were not a part of the organization because they were largely not welcome due to Protestant anti-Catholicism in its early years. Furthermore, many of these
institutions simply lack the power or authority they did a century ago. This marginalization is part and parcel with the decline thesis, but it illustrates a disjunct, or rift, between denominational and institutional bureaucracies and many in the pews, as well as the growth of both pluralism and secularism in wider American society.

Rather than clinging to this past, as many within the Seven Sisters do, it is useful to begin to conceptualize a new Mainline. More than those outside the majority and even more than the decline thesis, looking for and at the majority can tell us a great deal about American religion. What we will find in making such a journey is that the Mainline has always been a part of the American experience. It has reflected in very real ways not only historic events, but the very face of the nation. Its history, its story, is a rich treasure just waiting to be found and appreciated.

If the past is to be our guide in discovering who the Mainline is today, then we must be prepared to embrace not only the flow of history, which shows a decided continuity within the Mainline in America, but the complex nature of Mainline Christianity in both the past and the present. In some ways, there has been more than one Mainline. In the colonial period, it was comprised of churches tied to their colonies and then states. After the Revolution, these denominations were joined by more evangelical denominations to form the Seven Sisters. By the mid- to late-twentieth century, this incarnation of the Mainline began to decline, forcing our discussion of a possible third reconfiguration of the group of churches that best reflects American Christianity.

As a collection of denominations, the Mainline has always been reflective of the America of their time and place. The story is full of saints and sinners, shortsighted pronouncements and visionary statements, not to mention doctrinal debates, theological discussions, and political shenanigans, all played out by those clinging to the cross of Christ. If not a uniquely American story, as an important part of the nation’s history, it is no longer one that either can or should be ignored.