Everywhere and Nowhere:  
Recent Trends in American Religious History

by
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In the one hundred years from 1900 to 2000 Americans have become, by many measures, more religious, not less. Church attendance has gone up (so far as such things are calculable), evangelical and even Fundamentalist Christians (depending on how you define such things) are politically more powerful today than they were 100 years ago, and America’s religious marketplace, where the number, type, and size of religious institutions, is as vibrant as ever, makes one feel as though non-believers just haven’t yet found their proper place of worship.

In America today, reports Jon Butler, people identify with religious organizations at rates higher than any time since the Puritans ruled Massachusetts in the 1630s, 1640s, and 1650s. Butler’s thesis, contained in his title Awash in a Sea of Faith: The Christianization of the American People, applies to the colonial era, but it could be extended forward. The 1950s (not the 1850s or 1750s), after all, represented the high point of formal religious affiliation in American religious history, and President Eisenhower famously spoke of the importance of having faith, no matter what it was.

At the same time, with all this religious awareness and advocacy in today’s public sphere, historians of American religion have, during the past 20 years, revolutionized their field. They have examined religion in all sorts of useful, unconventional ways, and found the persistence and continuity of American religion an impressive, motivating, guiding specter—a specter that has changed, for certain, but one that has most certainly
not gone away. They have focused on immigrant communities and the unusual ways in which immigrants have incorporated their worship into American life. They have examined the role of religion and religious groups in the making of mid-century American liberalism, and the have reminded us that Martin Luther King, Jr. derived his sensibilities as much from Jesus as from Gandhi. Also, how do we explain Selma without understanding the religious ecumenism of the mid-century? Women’s history has looked to religious history as an ally, recognizing that, throughout American history, women have always gone to church more than men. “Women’s History Is America Religious History” is the title of Ann Braude’s seminal 1997 article on the subject.

Religion has also become central to understanding the development of the suburbs, the development of the Progressive Era, the development of America’s commitment to human rights. Historians have depicted Catholicism as central to the very definition of American democracy, albeit normally as a perfect foil for those who understood Protestantism and democracy to be forever linked. The notion of multiculturalism, normally understood to spring from the holy trinity of race, class, and gender, has roots in both the Jewish American intellectual tradition and the Catholic post-ultramontanist position of John Courtney Murray and John F. Kennedy. Liberal Protestants contributed their piece as well. And so did missionaries, often through their letters home in which they expressed a tacit form of cultural pluralism that both anticipated and then buttressed the work of people we are more familiar with, pluralists like Franz Boas and Robert E. Park.

Yet, despite the rise in American religiosity and historians’ sensitivity to it, and despite the findings of religious historians that religion has penetrated almost all aspects
of modern American life, many (maybe most) scholars outside the specific field of American religious history basically have failed to notice. Or, if they have noticed, they treat religion as another subfield, interesting maybe for those who are interested in it, but not necessarily central to the story, with the two possible exceptions of the civil rights movement and the rise of modern conservatism and the “religious right.” In the recent anthology *The Religious History of American Women*, editor Catherine Brekus notes with frustration how “RELIGIOUS HISTORY HAS YET TO INCORPORATE WOMEN AS WELL AS IT SHOULD, WHILE WOMEN’S HISTORY DOESN’T “GET” RELIGION AT ALL – LEAVING BOTH AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY AND WOMEN’S HISTORY SIMULTANEOUSLY IMPOVERISHED”). The problem that Brekus notes may be extended more generally to the relationship of American religious history with broader themes of American history. Perhaps it could be said that American religious history is in, but not of, the broader themes of American history. There is, one of the leading scholars in the field has said, a “religion problem in Modern American History.”

Religion is everywhere, and many scarcely notice, or if they notice don’t care. Historians often are puzzled about how to incorporate religion into the general narrative of American history (with a couple of exceptions, discussed further below). It appears here and there—JFK, Al Smith, Monkey Scopes, Selma, William F. Buckley, the Moral Majority—but these things just show up out of the blue, often with little longer term understanding of these phenomena.
It would be hard to teach colonial or antebellum America without paying due attention to religion. There is no such compunction when it comes to post-Civil War America.

What explains the failure of American religious history to impact the larger narratives of modern American history? Here we must speculate. Those of us who emerged in the field after the spectacular rise of social history in the 1960s and 1970s want to blame it for the field’s general anonymity. After all, religion’s decline in the narrative lined up not coincidentally with the rise of social history. Moreover, as secular intellectuals moved into the Ivory Tower, this argument might go, they brought with them a distrust, antipathy, and/or ignorance of religion and religiosity. While the foundational text of British social history—E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)—powerfully demonstrates the role Methodism played in justifying the industrial order (much to Thompson’s chagrin, captured in his famous quip that Methodism was the “chiliasm of despair”), no such religiosity is part of what might be called its American counterpart, Sean Wilentz’s *Chants Democratic*. Worse still, another major American contribution to this early national/Jacksonian period—Charles Seller’s *The Market Revolution*—deliberates on antinomianism in such a way that is either so brilliant this author can’t understand it, or nonsensical. For works on the twentieth century, religion figures hardly at all in David Kennedy’s *Freedom from Fear* and James Patterson’s *Grand Expectations*, two signature volumes for the twentieth century in the Oxford History of the United States.
Yet this is not to discredit the whole of social history. Indeed, when some social historians began following their own credo, to pay attention to the lives and cultures of ordinary Americans (from slaves to working-class immigrants and others), many of them discovered religion’s centrality to those lives, and some (such as Lawrence Levine’s work *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*) wrote with great sensitivity of the religious culture of their subjects. To cite other examples, Catholicism was vital to the French-Canadians in Gary Gerstle’s *Working-Class Americanism* and the social history turn to individual and group experience paved the way for such classics books as Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 125th Street*.

Thus, we should look elsewhere, beyond the rise of social history, for an explanation. One likely culprit lies in the fact that, for the most part, since the turn-of-the-twentieth century American intellectuals have been more prone than other Americans to forsake religion for themselves. This is not to say, of course, that all American intellectuals are irreligious, just that many of them are, and they are so in ways that distance them from other Americans. Bringing these secularist predilections into the Ivory Tower has made our religious history a history of the lower-classes, or the racialized, or the marginalized – where religion may safely reside, outside the mainstream narratives. Richard Hofstader was not shy in describing America’s persistent religiosity as a key ingredient to American anti-intellectualism. This was especially true for Catholics, in Hofstader’s telling, who received particular vilification in the wake of McCarthyism.

There is also something to be said for the general role of secularization in American life. The word “secularization” has provoked a lot of discussion during the
past thirty years, mostly debating the validity of Max Weber’s idea that, as a society become more Industrial, more urban, more “modern,” it also becomes more secular. In this telling, America truly is an exceptional nation, because unlike the industrialized nations of Europe, the United States has retained high percentages of churchgoing. But, some say, is it also not true that American institutions have become a-religious? Is it not true that even something called the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) is basically a health club facility, not particularly Christian anymore? There are interesting things to say about the debate, and it may hinge on who gets to define the word “secular.”

Moving beyond the question of blame, the task of assessing the role of religion in recent American historiography has been greatly helped by the growing recognition (and frustration) that tremendous amounts of religious scholarship is out there, that it’s not going away anytime soon, and that historians would do well to take note of it. Jon Butler, the eminent Yale professor, contributed powerfully to the debate with his 2004 piece for the *Journal of American History*, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History.” He argued that, in the grand narrative of the modern American past (as judged, in his case, by college-level textbooks), religion is largely absent. Historians have either been unwilling to or incapable of dealing with it. And, Butler said, when religion does appear in the telling of the recent American past, “it appears as a jack-in-the-box,” popping up “colorfully” in American textbooks, then disappearing, mere “momentary, idiosyncratic thrustings up of impulses from a more distant American past or as foils for a more persistent secular history,” but nothing more.
He then pondered: “Was religion important in American public and private life after 1870, and how should historians describe it?”

Other commentators have registered similar complaints. The Historical Society’s own *Historically Speaking* recently published an interview with Robert Orsi, the eminent historian of religion, on the subject of religion in the discipline. Orsi insisted that historians have failed to grasp what’s been going on within the subdiscipline of religious history. David A. Hollinger, an intellectual historian and avowed atheist, has urged historians to study religion, not for the sake of advocacy, but because of the extensive gap between intellectuals and the rest of the population. His articles have carried urgent titles like “Jesus Matters in the USA” and “Why is there so much Christianity in the United States?”

After examining the literature, we have denoted five particular directions that American religious historiography is moving, and two major omissions.

**FIVE DIRECTIONS**

1. Religious pluralism as an important component of American life
2. The relationship between religion and politics
3. The everyday experiences of religion
4. Mormon and Jewish history
5. Incorporating religion into the traditional narrative of the American past

**TWO MAJOR OMISSIONS**

1. Denominational studies, with an end toward defining Mainline Protestantism
2. Catholicism as a key component of American life
To conclude, the folks at the Pew Survey Center just released the largest survey of American religion to happen in quite some time. In it they found some interesting findings: one in ten Americans is an ex-Catholic. Meanwhile, Catholics have managed to maintain their average of about 25% of the population. How? This is only explicable because of large scale immigrants, mostly Hispanics, coming to the United States. What else? The United States is still Judeo-Christian, if it ever was. Jews make up 1.7% of the population, while no other religion has more than 1%, so we are not yet an Abrahamic nation, and, for certain, hardly “Judeo-Christian.” In fact, the largest growth area was in the famous “uncommitted” category, which is now 14% of the population. So religion remains important in American life, in interesting and unique ways. The question is: will historians bother to care?