

Introduction

IT HAS been over thirty years since the appearance of Henry May's 1964 *American Historical Review* article, "The Recovery of American Religious History." In that essay May observed the achievements of the previous three decades of scholarship, years in which Puritanism, Edwardsian Calvinism, revivalism, liberalism, modernism, and the Social Gospel had been "brought down out of the attic and put back in the historical front parlor." Even historians who had no intrinsic interest in religion, May added, were willing to acknowledge that religion constituted the "mode" and "language" in which most Americans before the twentieth century had thought about human nature and destiny.¹

With the hindsight of three decades, what May considered a recovery now appears no more than a trickle of scholarship on American religious history. And while religious history appears to be a healthy venture capable of sustaining continued growth, it is usually relegated to the periphery in the professional study of history. Some of the evidence for this generalization is only anecdotal. For instance, while some history departments have begun to include courses in religious history, the experience of one graduate student at Indiana University is far more typical. She writes that the department admitted her to do church history in the late medieval and early modern periods. But because no one in the department now offers courses in scholasticism or Reforma-

1. "The Recovery of American Religious History," reprinted in Henry F. May, *Ideas, Faiths and Feelings: Essays on American Intellectual and Religious History, 1952-1982* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 67-86, quotations from 67.

tion history, the chair asked her to transfer to the religious studies department or philosophy department where scholars study such things. To conclude, as this woman does, that Indiana's history department manifests "blatant discrimination" against Christian and traditional religions may show insufficient nuance. But her experience does raise the question of why the history department offers courses on medieval sexuality and medieval women's spirituality but won't hire faculty to teach courses on Aquinas and Calvin.²

Confirmation of a certain bias against religion within the historical profession also comes from sources easier to document. For instance, Carl N. Degler opined during his 1980 presidential address before the Organization of American Historians that some subjects, particularly the history of religion, "have fallen into disfavor among historians or been forgotten entirely."³ While Degler later admitted that he had been looking primarily at studies of the Social Gospel and consequently had missed much of the literature in religious history, his comments were fairly representative of the perceptions of mainstream American historians. Anthologies devoted to the general themes and periods of the history of the United States, such as *The Promise of American History*⁴ and *The New American History*,⁵ virtually ignore religion as a field of American history. Studies of academic history also have given little consideration to the growth of American religious history.⁶ These omissions make plausible the conclusion that Degler's reflections, even though written only halfway into the most productive period of religious history, were not unusual.

Degler's comments have recently been confirmed by historians who study American religion but who believe the profession is largely indifferent to it. Garry Wills insists that historians and political commentators neglect religion, so much so that in reading most texts one

2. Letter of Emily Nedell, *First Things*, April 1994, 3-4.

3. Carl N. Degler, "Remaking American History," *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 13.

4. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler and Stanley N. Katz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

5. Ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

6. See, for instance, the otherwise fine books, John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (1965; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).