Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History

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It has seldom been possible, much less wise, to assess American history before the Civil War without taking religion seriously. The Puritans fascinated nineteenth-century historians and novelists alike, although the portraits left by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville easily outlasted those crafted by George Bancroft or even the truculent Brooks Adams. Then in the 1930s Samuel Eliot Morison and Perry Miller transformed the Puritans' crabbed image by taking them seriously as intellectuals. "Puritanism was one of the major expressions of the Western intellect," Miller proclaimed, and his reassessment stimulated an outpouring of American Puritan studies that continued into the 1990s. This mountainous scholarship not only revised our view of the Puritans, but led to a renaissance in American historical writing generally.1

Historians have long found religion important well beyond New England. For two centuries they have written extensively about Quakers, evangelicals, revivalists, African and Native American religions preserved and destroyed, and spiritually inspired reformers. They have also found religion critical to the American experience not just in New England, but in the middle colonies and states, in the increasingly evangelical South, and on the frontier. Indeed, so much antebellum reform is now traced to Protestant evangelicalism—from abolitionism to women's rights, education, and, still more, temperance—that we may undervalue secular sources for those movements. The scholarship on the pre–Civil War United States read by nearly every American history Ph.D. candidate since the 1950s has long featured religion at almost every critical interpretative point, whether in Edmund S. Morgan's The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop (1958), Rhys Isaac's The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790 (1982), Eugene D. Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves

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Made (1974), or David Brion Davis’s The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1832 (1975).2

Religion has not fared well in the historiography of modern America, however. That is not because major figures who invoked religion did not move America intellectually, morally, or politically after 1870. One need think only of Mary Baker Eddy’s Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures (1875), William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), Reinhold Niebuhr’s Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), Mordecai Kaplan’s Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life (1934), Vine Deloria Jr.’s God Is Red (1973), or The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965) to acknowledge texts whose religious messages had powerful cultural repercussions. And historians have written imaginatively about religion in modern America. Consider T. J. Jackson Lears’s subtle No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920 (1981), George Marsden’s challenging Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925 (1980), Richard Wightman Fox’s compelling Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography (1985), or Paul S. Boyer’s endlessly fascinating When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture (1992). Those and other histories take religion in America after 1870 very seriously indeed. But such works also constitute much less of the scholarship on their era than religiously engaged books do of the scholarship on the colonial, early national, and antebellum eras. More important, they stand outside the interpretative mainstream, which overwhelmingly finds religion in modern America more anomalous than normal and more innocuous than powerful.

United States history textbooks and survey courses demonstrate the crux of the problem. Paul Boyer’s 1996 comments on the paucity of religion in U.S. history texts apply with special force to textbook treatments of religion after 1870. In elementary and secondary schools, particularly, but also in colleges, Boyer noted, “religious history is, indeed, only slowly filtering into the textbooks and the survey courses.” Boyer discounted aggressive “secular humanism” and scholarly hostility to religion as persuasive explanations for this absence, although conservative religious activists usually blame those sources. Instead, Boyer stressed subtler influences. Especially in regard to elementary and secondary history textbooks, Boyer highlighted publishers’ caution in approaching the “religion question” and their misplaced fears of violating the separation of church and state. Moreover, the “presidential synthesis” that often dominates college texts generally emphasizes secular politics and modernization, neither of which seems to fit well with religion. Growing interest in the histories of minorities and women, popular culture, sports, ever-expanding international relations, and sci-

ence and technology means that all topics, including religion, face increased intellec-
tual and territorial competition for static page space in American history textbooks. Textbooks give substantial coverage to religion before 1870. Puritanism, eighteenth-century revivalism, First Amendment issues, denominational expansion, reli-
gious pluralism, religious bigotry, and especially the religious origins of ante-bellum reform and abolitionism are all commonly laid out in college textbooks. And while lecture practices are far more difficult to measure, most college and even high school teachers would acknowledge that those and other topics of obvious religious signifi-
cance regularly inhabit pre–Civil War U.S. history survey lectures.

After 1870, however, religion more often appears as a jack-in-the-box, whether in U.S. history textbooks or survey course lectures. Religion pops up colorfully on occasion in textbooks—the Social Gospel, Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, the 1925 Scopes trial, Martin Luther King and the civil rights crusade, and Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. But as with a child’s jack-in-the-box, the surprise offered by the color or peculiarity of the figure is seldom followed by an extended performance, much less substance. Textbooks rarely connect American religious figures and events between 1870 and 2000 to larger enduring patterns in American life. Figures and events appear as momentary, idiosyncratic thrustings up of impulses from a more dis-
tant American past or as foils for a more persistent secular history.

The handling of the civil rights crusades of the 1950s through the 1970s and of the rise of the so-called new Christian Right in the 1970s and the 1980s demonstr-
ates the problem. Textbooks scarcely ignore them. But most textbook discussions of the civil rights crusade focus on politics. They say surprisingly little about explicit-
ly religious motivations for the civil rights activities of major figures, and they only occasionally describe the importance of religious organizations, congregations, and individuals in carrying on the movement, south or north. Similarly, most textbooks’ inattention to conservative Protestantism and Fundamentalism after the Scopes trial of 1925 makes the emergence of post-1970 conservative Protestant political activism unexpected. Jerry Falwell appears in many textbooks, but it is not clear where he came from and what historical sources and traditions he and his movement tapped; conservative Protestantism has seldom been mentioned since students read about the 1920s. The result is a loss of history’s greatest disciplinary advantage, its ability to explore a society’s broadest, most complex, and sometimes contradictory transforma-
tions. The potential for suppleness shown by American religion in the face of mono-
mental post-1870 technological, social, economic, and political change—raised by the centrality of religion to both liberal and conservative movements after 1960—becomes reduced to an intriguing but often isolated anomaly.

The problem raised here is not “advocacy history”—the promotion of religion through published histories or courses. Nor is it the interpretation of historical develop-
ments from a religious perspective—Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, for example—an approach that assumes religion’s usefulness as an interpretive tool and that George

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3 Paul Boyer, “In Search of the Fourth ‘R’: The Treatment of Religion in American History Textbooks and Sur-
M. Marsden and other historians have debated extensively. Rather, the problem is understanding modern American history itself. Was religion important in American public and private life after 1870, and how should historians describe it?

A single essay cannot solve this problem. But thinking about three issues in modern American history can clarify the questions we should address: the problem of assuming “secularization” in America after 1870; religion's continuing importance in twentieth-century American politics and elections; and religion's adaptive capacities in the face of modernity's technological, economic, and intellectual challenges.

Discussing those three issues assumes nothing about religion's worth at any time in American history. Historians probably differ as much in their views about the perils and attractions of America's religions as their readers do. But the discussion does suggest that historians should grapple seriously with religion in modern American private and public life because doing less produces substantial misinterpretations of that history and the many peoples who made it.

The religion problem in modern American history rests on a widespread conviction and assumption that the post—Civil War United States has been a society where religion receded, especially in public life. If private religiosity sustained itself, its expression has been largely innocuous and irrelevant to public affairs. This is what is typically meant by secularization: the essential disappearance of religion from public life despite its presence, even a vital presence, in private life.

What do we mean by religion and secularity? If we adopt relatively straightforward definitions—religion meaning conceptions of life and moral behavior rooted in supernatural and transcendent beliefs and secularity meaning the absence of religious conceptions in the customary conduct of public and personal life—ample evidence suggests that religion found itself dramatically challenged in America, as in most of Western culture and society, after 1870. The rise of modern science and industrial, nuclear, and postnuclear technology, the emergence of the secular professions and the modern corporation, and the eruption of urban megalopolises that displaced rural, face-to-face society across so much of America apparently obscured religion as traditionally understood and practiced.

Yet two major difficulties prevent us from assuming the triumph of secularity in writing modern American history: erroneous views about religion's ubiquitous power in the preindustrial, preurban West, including America, and the remarkable persistence in twentieth-century America of an individual religious commitment so deep that it defies classification as a privatized religion irrelevant to public life.

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5 This conceptualization of religion merges one in Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 3 (“religion is taken to mean belief in and resort to supernatural powers, sometimes beings, that determine the course of natural and human events”) with that in “Preface,” in The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life, ed. Christian Smith (Berkeley, 2003), vii (“By religion I mean the distinctive way of life of communities of followers shaped by their particular system of beliefs and practices that are oriented toward the supernatural”).
A new book edited by the historical sociologist Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution*, offers a particularly useful introduction to the secularization question in modern America, all the more because it also offers a powerful revisionist account of secularization's origins. Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and other secularization theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued that secularization would be the irrepresible, inevitable outcome of industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization. But Smith and his companion authors stress the importance of specific secularization agents, particularly university intellectuals, educators, scientists, social reformers, lawyers, and even religious leaders, who upended religion's hegemony over science, education, and politics. Smith generally equates the destruction of the nineteenth-century Protestant intellectual and political elite with the attainment of a twentieth-century “secular revolution” and argues that in twentieth-century America “religion is privatized and made irrelevant to public deliberations.”

Emphasizing the destruction of the nineteenth-century Protestant intellectual and political elite casts us back to a golden-age view of preindustrial religiosity. But religion’s command of early modern Western intellectual, political, and social life is difficult to square with much recent early modern European scholarship. Historians have pointed out the shallow roots of organized Christianity from the sixteenth well into the eighteenth century. Evidence includes ignorance of basic Christian doctrine in Martin Luther’s Germany; widespread resort to non-Christian methods of curing; declining attendance at Communion in prerevolutionary France; low church membership rates in colonial America, including New England and particularly in the cities; lay and intellectual anticlericalism; direct challenges to orthodox religious notions about virtually every topic of religious significance, from toleration and astronomy to morals and ethics; and an expanding pluralism of Christian denominations and reforming groups that precluded any single, powerful “religious” voice on ecclesiastical or intellectual issues. It was not a secularizing intellectual but a North Carolina farmer, probably illiterate, who told the Church of England itinerant minister Charles Woodmason in 1767 how multiplying Protestant groups affected even rural piety in prerevolutionary America: “by the Variety of Taylors who would pretend to know the best fashion in which Christs Coat is to be worn[,] none will put it on.” In short, the old Christian establishment was neither so well established nor so powerful as to constitute a cohesive entity whose overthrow would mark a “secular revolution.”

Moreover, the persistence and even advance of personal religious commitment from the Gilded Age to the late twentieth century suggest that the privatization of

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religion may make religion a powerful phenomenon, not an insignificant one. Given
social history’s emphasis on the primacy of individual and group experience, it seems
peculiar that the personal religious affiliations of Americans receive so little notice in
broad synthetic works on twentieth-century American history. Yet for decades, the
Gallup Poll and other measures of popular sentiment have reported that Americans
believe in God and supernatural powers at rates far higher than do Europeans. The
sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark are probably right in claiming that Amer-
ican church, synagogue, and mosque affiliation advanced rather than receded
throughout most of the twentieth century, climbing from 40–45 percent in the
1880s and 1890s to 60–65 percent in the 1970s and 1980s, with only a slight falling
off between 1980 and the present (old “mainline” denominations losing and Christ-
tian evangelicals gaining). The obvious contrast is with most of Europe, where the
Gallup International Millennium Survey of 2000 reports that agnosticism and athe-
ism attract a full third of adults compared to 9 percent in North America and where
14–20 percent attend religious services once a week, compared with 47 percent in the
United States and Canada. In short, Americans not only have continued to be
individually religious throughout the twentieth century but may also have attached
themselves to religious institutions at rates higher than at any time since the Puritans
commanded Massachusetts in the 1630s, 1640s, and 1650s.8

Of course, religion can be found outside churches, synagogues, and mosques, and
“membership” or attachment can be superficial, more social than spiritual (although
that too deserves explanation). Indeed, calculating church membership or adherence
in the colonial and early national periods is a complicated matter, and so too is assess-
ing the meaning of seemingly higher religious membership and adherence in the
twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Those matters must be settled elsewhere.9

Twentieth-century Americans’ supernatural beliefs and robust religious affiliation
rates directly challenge historians’ treatment of the modern United States as a nation
that has drifted free from both personal and public religion. Historians may in the
decide that personal religious affiliation in twentieth-century America only
faintly echoed the “real” religion of the colonial, early national, and antebellum eras;
perhaps it represented little more than the guilt of men and women in an otherwise

(Chapel Hill, 1965), 147; Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour Lachman, *One Nation under God: Religion in Contempo-
rary American Society* (New York, 1993); Philip K. Hastings and Dean R. Hoge, “Religious Trends among College
Industrial Society*, trans. Patricia Lipscomb (Oxford, 1979); Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe,
1814–1914* (New York, 2000); Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation,
1996); Steve Bruce, *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis
(Oxford, 1992); Gallup International Millennium Survey <http://www.gallup-international.com/default.asp?
content=ContentFiles/millenium15.asp> (Dec. 10, 2003).

9 Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 16, 24–30; Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, “Church
Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (April 1982),
245–86; Theodore Caplow et al., “A Symposium on Church Attendance in the United States,” *American Sociologi-
starkly secular society. But the statistics about belief and religious affiliation at least demand recognition and explanation from historians of modern American life.

Robert A. Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (1985) explains the powerful cultural implications of religious commitment in modern America. Orsi made faith and family the two great foundations of his story and the centerpiece of Italian immigrant culture in New York, not its periphery. Whereas historians previously stressed Italian anticlericalism and immigrant antagonism toward the Irish-dominated American Catholic Church, Orsi uncovered a vibrant local community where faith seemed well rooted and deepened by its connections to family. Its capstone—the annual *festa* of the Madonna of Mount Carmel in Harlem—featured religion as the centerpiece of a community brought into being as much by pious laypeople as by clerics. The religion and the community described by Orsi produced tension between men and women and discord between religious and secular concerns. Nothing here was saccharine or sentimental. But the achievement was more than something quaintly foundational, to be forgotten as assimilation occurred. Religion, embodied in the *festa*, stood at the center of Italian immigrant life in New York, and when Italians abandoned Harlem for New York's Westchester County, Long Island, and New Jersey after World War II, they returned to that neighborhood for decades to reenact the yearly *festa* of the Madonna of Mount Carmel.10

In their integration of religion into modern personal and social life, Orsi's Italians proved far more representative than we customarily acknowledge. Randall Balmer's evocation of a Bible camp in the Adirondack Mountains where adolescents happily carved "Erika & Howard" and "I love Dave" into so many helpless trees suggests how powerfully, not hypocritically, religious groups understood and frankly tolerated the union of physical and spiritual questing that typified the Bible camp experience. For many Americans well into the 1950s, religion as likely defined the boundaries of permissible love as did ethnicity and race. The marriages tracked among Scandinavians in Richard M. Bernard's study of rural Wisconsin in the early twentieth century roughly reflected the language, national, and doctrinal separation among proliferating immigrant Protestant denominations between 1880 and 1910 (by 1905 there were over twenty Scandinavian Protestant groups divided by language, doctrine, and liturgy). Increased intermarriage among Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Finnish lovers in the next decades paralleled denominational mergers, cultural assimilation, and the universal adoption of English among children. Did religious and congregational life "cause" the changes in choice of spouses? Not in any simple fashion. But it surely made a difference when a Lutheran minister spoke about the worthiness or unworthiness of others or when he supported or opposed denominational mergers that privileged doctrine above national origins.11

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And Wisconsin predicted America for Europeans, if not for African Americans or Hispanics. The “triple melting pot” described and denounced in one of the few simultaneously famous and significant books of the 1950s—Will Herberg’s Protestant, Catholic, Jew—represented a profound transformation of American social values and behavior at the very heart of family and personal experience. For young men and women, old denominational-doctrinal-language-ethnic loyalties that precluded courtship and marriage gave way to new configurations defined by religious rather than secular parameters. Protestants could court and marry other Protestants, Catholics other Catholics, and Jews other Jews (regional and other variations acknowledged). Among middle- and upper-middle-class Jews, that pattern so swiftly spilled out to marriage with Christians that its demographic implications have concerned American Jewish leaders for four decades. Perhaps ironically, Herberg excoriated this transformation because it abandoned traditional religion and embraced a pallid gospel of the American way—“very often a religiousness without religion, a religiousness with almost any kind of content or none.” But Herberg’s dismay only emphasized the power he accorded to religion in recasting the modern American social experience. Herberg might have explained the changes in American marriage patterns through class rather than religion in a book entitled “poor, middle, rich.” But author, readers, and subjects alike understood that religion, not class, constituted the principal mechanism of this twentieth-century marriage upheaval among whites of European descent, however superficial Herberg believed the religion had become.12

In twentieth-century America religion shaped not only the interactions of men and women, but what it meant to be a man or a woman. The demographics of twentieth-century American religion—indeed of American religion since the 1660s—makes gender a matter of equally critical interest. Ann Braude’s 1997 essay, “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” conveyed the point with deceptive simplicity: “In America, women go to church.” Braude did not mean, of course, that all American women are Christian. Rather, she pointed up the importance of women to groups in all religious traditions. Historians must thus grapple with the fact that women have constituted 50–65 percent of the membership in American religious groups, except in some sects, for over three hundred years: “the numerical dominance of women in all but a few religious groups constitutes one of the most consistent features of American religion, and one of the least explained.”13

The centrality of women to American religion—and of religion to American women—has provided historians with topics for an almost staggering number of books. One might expect many examinations of women in American religion before

the Civil War, and they are indeed there, from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s study of religion and women’s roles in colonial New England to Catherine A. Brekus’s recovery of women preachers from the 1740s to the Civil War. But books on religion among modern American women are equally notable: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s account of African American women within the Baptist tradition, the exceptional depth of the entries in Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore’s *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1997), Cynthia G. Tucker’s remarkable discovery of liberal women preachers on the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century western frontier, Mary Jo Weaver’s often controversial work on twentieth-century Catholic women in America, and histories of women’s roles among conservative Protestants by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, R. Marie Griffith, and Lori L. Witt. Those books depict an interaction between women and religion that sets American women’s experience apart from anything in the history of western Europe, for example.14

In the context of modern America, religion therefore becomes central to understanding women and their history. Another book by Robert Orsi, his study of women’s devotion to St. Jude, illustrates religion’s perhaps unexpected centrality to women’s negotiation of modernity. Orsi focuses on a popular devotion to a modern saint that originated in Chicago in a south side Mexican American parish in 1929. Petitions to St. Jude and thanksgivings for favors granted have for decades been delivered, not in personal visits to the shrine, but through the U.S. mail, which is processed by a large office staff in downtown Chicago, and in tiny advertisements dotting the classified section of virtually every American newspaper from the 1930s to the present. St. Jude’s overwhelmingly women petitioners typically asked the “patron saint of lost causes” to solve specifically modern dilemmas: increasingly complex marriages, the human consequences of the Great Depression, the horror of World War II, the persistence of sickness and death when twentieth-century medicine promised and often delivered cures. The petitioners did not seek reclusive retreats, and St. Jude did not thrust them back into a preindustrial agrarian world. Instead, women and St. Jude together sculpted their way from modern crisis to modern crisis while bringing female supplicants closer to God.15

A few tantalizing books raise the implications of personal religious commitment among American men since 1870. Mark C. Carnes described spiritualized men’s rituals in Victorian fraternal organizations that paralleled Protestant congregational life but broached transcendent beliefs that were unorthodox by any contemporary stan-

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dard. Clifford Putney portrayed connections between hypermasculine athleticism and post-Victorian Protestantism. Orsi’s study of Italian immigrants in New York traces conflict between religion and notions of masculinity among Italian men in Harlem, a conflict only amplified by the family’s importance to immigrant religious and social life. But it is a long way from those mainly late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century histories to the next major block of studies about religion and masculinity—the largely sociological literature on the short-lived Promise Keepers movement of the 1990s. Although books by Rhys H. Williams and others lack strong historical awareness, their descriptions of powerful evangelical Christian efforts to enlist religion in the recovery of male authority in a feminist and postfeminist world merely highlight the potential benefit of determining what happened between religion and masculinity from the 1920s to the 1990s.16

The importance of religion to American children and adolescents since 1870 has received uneven attention from historians, though the literature is replete with intriguing studies and fascinating possibilities. The aphorism “lose the child, lose the adult” stands at the center of the nineteenth-century Protestant Sunday School movement that Anne M. Boylan described in her rich, complex history. Twentieth-century Christian proselytizers broadened, rather than narrowed, their approach. Boys of the Street by the founder of Manhattan’s Labor Temple, Charles Stelzle, described almost feral children traveling in packs through New York’s canyons. The English-born Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) movement of the 1840s proliferated and diversified in the United States in YMCAS and Young Women’s Christian Associations (YWCA), and then in Young Men’s Hebrew Associations (YMHA) and Young Women’s Hebrew Associations (YWHA). The decline of overt formal religious identity in such institutions, which indeed occurred at the turn of the century, should not obscure the development of a moral earnestness that may have been equally, if not more, powerful in shaping urban social reform after 1910. Following World War II, the dramatic expansion in college enrollment opened unprecedented opportunities through newly fashioned or revamped organizations for late adolescents and young men and women—Hillel, Newman Centers, and Campus Crusades for Christ, among others. They stimulated religious engagement and commitment in middle or late adolescents, whom organized religion often lost, and they offered an alternative to the supposed secularity of campus intellectual life.17


The psychiatrist Robert Coles and the sociologist James Garbarino suggest, in distinctly nonhistorical works, that reformers’ attention to the religious formation of young people may not have been misplaced, whatever the successes and failures of the reformers’ goals and theologies. Coles’s books on children’s moral and spiritual lives in the 1980s and 1990s reveal the rich moral and religious sense still typical of American children in the late twentieth century. They suggest that the historical exploration of children’s religion—as opposed to the religion reformers tried to teach to children—should be an extraordinarily attractive object of historians’ study. And James Garbarino’s heartbreaking 1999 study of adolescent murderers—who display an utter lack of empathy, kindness, and love shocking at such young ages—might point up organized religion’s tragic failure to break across the barriers of class, race, and family pathology in late-twentieth-century America. Historians and religious studies scholars might rightly question Garbarino’s assumption that the values these boys tragically lack are necessarily religious. But the absence of those values in the young murderers studied by Garbarino and the spiritual hunger in the children described by Coles demonstrate, negatively and positively, that a child’s sensitivity to a larger ethical, moral, and indeed spiritual world is as critical in the early twenty-first century as it was two and three centuries earlier.18

Novelists have appreciated the consequences of children’s engagement with religion for adolescents and young adults better than historians despite American historians’ profound turn to social history in the past thirty years. Norman Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead (1948), the best-selling novel of American soldiers on a Japanese island in World War II, deftly demonstrates how World War II soldiers lived out powerful youthful engagements with religion. Mailer used religion not as a mere prop but as a touchstone by which characters defined themselves: Roy Gallagher, whose Boston Irish Catholic guilt inspired resentment of both his pregnant wife Mary and of Jews; Julio Martinez, the Texas “Mexican Catholic” who imagined his sexual relations primarily with Irish Catholic or Protestant girls; Joe Goldstein, the religious Jew who is defined both by his faith and by the mountainous anti-Semitism that surrounds him; Oscar Ridges, the southern Christian Fundamentalist who just acted rather than contemplated; Maj. Gen. Edward Cummings, whose religion was power; Lt. Robert Hearn, the quintessential liberal agnostic who saw no meaning in this or any war. When they were cast together on a south Pacific island, religion became their personal shorthand, a way they defined themselves and each other as individuals faced not only the Japanese but, worse, their comrades. The soldiers’ ascriptions did not reflect what their denominations might claim to have taught them. But they revealed how the young men imbibed and then used the religion each had ubiquitously experienced as child and adolescent.19


In the next decade other American writers placed religion at the center of the adolescent experience. James Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) made a young adolescent’s arrival on a Pentecostal “threshing floor” in Harlem the principal focus of a moving description of African American life and culture in New York City. Mary McCarthy’s Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957) placed its acerbic, bitter description of Catholic parochial schools at the very center of her story about growing up. Philip Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint (1969) portrayed the contest between a sexually driven teenage boy and his anxious Jewish parents as the pivot of his own awkward maturity. All of them describe Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish childhoods that exerted powerful, if devastating, influences on twentieth-century children and adolescents. Theirs were worlds far from the effete “Protestant, Catholic, Jew” ecumenism that Will Herberg insisted had overtaken midcentury American religion and, frankly, far from social history as commonly written.20

Did religion’s powerful influence in the lives of modern children, adolescents, and adults significantly affect public life, especially politics, between 1870 and 2000? Nineteenth-century U.S. political historians have long described religion’s stimulus to political movements and electoral politics before and after the Civil War. Robert H. Abzug, Lee Benson, Paul Boyer, David Brion Davis, David W. Blight, Nancy F. Cott, Don Harrison Doyle, Ronald P. Formisano, Daniel Walker Howe, Linda Kerber, Paul Kleppner, Anne Norton, Mary Ryan, Robert P. Swierenga, Ronald G. Walters, Sean Wilentz, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, among others, have described how religion subtly or directly shaped electoral politics and political movements from the early republic into the Gilded Age. Lay and clerical leaders of movements for abolition, the defense of slavery, educational reform, women’s rights, and temperance interwove theologically derived ethical and moral convictions with nineteenth-century American ethnic and class sensibilities to produce a politics as dynamic as it was distinctive. Not everything was pretty or successful. But the engagement was vigorous, and Joel H. Silbey well summarized its ballot box effects before and after the Civil War: “A ‘good deal of sectarian bitterness’ was expressed at the polls, and each party could count on an amalgam of religiously and ethnically defined tribal loyalties to sustain it in election after election.”21


Twentieth-century U.S. historians have only occasionally emphasized religion's impact on modern American public life, especially politics. The exceptions occur in treatments of the 1928 and 1960 presidential elections, the post–World War II civil rights movement, though even there specifically religious foundations are sometimes oddly ignored, and the rise of the new Christian Right, which is frequently discussed but not always historically explained. Interestingly, none of the essays in Christian Smith's The Secular Revolution dissects the outcome of secularization in electoral politics, although its impact can fairly be inferred from Smith's argument that secularization "deposited the mainline Protestant custodianship of public culture, ... supplanting it with the liberal political theory's 'procedural republic.'"22

Secularization did indeed advance in America after 1870. David A. Hollinger has powerfully traced its effects in the American scientific community and its peculiar relationship to American Judaism. Protestant-sponsored censorship in literature, the arts, and news slowly imploded from its own hypocrisy as well as its inability to corral massively expanding leisure industries, a collapse that compromised expanding Catholic censorship efforts in the mid-twentieth century despite their substantially more coherent theological foundation. Public and private elementary, secondary, and higher education eschewed formal and informal religious trappings and foundations. Journalism in America's biggest cities, if not in midsize cities and small towns, seemed to revel in imitating H. L. Mencken's enthusiastic ridicule of religion as the principal intellectual dinosaur still surviving in the modern age.23 Yet religion's resilience and power to shape political movements and electoral politics in twentieth-century America suggests that secularization has not been linear. Henry F. May rightly criticized the "Social Christianity" movement of the 1880s and 1890s as politically naive, timid, and largely unsuccessful. But he and his scholarly predecessor C. Howard Hopkins also pointed out the massive debt twentieth-century liberal politics would owe to the Protestant Social Gospel movement and to such figures as Walter Rauschenbusch well into the 1960s. Robert Morse Crunden reminded historians of Progressivism's massive debts to the same liberal Protestant evangelical-


ism. David M. Kennedy's history of the depression-era United States, written amid a very thin historical literature on either religion or religion in politics in that period, contains only two index entries under “religion,” but the book still notes religion's significant role in Republican and Democratic electoral politics from 1929 to 1945. Religious convictions and, indeed, bigotry not only obviously influenced the 1928 presidential election in which the Iowa Quaker Herbert Hoover swamped the New York Catholic Al Smith but also often hobbled Democrats in the 1920s and caused tension within the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt after 1932.24

Religion's ability to shape public discourse on broad-scale issues of morals and ethics in a vigorous secular environment prospered long past the demise of the Progressive movement. The Catholic social activist John Ryan, a protégé of Archbishop John Ireland, articulated still powerful convictions about the “living wage” for laboring men and women. Through the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin advanced a “personalism” that espoused the dignity of working men and women, pacifism, and the responsibility of moral men and women for all of those around them, including especially the homeless and destitute. Catholic authorities likewise articulated an opposition to eugenics, birth control, and abortion substantially more consistent, and controversial, than that of secular, Protestant, and Jewish thinkers, who often supported birth control as a part of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century while opposing abortion; they frequently reversed their stands on eugenics and abortion after the 1960s. The Protestant theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich led public intellectuals in opposing Nazi and Communist totalitarianism and Nazi and American anti-Semitism and racism. Far in advance of other white clergymen in America, Niebuhr supported racial justice, as did the renowned Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, to considerable effect within their religious traditions and across the nation. Together, those figures exemplified Tillich's conviction that religion was, at its essence, a philosophical and theological “ground of being” whose redefined spiritual centeredness could successfully confront modern totalitarianism, religious bigotry, and racism even as it transcended the creedal orthodoxy and denominational distinctiveness that the sociologist Will Herberg and others saw as the heart of religion.25

Dwight D. Eisenhower's widely ridiculed pronouncement following his November 1952 election that “our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is” is intriguingly confirmed in a massive recent study of American voting patterns by the political scientists Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks. Manza and Brooks's data on elections from 1952 to 1996

describe religion as the second most important “cleavage” separating American voters after race, which was twice as important. Religion ranked ahead of class and gender.26

Manza and Brooks’s conclusions are scarcely surprising when one remembers how religion and race merged on both sides of the most important political divide in the 1950s and 1960s—the civil rights crusade. Charles Marsh documents the eagerness of Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, to punish “heretics” such as “Turks, Mongols, Tatars, Orientals, [and] Negroes” as well as Catholics, Jews, and Communists and his frequent injunctions to “Get your Bible out and Pray! You will hear from us.” James H. Cone has reminded readers and historians alike that “black people followed King,” not because he adopted and adapted the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, but because King “embodied in word and deed the faith of the black church which has always claimed that oppression and the Gospel of Jesus do not go together.” Charles M. Payne, John Dittmer, Neil R. McMillen, and other historians have recorded the importance of local organizers connected through church membership and intercongregational activity who interpreted their work and experiences in religious terms. And, on the other side, John T. McGreevy explains with no little pain how liberal Catholic efforts to end racial segregation in heavily Catholic northern cities ran afoul of the vibrant European ethnic consciousness that the expansive Catholic parish system fostered and that now seemed threatened by racial integration, even by African American Catholics.27

Many episodes illustrate the centrality of religion’s capacity to link seemingly privatized personal faith with near-revolutionary social change, but none is more tragic or affecting than Beatrice and Roosevelt Cole’s fateful encounter with the Ku Klux Klan in the summer of 1964. Charles Marsh, in his God’s Long Summer, described how Klansmen beat Roosevelt Cole and threatened to kill him as the Coles left a meeting at Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Mississippi’s Neshoba County. Beatrice Cole asked one of the Klansmen to stop hitting her husband and allow her to pray.

I started praying to God that he would spare my husband, that God would spare his life... I remembered a hymn. It just fell into my heart. I said, “Father I stretch my hand to thee, no other help I know.”... And when I said that, the man who was beating my husband just stopped. Someone said, “leave him living.”... I didn’t know nothing else to do but call on God. And God just got in the midst.28

It would belabor the point to stress that theological ideas have helped propel the new Christian Right from the 1970s to the present. But the political scientist Michael Lienesch has described the importance of Francis A. Schaeffer’s 1976 book, How Should We Then Live? Schaeffer is not well known to historians, but his denunciation

28 Marsh, God’s Long Summer, 68.
of “secular humanism” heralded the vast literature that fueled conservative Christian activism after 1970 and shaped the style of cable television and radio talk shows that have expanded the movement since the mid-1980s. Patrick Allitt’s dissection of conservative Catholicism after World War II reminds us that religiously motivated political conservatism was not ubiquitously evangelical or Protestant. Participants in the intellectually pungent world surrounding William Buckley’s National Review always understood their movement as embodying a Catholic world view that could inform modern America. At the same time, National Review conservatives found it possible to support more secular conservatives such as Barry Goldwater, who favored the “the primacy of moral initiative” but from a more political than religious foundation.

Lisa McGirr’s history of conservative women in Orange County, California, renowned as the epitome of southern California political conservatism, deftly traces the translation of larger theological and religious issues into modern American grassroots politics. Conservative women moved effortlessly from evangelical congregations to Republican workshops in an almost uncanny parallel with antebellum women’s activism and social reform. Opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) among conservative women in America’s suburbs and small cities flowered easily within evangelical Protestant, Mormon, and conservative Catholic congregations. Partisan conservative Republicans such as Phyllis Schlafly provided enormous energy for the anti-ERA crusade. But those who listened to such leaders made their opposition effective through local organizations that brought together activists from different religious congregations whose objections to the ERA emerged from their religious convictions and experiences.

Jimmy Carter’s defeat by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election demonstrated the fallacy of treating religion as a privatized behavior irrelevant to twentieth-century American public life. Conservative evangelical activists, led by the evangelist Jerry Falwell, have long claimed Reagan’s victory for themselves, citing the success of Falwell’s Moral Majority organization in turning out conservative voters. In contrast, Ralph Reed, founder of the Christian Coalition and the current Georgia state Republican chairman, has acknowledged that Falwell’s claims are probably overstated. But he noted their usefulness in sustaining conservative Christian political activity, observing that “in politics, perception is often reality.”

Systematic voting studies exemplify the critical roles religion played in the 1980 presidential election. Choices and alliances made then predicted and motivated crucial religiously conservative political action over the next two decades. In their account of the 1980 presidential election, the political scientists Jerome L. Himmel-
stein and James A. McRae Jr. denied the emergence of the “neopopulist” or “Middle American Radical” constituency touted by Falwell. But they also underlined the conservative evangelical impact on voting in the South and Middle West, where conservative Republicans displaced many Democrats and recast national and regional American politics. Corwin Smidt found that in 1980 evangelical Protestant voters, some newly mobilized, largely split between Carter and Reagan. But they also tended to vote heavily and conservatively in congressional races, and their concentration in the South helped capture the U.S. Senate for the Republicans, a critical point in the conservative turn in post–Vietnam War America.32

In short, religion could make a critical difference in complex modern partisan American politics. That was the point of Ralph Reed’s 1996 book, Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of American Politics. Reed legitimated conservative Christian political activity by tracing it historically to the colonial era. And he invoked the abolitionist Theodore Parker to stress the time-honored moral purposes of American politics: “The curve of the moral universe is long, but it leads toward justice.”33 The sentiment stretched back to Martin Luther King, Reinhold Niebuhr, Abraham Heschel, Dorothy Day, and Walter Rauschenbusch, however differently they defined justice or understood religion.

The surprise of a vital religious force in modern American politics leads inevitably to the question of religion, secularization, and modernity. We too often view religion as a fixed embodiment of premodern culture and “tradition.” In that formulation, creative interchanges between religion and modern culture bear the stigma of compromise, summarized in the fateful term “secularization.” Yet ample evidence suggests that modernity has offered grounds on which religion not only has survived in modern America, but has prospered in three particular areas.

Many conservative religious activists in twentieth-century America, to use a secular comparison, could be said to be late modern globalists, albeit Christian and conservative, rather than early modern nationalists. After 1970 conservative evangelicals often embraced alliances across many old denominational boundaries, and they sometimes bridged gaps between Christianity and Judaism, this surprising among heirs to a movement earlier known for virulent anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism. The evangelist Pat Robertson not only praised the April 1980 Washington for Jesus rally because “Catholics and Southern Baptists prayed side by side with Presbyterians and Nazarenes” but also later called for a “return to our Judeo-Christian roots” as he prepared for his 1988 presidential campaign. And religious conservatives steadily embraced broadcast media, from Aimee Semple McPherson’s construction of KFSG

33 Reed, Active Faith, 9.
(“Kall Four Square Gospel”) radio in Los Angeles in 1924 and the elaborate syndication network for the Old Fashioned Revival Hour of the 1930s and 1940s to the use of network television by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen and Billy Graham in the 1950s and 1960s and of cable television after 1980 by Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell.34

The broad ecumenism of post-1960 religious activism, liberal and conservative alike, signaled the sponsors’ acceptance of modern functionalism and its lure among religious activists throughout America. The ubiquitous emphasis on what religion could “do”—how it could bring men and women together, ground politics, herald moral crusades, motivate voters—allowed twentieth-century religious leaders to slight old religious identities rooted in particular creeds or liturgies and instead to stress broad principles, from Paul Tillich’s “ground of being” to Pat Robertson’s “Judeo-Christian roots.” They scarcely imbided the functionalism of William James, who in his Varieties of Religious Experience defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.” Rather, they deftly retained what can be called “substantive” concepts of religion—belief in the supernatural or specifically in God—but deemphasized denominational exclusiveness. They stressed that religion empowered adherents to reconcile previously competing forces such as economics, secular politics, or national or ethnic interests in order to produce healthier, more successful individuals and a better integrated, more moral society. From reshaping urban slums such as Hell’s Kitchen in Rauschenbusch’s time to recasting personal and public morality in Robertson’s or Falwell’s, this religion produced results. Religion could “work” in the century of its reputed demise.35

Ample scholarship also suggests that religion found more compatibility than threat in modern America’s advancing material and consumer culture. Colleen McDannell, Leigh Eric Schmidt, Andrew R. Heinze, Jenna Weissman Joselit, Paul Gutjahr, and David Morgan demonstrate how Christianity and Judaism thrived in America amid the proliferation of things. Organs, Christmas decorations, Easter parades, matzo, bar and bat mitzvahs, Bibles in profusions of styles, mass-produced pictures of Christ, and sheer kitsch—all sacralized much of private and public American culture. The parade of religious goods may have brought more men, women, and children to religion than it repelled, even if it appalled purveyors of high culture and offended some religious leaders.36


36 Colleen McDannell, The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840–1900 (Bloomington, 1986); Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America (New Haven, 1996); Leigh Eric
Suburbanization with its consumer-dominated public culture likewise proved a boon to organized religion after World War II. Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003) describes a wholly secular society where shopping centers and material consumption epitomized suburban American life. But one could ask if religion did not provide an equally powerful, if subtler, and still farther reaching nexus of suburban life in postwar America. Each shopping center was larger than any single suburban church or synagogue, not only in the New Jersey Cohen studied but also and especially in the Midwest, where enclosed shopping centers originated and where they dwarfed East Coast malls in size and number. But thousands of new, sparkling suburban churches and synagogues predated the enclosed shopping malls by a decade (the first enclosed mall, Southdale, in Edina, Minnesota, was not built until 1956) and surrounded them in even greater numbers as the malls proliferated.  

Anecdotal evidence and criticism of suburban religion suggests an engagement between religion and suburbanization so strong that it accounts for the exceptional rise in church membership among Americans between 1945 and 1970. For every trip to the mall, suburban families easily made two, three, even five or more trips to suburban congregations between 1945 and the 1970s and beyond. Congregations not only participated in consumer culture but helped lead the very “consumers’ republic” Cohen describes. Congregations dealt with spiritual needs, in part by providing a bevy of social services originating in the so-called institutional churches that had proliferated in the old cities under the Social Gospel and in the synagogue centers that had emerged among urban Jews. Youth groups, choirs, prekindergarten classes, nursery schools, counseling for young couples, services for the elderly, discussions about alcohol, then drugs, all found their primary base in suburban congregations that stretched from Maine to Texas and New Jersey to southern California and across the full denominational spectrum among Christians and Jews.  

This union of religion with suburbia almost infamously worshiped the middle class. Gibson Winter excoriated the suburban churches for their moral indifference to the plight of the old cities in his 1961 book, *Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis*. Winter’s critique thrived because it recognized the strength, rather than the weakness, of postwar suburban religion, as Winter called on suburban churches to uphold their responsibilities to old cities that had birthed the suburbs. In fact, the practice of religion was
probably as surprisingly complicated and capable of multiple expression in the suburbs as it had been in the cities. Gerald H. Gamm explains the complicated reasons that led Jews to the suburbs and kept Catholics in the city, holding on to, but also transforming and sometimes abandoning, religion in contexts that reflected different understandings of the meaning, function, and value of religion in modern circumstances. And Etan Diamond explains why and how Orthodox Jews could find a home in Toronto's suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s. Religion and secularity intertwined in the suburbs, and their happy and unhappy engagements remade the public and private life of Orthodox Jews and metropolitan Toronto alike.39

Religion might have this effect in modern America because it increasingly tapped a central force of modernity itself: the “therapeutic” impulse that historians from Sydney Ahlstrom to Martin Marty have identified as a major component of modern American religiosity. Ahlstrom described the impulse as “harmonial”: “those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos.” They were exemplified in the movement’s founding tract, Ralph Waldo Trine’s 1897 In Tune with the Infinite; or, Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty.40

The success of therapeutic or harmonial religion in America stemmed from its broad cultural influence rather than its expression in a single denomination. Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science movement and its offshoots, which historians label New Thought—the Church of the Universal Design, Divine Science, the Unity School of Christianity—gave therapeutic religion specific denominational expression. But its cultural importance was far broader. Beryl Satter has traced the therapeutic influence in the novels of Ursula Gestefeld, in Progressivism’s emphasis on human potential, and in the popular psychology of Good Housekeeping and Ladies Home Journal. The religiously based therapeutic approach to personal problems, which thrived on its vague spiritual allusiveness, blossomed after 1945 in Joshua Loth Liebman’s 1946 Peace of Mind and the Catholic bishop Fulton J. Sheen’s 1949 Peace of Soul. It success was then capped by Norman Vincent Peale’s dramatic 1952 best seller, The Power of Positive Thinking, a book thick with roots in New Thought, spiritualized popular psychology, and Trine’s In Tune with the Infinite. By 1955 even the evangelical Billy Graham turned Jesus into an apostle of contentment in The Secret of Happiness: Jesus’ Teaching on Happiness As Expressed in the Beatitudes. As the sociologists Robert N. Bellah, Wade Clark Roof, and Robert Wuthnow argued, the God many Americans worshiped after 1945 was one who offered direction and rest to a nation of busy “seekers.”41


The Power of Positive Thinking, which sold millions of copies for decades (and which now is available for perusal on Palm personal digital assistants), is a distinctly modern American book for a distinctly modern American people that demonstrates the relevance of religion in American public and private life. It emphasizes power as much as the positive, and it never requires overly concentrated thinking. Peale showed men and women seeking success how to effect personal change through religion, and he made religion all the more relevant because he showed what it could accomplish more than what it was. The success of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who became masters of cable television in the 1980s and 1990s, bespeaks similar modern commitments (Robertson sold his Family Channel to Fox Broadcasting in 1997 for $1.9 billion). Their network programs interlace biblical exegesis with partisan politics, international news, and discussions with pundits and controversialists, and the Christian Financial Network provides financial advice both through Robertson’s television programming and on the Internet. The medium and the message urge Christian action to shape viewers’ lives and remodel the world; their evangelical understanding values action more than contemplation.42

Until religion does die out in American public and private life, historians need to understand it as commonplace but also transformed in modern American history, not as exceptional or anomalous. That understanding requires no sanctimony. Indeed, because religion’s frequent claims for transcendence produce questionable and horrific behavior—fraud, sexual abuse, group suicide, and apocalyptically driven mass homicide in the name of the divine—critical discernment is at least as important as it is in writing secular history. A persistently happy history of religion in modern America could scarcely be an accurate history since religion has too often only roiled the waters of our national dilemmas and disgraces.

Nor does writing the history of religion in modern America or elsewhere require a personal religious commitment. Personal faith, like political allegiance, may highlight issues not otherwise noticed. But it also easily obscures. Contemporary religious commitments do little to illuminate distinctly historical expressions of religion, not merely those of the thirteenth century but even those of the 1910s and 1920s, decades now approaching their centenary. One need only cite the atheist Jerry Miller’s rendering of New England’s Puritans with a grace of understanding still unmatched to reject the idea that the best author of twentieth-century Christian history is a Christian, of nineteenth-century Protestant history a Protestant, and so forth.43

Understanding religion’s role in modern American history requires the learning essential to all history applied to the pressing questions of the past. We need to know

17; Robert N. Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley, 1985); Wade Clark Roof, Spiritual Marketplaces: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion (Princeton, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s (Berkeley, 1998).


more about religion and voting between 1900 and 1950. We need to know more about relationships among religion, class, and race, questions raised by the ubiquitous racial and economic segregation of almost all modern American congregations yet seldom discussed historically or even contemporaneously. We need to move past Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad’s and Jane I. Smith’s general histories of Islam in America to probe historical Muslim communities in America’s cities and suburbs, much as historians probed seventeenth-century Puritan towns or late-nineteenth-century European ethnic communities in urban America. We need to ask hard historical questions about religious complacency in the face of moral dilemmas, as E. Franklin Frazier and Benjamin Mays did when they wrote about what Gayraud Wilmore termed the “deradicalization of the Black Church” in the interwar period or as Gibson Winter did in his critique of post–World War II suburban churches. Finally, we need to ask whether religion’s survival and even prosperity in modern America require us to rethink stereotypical notions of modernity, notably, the assumption of a thoroughgoing secularization that fails to describe American history and culture into the twenty-first century.44

In short, understanding religion’s role in modern American history requires taking three questions seriously: Did religion make a difference in modern America? If so, how and why? When we treat those questions as largely irrelevant to modern American history, we only continue the mystification experienced by students in second semester U.S. history survey courses who ask how religion could have affected post-1960 American politics because God has otherwise seemed so dead for so long. In our present condition, too often a teacher can only sigh, “Now what? They’ve asked about religion.”