Religious History in the Post-Ahlstrom Era

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In the winter of 2006 several graduate students in history at Boston College organized a conference on new approaches to the history of religion. They hatched the idea, solicited the papers, and managed the local arrangements. Over two days about fifty historians—from students to senior professors—presented their work on religion in various historical times and places. There were papers on the origins of the American Bible Belt, panels on feminism and religion in modern Britain, and much more. Because I am the dissertation advisor to the organizers, they asked me to provide some remarks at the concluding lunch. It seemed worthwhile, given the emphasis on new approaches to the subject, to look back and reflect on some older ones. This was not just the nostalgic impulse of a graying academic, fondly recalling the heady days of his own graduate-student youth. I thought it might be useful to draw some kind of baseline, a starting point from which to measure what had happened since and is happening now.

In 1972 Yale University Press published Sydney Ahlstrom’s Religious History of the American People. Most American historians are familiar with it, though there are probably only a few of us who have actually read it cover to cover. It’s a big book; it weighs just under five pounds. It is “synoptic”—an appropriate word, that—and its chronological scope is impressive. It opens with the Council of Constance (1418), which ended the Great Western Schism and reestablished the unity of European Christendom. The last chapter describes what Ahlstrom calls “the Turbulent Sixties”—the 1960s, that is, barely over as he was writing. Those recent years were a time, he said, not of consensus but of “dissensus” in religion as in other aspects of American life. There was a sharp break between the religious past and the religious present,
and the future did not seem particularly bright. “America’s moral and religious tradition was tested and found wanting in the sixties,” Ahlstrom concluded bluntly. Factors such as rapid technological change (the moon landing, for instance, only three years before), the disaffection of youth (Kent State University, two years earlier), changing roles for women in society (the Equal Rights Amendment, submitted to the states just as the book hit the stores)—all these and other social forces were challenging religion and the writing of its history.

Accordingly Ahlstrom took as his interpretive framework the idea that religion in America had had a remarkable consistency from the fifteenth century down to his own day. The nation might have been moving away from its earlier consensus, but that consensus had once been firmly in place, and it could be seen across the denominational lines. Through most of its history, America had been “the Protestant Empire,” dominated in fact by a particular kind of Protestantism, the one associated with the independent Calvinist churches of early New England. Across the board religion in America had been “unmistakably conditioned by a Reformed and Puritan ethos.” This ethos was gradually attenuated and secularized over time, but the country had nevertheless been “pervaded by an ideology which . . . was Puritan at the level of both personal and social ethics.” Now, however, that ethos had unraveled, and what Ahlstrom called a “post-Protestant,” even a “post-Puritan” era had arrived. This time of “post-”s threw into sharp relief the “pre-”s, and, standing as it did on that very cusp, Ahlstrom’s book might serve as the earlier era’s summary and capstone.

The reviewers all thought so, and they concluded that an older way of doing religious history had come to a close with the publication of Ahlstrom’s Religious History. This book, they said, was a vast improvement over the largely denominational volumes of earlier scholars, but it was also the culmination of one way of approaching the subject. Jerald Brauer of the University of Chicago said in Church History that Ahlstrom’s work was “probably the last and the very best of a long series of synthetic histories of the religious development of America. . . . It closes the door on one period and makes necessary the opening of doors to a new period of historiography.” Henry Warner Bowden of Rutgers, reviewing the book for the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, compared Ahlstrom to Moses, no less: he brought scholars to a vantage point where they could see the “new terrain for future generations of students”—new topics to be explored, new methods to be tried—but he could not “cross over into that territory himself.” No one, all the reviewers agreed, would ever write religious history quite this way again.
I remember reading some of these reviews when they first appeared, and it is interesting to go back and read them again now. In the intervening years my opinion has changed. At the time I thought the reviewers were simply wrong. “Whaddaya mean, religious history can’t be written this way any more?” I said to myself. “Of course it can.” For that matter, this was the only way to write the history of religion in America or anywhere else, wasn’t it? You looked at the various religious institutions, their leadership, their theology. What laypeople did was too difficult to get at. And what, in any case, was historically significant about them? Religious history was inevitably a branch of intellectual history such as Ahlstrom had written. Perhaps no other scholar would be as comprehensive as he in the future, I thought, but he had correctly identified the story that was to be told, the phenomena that were to be analyzed. Paul Conkin of the University of Wisconsin seemed to confirm this position, even as he offered the most Wasplish assessment in the pages of Reviews in American History. Conkin aimed his criticisms at Ahlstrom’s supposed lack of what he called “dogmatic intellect,” pointing out the book’s failure to account adequately for the doctrinal differences between, say, Mormon and Adventist views of death and the afterlife. But Conkin’s critique only reinforced the notion that dogma, the body of religious ideas, had to be at the heart of religious history.

Now I think the other reviewers were right after all. Broad as it is Ahlstrom’s book does seem to offer a limited view, and its questions are no longer the only ones we want to ask. It is unappreciative at the least to take an eleven-hundred-page book, published three decades years ago, and point out all the things that aren’t in it. But there are some obvious topics that get little or no treatment. Theologians and clergymen are the principal characters in the story, and these are, of course, overwhelmingly male. I did a rough count in the index: there are about twelve hundred personal-name entries, only about sixty of them women. This is an unfair criticism, but obviously no one could write about religion today and leave women out of the story. There are many other subjects that simply are not discussed. Even among the mainline Christian denominations there are lots of gaps. In the discussion of Methodism, for example, we necessarily meet the Wesley brothers. We are told of John’s power as a preacher, but we never really hear much about the content of that preaching, why it had such an impact on people, or what they may have thought about it. The book is better on the post–Vatican II changes within Roman Catholicism (perhaps because they were more recent), but we still don’t get an indication of how any of these were experienced by Catholics themselves. It is wrong, of course, to be Whiggish here, to blame Ahlstrom.
for not being like us. I bring all this up only to confirm the reviewers’ opinions that this wonderful and essential book did indeed mark the end of a historiographical story. Since its publication, therefore, those of us who work in the history of religion have been living in what I call the post-Ahlstrom era.

What are the hallmarks of this period? Apart from the addition of previously overlooked religious traditions, the most significant development has been the advent of the “lived religion” approach. Historians now study religion as it was experienced and lived by laypeople. The landmark studies are familiar: Robert Orsi’s *Madonna of 115th Street* (1985), Nancy Ammerman’s *Bible Believers* (1987), David Hall’s *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* (1989). On the European side John Bossy’s *Christianity in the West* (1985) and Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* (1992) and *Voices of Morebath* (2001) all show how religion might be approached from this perspective. It is from works such as these that we get Hall’s “horse-shed Christians” (I always tell undergraduates that it’s important to pronounce those words carefully), or Ammerman’s “Golden Rule Christians,” or, if I may say so, my own practitioners of “week-to-week” religion.

Many factors contributed to the success of this approach, none more so than the ways in which new sources were identified and used to study questions that had once seemed unanswerable. At least since Perry Miller in American history and giants like David Knowles in European history, the inevitable sources for religious historians were the writings of religious leaders and thinkers: sermons, doctrinal syntheses, official denominational statements, and so on. Just as other kinds of history were written from elite, primarily literate sources, so religious history relied on similar materials. The turn toward social history, however, just reaching full speed as Ahlstrom wrote, changed all that, and historians began to look for other sources, now recognized as chock-full of information about the experiences of regular people—in our case, those famously silent “men and women in the pews.” Even those sources that had official, institutional origins contained details about nonofficial practices and beliefs. Churches run by male hierarchies were full of information about women, for instance, and about women’s experiences. It might even be possible to find documentation of “things unseen,” as the Christian scriptures call them.

Indulge me in a reference to my own work on the practice of confession among American Catholics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here was something done weekly and monthly by staggering numbers of ordinary parishioners, but it was conducted in secret; there are no records of what transpired. Trying to write such a history would be a foolish enterprise, you might
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say, or at least one to be undertaken only by someone who already has tenure. Why study a topic for which there is no evidence? But there is evidence: sermons and moral theology textbooks, yes; but also catechisms, pamphlets from the racks in the church vestibule, laypeople’s letters to popular Catholic magazines, parish statistics, even parish weekly schedules that show the expansion and contraction of the hours set aside for this sacrament. By examining those and other sources, I’ve been able to see the extent to which average Catholics internalized their church’s official teachings and made them their own—or not. Through a kind of inkblot switch, it’s possible to use these apparently mundane sources to peel away the layers of lived religion.

In the process, I think, it has become easier to connect the history of religion to other areas of historical study, and this is a very positive development. Religious history has often seemed marginalized from other historical writing. Leslie Tentler of Catholic University tells of an Organization of American Historians’ session in 1990 on “new directions” in Catholic history. “It’s too bad,” one member of the audience said in the discussion that followed the papers. “You folks do interesting work. But you’ll always be marginal to the profession.” The same might have been said to those who worked on religion elsewhere. Some of this marginalization was no doubt attributable to religious historians themselves, though there were other reasons for it, too. My own view (which I can’t prove) is that the secularization of the academy and the people who pursue careers in it contributed to this as well. In any event, religion was reduced to Jon Butler’s already-famous “jack-in-the-box” phenomenon. It popped up into view periodically—Prohibition and the Scopes Trial in the 1920s, politically active fundamentalism in the 1980s—but then it was stuffed back down into the box while other historical tunes began to play. By studying the religious experience of people who continued to go to church even when no one was watching (that is, while Jack was safely stowed inside the box), practitioners of the lived-religion approach could see how religion influenced and was influenced by other historical themes, including the reigning historiographical Holy Trinity: race, class, and gender. Work on black churches has been particularly successful at this, and the potential for studying religion through the lens of gender seems to me to be only now being realized. The questions to be asked aren’t just about women and their religious experiences; they really are about gender as a category. Here is an opportunity for religious history to move decisively from the margins to the center.

This is all an encouraging sign of life for the history of religion. Religious historians have often felt that they get no respect—or not enough respect—
from their colleagues. But there is evidence that this is less so now than it was in the pre-Ahlstrom era. I was pleasantly surprised, for example, when I looked at the online directory of the American Historical Association, which lists about twenty-five thousand historians in universities and historical agencies in the United States and Canada. The directory allows AHA members to designate up to three topical fields of interest in addition to the particular country or time period they study. There are fifty possible subject choices, and one of them is religion. When I accessed the database last March [2005], 918 historians said that they worked on religion. This number was second only to the 1,014 who said they did “cultural” history, but if you add in the 237 historians who indicated that they did “Jewish” history (most of whom did not also check “religion”), religion is in first place.

So where does this leave us? The post-Ahlstrom era is now thirty years old, and no one can predict how long it might last. Historians will have to take account of new forms of religious diversity, particularly outside the West, both on their own terms and for the impact they have on more established groups. Levels of religious practice remain very high in America in comparison to other parts of the West, and history can help us understand this phenomenon. The future of the discipline is unknown, but it is clear that there is much work to do.