

THE SOAPBOX

# Why Religion Is Hard For Historians (and How It Can Be Easier)

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History is a word for a certain kind of reasoning: reasoning about time, about human agency, and about material records that can provide information about humans as marked by time. For many scholars—not to mention many of those outside the academy—such reasoning is anti-theoretical to the word *religion*. No matter how many books prove incontrovertibly that the authors of the Talmud engaged rigorously with Greek philosophy, or that Islamic philosophers contributed to the formation of modern scientific practice, or that evangelical readers engaged significantly with Biblical criticism, scholars of religion have not (and perhaps finally cannot) upend the common perception that religion is not a site of reasoned thought, but rather a space where reason is suspended.<sup>1</sup> “Religion is too important to be left in the hands of people who believe in it. Finally, historians are coming to grips with this simple truth,” David A. Hollinger opined in response to reports about the flurry of scholarly interest in religion as an effect in the modern United States.<sup>2</sup> It is a good quip, but one that portrays the historian as an axiomatically rationalist hero, swooping into medieval confusion in order to give clarifying accounts of the truth behind puzzling theologies, curious myths, and archaic rituals. Hollinger suggests that religious people or religious historians cannot do this work. Believers by his lights are not to be trusted with the reasoning history demands.

Hollinger did not invent this position. His Enlightenment forebears proposed that the historian would play a special role in the defeat of the *ancien régime*. Historians would explain how theologies offered as received truth were strategies of political control; historians would explain how fables of human folly were strategies of social control; and historians would explain how magical ceremonies were strategies of epistemological control. The work of historians was to explain how mobs form, fables circulate, and beliefs cement—how religions endure despite the unreason they may seem to propel. The assumption was something like: if historians offered these explanations, readers might be compelled to give up their unreasonable beliefs. Academic

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<sup>1</sup>Christine Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law? Early Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ, 2015); Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (New York, 2009); Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>The Editors, “Religion and the Historical Profession,” *The Immanent Frame*, Dec. 30, 2009, <https://tif.src.org/2009/12/30/religion-and-the-historical-profession/> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019). Hollinger has written searchingly on the subject of authorial religious identity. See David A. Hollinger, “The Wrong Question! Please Change The Subject!” *Fides et Historia* 43, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2011): 34–7; David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ, 2013), 138–69, 190–8.

historical thinking emerged therefore in part as a prejudicial prescription. It existed to revoke history from religion and religious traditions of history.<sup>3</sup> What I am suggesting is that it is impossible to define religion as a historical subject without describing this prejudicial inference. Religion was the disease that secular history was born to heal.

Some readers of this article, self-identified historians, might not see themselves in this profile; they might point to the many excellent histories of religion written in the last many years in order to demonstrate the growing success of historians in their effort to track religion.<sup>4</sup> Yet we cannot move ahead (generally in our scholarly work, or specifically in this article) if we cannot agree that something still seems amiss in how historians understand religion. Even as historicizing religion is in a heyday, it is in no way exorcised of its past in which a historian's mettle was in part defined through expurgating religion.

In a 2006 issue of *History and Theory*, the conjoined genealogy of history and religion was taken up with great verve by several scholars who added that a third concept, modernity, was an obscuring element in their categorical engagement. As historian of medieval England David Gary Shaw wrote, "Modernity is the obstacle or prejudice that stands not just between historians and the people of the past, but also between historians and many religious people today."<sup>5</sup> Reformation historian Brad Gregory argued for historians to work harder to bracket their convictions. "We must be willing to set aside our *own* beliefs—about the nature of reality, about human priorities, about morality—in order to try to understand *them*," Gregory wrote.<sup>6</sup> These suppositions—about the consequences of modernity on our interpretive work, and about historians' beliefs in the production of history—have received significant theoretical treatment elsewhere. My point is simply that Shaw's and Gregory's words indicate trouble in the historical kingdom. Even as historians agree that "modernity is the outcome of religious influence, and that modernity continues to support, and even to rely on, religion in a wide

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<sup>3</sup>On the emergence of historical thinking alongside and within Enlightenment thought, including eighteenth-century critiques of religion, see Daniel Brewer, *The Enlightenment Past: Reconstructing Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Cambridge, UK, 2008); Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT, 1980); Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); and Dorothea E. von Mücke, *The Practices of the Enlightenment: Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public* (New York, 2015). These scholars demonstrate that the Enlightenment did not nullify religion; rather, they describe in different ways how religious texts and ideas survived and thrived in the context of emergent scholarly techniques of interpretation. Early modern European scholars—historians, theologians, Biblical critics, philosophers—did not abandon religion in favor of history; they used history as a tool, and as they did, those scholars intensified relations to religion.

<sup>4</sup>The number of books published per year in U.S. history with religion as one of their main subjects has increased significantly over the last thirty years. To make a simple comparison: the number of books published in U.S. history on religion with a copyright of 2015 is four times the number published in 1995. Rather than provide the entirety of the available bibliography of 2015 publications, I refer readers to Paul Putz, "New Books Alert: 2015 Year in Preview, Part One (January–April)," *Religion in American History*, (Dec. 19, 2014), <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2014/12/new-books-alert-2015-year-in-preview.html> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019); and Paul Putz, "New Books Alert: 2015 Year in Preview, Part Two (May–August)," *Religion in American History* (Apr. 20, 2015), <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2015/04/new-books-alert-2015-year-in-preview.html> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019). On the recent popularity of religion as a theme of historical study, for instance, see Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (Mar. 2004): 1357–78; and Jon Butler, "Religion and the Historical Profession," *The Immanent Frame* (Dec. 30, 2009), <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/12/30/religion-and-the-historical-profession/> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>David Gary Shaw, "Modernity between Us and Them: The Place of Religion within History," *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 1–9, here 1.

<sup>6</sup>Brad S. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion," *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 132–49, here 147.

array of forms,” this does not mean they are any more comfortable with religion—its persistence or its definition—in 2019 than they were in 2006, in 1996, or 1896.<sup>7</sup>

Finding ways to improve upon how religion appears in historical thought is the focus of this essay. In his 1954 treatise, *The Nature of Prejudice*, psychologist Gordon Allport wrote, “The human mind must think with the aid of categories (the term is equivalent here to generalizations). Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudgment. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it.”<sup>8</sup> When I speak of history’s prejudice about religion, Allport’s humane cast on the term is what I intend: to think about how religion remains a fraught category within historical study, and also to acknowledge that prejudice is perhaps an inevitable feature of critical thought. To be clear, contemporary inheritors of Allport agree and disagree with this perspective. Psychologists believe prejudice is inherent to human socialization, but they also seek to find out if they can alter (what their work has branded) our unconscious bias.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, social scientists have labored to identify strategies to ameliorate such bias. Time and again, research suggests that no amount of education works. Teaching people about the history of discrimination is an ineffective way to counter discriminatory views.<sup>10</sup> What has worked in a small number of studies was providing volunteers with “counterstereotypical” messages. “People were shown images or words or phrases that in some way bucked the trend of what we end up seeing in our culture,” reported Mahzarin Banaji, a pioneering researcher on the origins of social cognition. “So if black and bad have been repeatedly associated in our society, then in this intervention, the opposite association was made.”<sup>11</sup> Re-programming the mind is, according to social scientists, more effective than educating it.

If historians accept these findings, it could lead to some despondence. What value is history, then, if it is not to educate? I wager the most hopeful labor of history, and of the humanities more generally, is not a corrective relationship to human prejudice. A corrective relationship is one in which one party, the historian, points out the factual and logical error to another party (the student, the reader, the believer). This paternalistic posture defines much of our institutional heritage, but does not define the best work written today, or our highest political and intellectual futures. Our best work exposes the power and variability of human interpretation. Within that variability, prejudice is but one form. Many historians may be eager, for example, to diminish contemporary acts of bigotry and discrimination through the provision of the histories of discrimination and stereotyping.<sup>12</sup> But this reach to diminish—to use history as an analgesic to racism or sexism—is a complicated intercession, suggesting that historians hold

<sup>7</sup>I quote here from Mark Cladis’s excellent rebuttal to Constantin Fasolt’s contribution to that special issue. Mark S. Cladis, “Modernity in Religion: A Response to Constantin Fasolt’s ‘History and Religion in the Modern Age,’” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 93–103, here 103.

<sup>8</sup>Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954; New York, 1979), 20.

<sup>9</sup>Psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington created “Project Implicit” to develop Hidden Bias Tests (or Implicit Association Tests) to measure unconscious bias. To take Project Implicit’s Hidden Bias Tests, go to <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019).

<sup>10</sup>Calvin K. Lai, Maddalena Marini, Steven A. Lehr, Carlo Cerruti, Jiyun Shin, Jennifer Joy-Gaba, Arnold K. Ho, et al., “Reducing Implicit Racial Preferences: I. A Comparative Investigation of 17 Interventions,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, no. 4 (2014): 1765–85.

<sup>11</sup>Shankar Vedantam, “How To Fight Racial bias When It’s Silent And Subtle,” *NPR.org*, July 19, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/07/19/203306999/How-To-Fight-Racial-Bias-When-Its-Silent-And-Subtle> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019).

<sup>12</sup>For examples of historical scholarship specifically focused on the history of religious bigotry, see David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (Sept. 1960): 205–24; Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York, 1995); J. Spencer Fluhman, “A Peculiar People”: *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2013); Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA, 1994); and Patrick Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York, 2011).

the moral high ground simply by the act of historicizing. No, a more ethically responsible—and methodologically viable—claim for history’s power is in its depth of hermeneutic acuity. What do historians know that other scholars do not? They know just how richly complicated, contradictory, and varied are the ways human beings understand what they do and what they think. This capacity to complicate our contemporary senses, even our social scientific senses, is where history as a practice thrives.

When it comes to religion, historians’ valuable capacity to portray human complexity occasionally flags. A review of works that think about religion as a subject within U.S. history offers an opportunity to see where historians falter but also—through positive instantiations of the subject—how they succeed. What I discover is that historians are not, as Hollinger suggests, worried about the religious historian as much as they are overconfident in their own understanding about how religion operates, and oversimplifying of its operational power in history. Insofar as there is prejudice, it is about what religion is and how it—whatever *it* is—affects the lives of those who have it and speak of it.<sup>13</sup> To that end, I organize what follows in an exploratory tenor, asking, first, what *is* religion; second, what does religion *do*; and, third, *who* does religion? The answers are less prescriptive than inspiring: let us not give up the energy religion provides historians’ pens. Let us simply be more reflective about the consequences of how we define this most inspiringly vexatious subject.

### What Is Religion?

I am not the first scholar to reflect critically upon the status of religion in U.S. history. Others before have dipped into this terrain, with mixed interpretive results. In their 2010 review essay, Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey suggest that the subfield devoted to the study of religion in U.S. history (what they refer to as *American religious history*) has completed excellent research, but to little consequence in the broader study of American history: “Despite the rise in religiosity of most Americans and contrary to the findings of religious historians that religion penetrated almost all aspects of modern American life, many—probably most—scholars outside the specific field of American religious history basically have failed to notice.” Schultz and Harvey suggest that even when works from that subfield are recognized they have no effect on “the grand narrative” of American history.<sup>14</sup> They then recommend a variety of ways American religious historians might “make other historians notice, and more naturally integrate American religion in American history.”<sup>15</sup>

Schultz and Harvey build on the work of Jon Butler’s earlier 2004 essay in the *Journal of American History*, where he advocated for “modern American history” (what he defined as U.S. history after the Civil War) as something critically formed by religious thought and practice. Butler suggested that most historians of the modern United States think of religion as something that has receded sociologically, and, as a result, they do not perceive the extent to which religion informs the development of modern social, political, and personal life. His

<sup>13</sup>To think through this particular problem, I work in conversation with many theorists of religion who have proved the consequential role of scholarly classification in everyday political governance and social life. The development of categories, and the pursuit of their effects on how we think, defines some of the programmatic work done under the auspices of the academic field called Religious studies. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, 2004). For an assessment of some of the tensions in Smith’s work, see Nancy K. Levene, “Courses and Canons in the Study of Religion (With Continual Reference to Jonathan Z. Smith),” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 4 (2012): 998–1024.

<sup>14</sup>Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey, “Everywhere and Nowhere: Recent Trends in American Religious History and Historiography,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (2010): 129–62, here 131. For a detailed response to Schultz and Harvey, see John Lardas Modern, “My Evangelical Conviction,” *Religion* 42, no. 3 (2102): 439–57.

<sup>15</sup>Schultz and Harvey, “Everywhere and Nowhere,” 135.

essay traversed a wide range of subjects to show that religion is not a sidebar to modern history, but integral to it. His statement that, “In twentieth century America religion shaped not only interactions of men and women, but what it meant to be a man or a woman,” is an emblematic analytical claim in an essay that included (in addition to considerations of gender and family) examinations of religion and adolescence, religion and the politicization of race, and religion and suburbia.<sup>16</sup> In his essay appraising “Religious History” in *American History Now* (2011), John McGreevy agrees with Jon Butler that religion is determinative to modern American history, and he agrees further with Schultz and Harvey that American religious historians could do a better job to connect their research agendas with bigger items in the historiography of the United States. McGreevy is especially critical of histories of American religion that do not develop a global perspective on those religious movements. McGreevy thinks American religious history is too *American*.<sup>17</sup>

Responding only to the terms of these scholars’ particular use of religion as a term of historical interest, it is tempting to wonder if each of them would agree that much of what they asked for has been accomplished—or begun to be accomplished. In response to Schultz’s and Harvey’s requests for scholarship that bridges American religious history and American history, one need look no further than Catherine Brekus’s *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (2013), Katharine Gerbner’s *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (2018), and Jennifer Graber’s *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* (2018). Among the many works that tackle Butler’s hoped-for interaction of religion and modern American history, few are as rightly celebrated as Darren Dochuk’s *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (2011) or Bethany Moreton’s *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (2010). Finally, recent years have seen the publication of several excellent works tracking religion transnationally, including Adam H. Becker’s *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (2015), Zareena Grewal’s *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (2013), Ussama Makdisi’s *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (2007), and Karine V. Walther’s *Sacred Interests: The United States and the Islamic World, 1821–1921* (2015). Given the terms of their critique, Butler, Harvey, Schultz,

<sup>16</sup>Jon Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (Mar. 2004): 1357–78, here 1364.

<sup>17</sup>John T. McGreevy, “Religious History,” in *American History Now*, eds. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia, 2011), 242–260. McGreevy’s point is valuable as a prod toward transnational scholarship (which is his intention) but also as it offers a moment to reflect on the nationalist tenor of the ascription *American religion*. Throughout the historiography of religion in the U.S., there has been an easy slippage between the mutually reinforcing processes of “evangelization” and “Americanization.” This suggests that the primary process by which an immigrant or outsider might become acculturated to the United States is through a process tinged with Christian theological and moral imperatives. Or, as R. Laurence Moore would argue, the process of becoming American is one in which potential converts distinguish themselves from the religious mainstream. See R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York, 1986). Whichever the case may be, the consistency is the nation-state summarized by the category “American.” Although scholarship across the social sciences and humanities has identified the hermeneutic and political limits of the nation-state, this does not seem to have diminished its repeated usage by scholars to summarize a subject area (*American religious history* or *American religion*). Efforts to correct for this nationalism include field titles such as “religion in the Americas” and “U.S. religions.” On the problem of cultural nationalism, see Chaim Gans, *The Limits of Nationalism* (Cambridge, UK, 2003). On the political economy of contemporary religious nationalisms, see Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, CA, 1994). On the status of the nation-state in contemporary social science, see Ersel Aydinli, *Globalization, Security, and the Nation State: Paradigms in Transition* (Albany, NY, 2005). On the importance of expanding our geographic boundaries in the study of religion, see Thomas Tweed, “Expanding the Study of U.S. Religion: Reflections on the State of a Subfield,” *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010): 250–8; and Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

and McGreevy might find that Brekus, Dochuk et al. advanced the historiography that they arraign.

Even as I write this paragraph, however, there is a failure of nerve in my immediate acquiescence to their descriptive terms and field critique. For each of these historians (Jon Butler, Paul Harvey, John McGreevy, and Kevin Schultz), *finding* religion is easy. The hard thing for them is finding history that treats religion well. Considering the ease with which they assume what religion is, it is unsurprising to me that they find historical scholarship on religion wanting. For these historians, religion is an object everybody can find without much confusion. Religion stands out to them as a clearly classifiable thing. Religion is different, distinguishable, and separable from other features of culture.

That assumption of religion's difference from culture is a problematic distinction. Separating religion from other things hoists religion (and its scholarship) on its categorical petard: each of these scholars wants religion to be something easily identifiable within and distinguishable from other things in society, but they also want historians to tie it into critical, supposedly broader, movements, issues, and topics of culture. The scholarship they criticize is trapped. If a work of scholarship identifies religion as something specific, it has failed to see the broader history of which it is contingent; if that scholarship focuses on broader historical forces, then it has failed to discern the specific effects and operations of religion.

The sheer number of topics associated with "religion" in these review essays belies any clarity a scholar may want to attribute to the term. Indeed, McGreevy suggests as much when he repeatedly writes of the overabundance of the field itself: "The sheer sprawl of the field—from formal doctrine to lived experience, from Native Americans encountering Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century to evangelicals recruiting Guatemalan Christians to work at Wal-Mart—defies easy summary." McGreevy proposes that the oversized index for religious history contributes to the lack of critical debates. "Precisely because the array of actors and goods in the religious marketplace is so vast, historians can find plenty of work without cultivating another's garden," he writes.<sup>18</sup> McGreevy does not explain how he decides that "formal doctrine and lived experience" are clearly subjects for religious history, or what Native Americans encountering Jesuit missionaries have to do with religion. He takes these as obvious instances of religion. Butler gets a bit more definitional, providing a "relatively straightforward" definition of religion: "religion meaning conceptions of life and moral behavior rooted in supernatural and transcendent beliefs." To be clear, this definition does not justify McGreevy's examples—nor, in truth, does it explicate those explored by Butler.<sup>19</sup> How does the historian research and then explain the relationship between lived experience and transcendent beliefs? How do they know which is rooted in which? Is it the "Native Americans" who possess conceptions of moral behavior rooted in supernatural beliefs, or is it the Jesuit missionaries?<sup>20</sup> And how do we (historically, religiously, intellectually) *know*?

I do not intend to hector.<sup>21</sup> I am here casting doubt that Butler and McGreevy have reflected critically enough on the term that organizes their historiographical critique. Whatever else historians do with religion, they ought to begin discussing it with a little less confidence that they know it when they see it. Even if they are disinterested in the rich theoretical conversations in the study of religion, as well as the fields of anthropology, law, and philosophy, about its classification, it would still befit critical inquiry for historians to be as transparent as possible about

<sup>18</sup>McGreevy, "Religious History," 243.

<sup>19</sup>Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith," 1360.

<sup>20</sup>On the problematic distinction between American Indians and non-natives, see Sarah Dees, "An Equation of Language and Spirit: Comparative Philology and the Study of American Indian Religions," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 27, no. 3 (2015): 195–219.

<sup>21</sup>For a sample of their scholarly excellence, see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); and John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago, 1996).

what they think the archive can show us about what we call religion. For example, consider the centrality of *belief* in Butler's definition. If supernatural and transcendent belief is a defining element of religion, how do historians know they have found it? To ask for someone's belief, or to identify someone as in possession of a belief, is something familiar in the modern United States, where survey instruments frequently seek to capture levels of religiosity through appraisals of individual testimonies to belief.<sup>22</sup> Americans across the religious spectrum are accustomed to these inquiries and have ready replies. (*Yes, I believe in God. No, I do not believe in hell.*)

For scholars of religion, such inquiries and survey instruments have the tinny, outmoded valence of a bimodal gender inquiry. The last decades of critical theorizing in religious studies demonstrate conclusively the theological and historical contingency of belief.<sup>23</sup> Consider the fact that not all religious traditions require or understand first-person claims to belief. Within the ritual processes of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, the phrase "I believe" has little salience. Contemporary Jews or Buddhists may use this phrasing in non-liturgical conversation, but this is due to the "ideology of belief" (to borrow from Donald Lopez's phrasing) in which non-Christians have, in the post-Reformation West, learned to speak about their religion in a political and sociological situation where Christianity is the default interpretive reference.<sup>24</sup> As scholars of secularism repeatedly demonstrate, the United States is not a neutral frame of disestablishment in which religious freedom is shared equally among all sectarian parties. American religious freedom is the production of a social hierarchy in which being a certain kind of belief-speaking Christian will make taking surveys, navigating the public sphere, and winning court battles much easier than being another kind of subject.<sup>25</sup> Learning the language games for right legibility as an unthreatening religious other is a component of non-Christian social education in the United States.<sup>26</sup> "Belief appears as a universal category because of the universalist claims of the tradition in which it has become most central, Christianity," Donald Lopez concludes. "Other religions have made universalist claims, but Christianity was allied with political power, which made it possible to transport its belief to all corners of the globe, making belief the measure of if what religion is understood to be."<sup>27</sup> When historians look for belief, they collude with this political power.

<sup>22</sup>For an instance of scholarship derived from such surveys, see Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God— & What That Says About Us* (New York, 2010). On the problem of the judicial standard of "sincerely held" belief established in *U.S. v. Ballard* (1944), see Charlie McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Religion, Secularism, and Belief* (Chicago, forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup>Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), 27–54; Robert A. Orsi, "Belief," *Material Religion* 7, no. 1 (Mar. 2011), 10–6. See also Nancy Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, eds., *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion* (New York, 1999). This summary of the critical debates surrounding belief derives in part from a roundtable discussion held at Yale University in 2011 with Jason C. Bivins, Mayanthi Fernando, Russell McCutcheon, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein. See Kathryn Lofton, "Introduction to the Yale Roundtable on Belief," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 1 (2012): 51–4.

<sup>24</sup>Donald Lopez, "Belief," in Mark Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998), 29.

<sup>25</sup>Finbarr Curtis, *The Production of American Religious Freedom* (New York, 2016); Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, NJ, 2015); David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York, 2010); Jolyon Baraka Thomas, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan* (Chicago, 2019); Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

<sup>26</sup>Courtney Bender, "Pluralism and Secularism," in *Religion on the Edge: De-centering and Re-centering the Sociology of Religion*, eds. Courtney Bender, Wendy Cadge, Peggy Levitt, and David Smilde (New York, 2012), 137–58; Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago, 2011); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).

<sup>27</sup>Lopez, "Belief," 33.

With such a worry about belief on their shoulder, how else might the historian find out what religion is? Anthropological work, such as that by Thomas Csordas, Sherine Hamdy, Angie Heo, Saba Mahmood, and Nathaniel Roberts, among many others, focuses on religion in its material and linguistic manifestations.<sup>28</sup> Rather than decide religion is what individuals say they believe, these anthropologists use individual statements to describe socially determined frames of sensory and governmental reference. In the study of religion in U.S. history, two works that evince well these same anthropologically informed interpretive impulses are Anthony Petro's *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (2015) and Judith Weisenfeld's *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (2016). In *After the Wrath of God*, Petro plumbs the archive for what he describes as "moral languages." Moral languages are instances where communities articulate what they understand as right behavior in terms of conduct and norms. Through this archival exhumation, Petro shows how a medical crisis—the AIDS epidemic—was also always a religious crisis, insofar as no assertion about what to do in response to the disease lacked an accompanying injunction about the morality of the social body.<sup>29</sup> In *New World A-Coming*, Weisenfeld looks at census records, embodied rituals, family structures, parade exhibitions, and building structures to prove how the "American system of racial hierarchy has structured religious belief, practices, and institutions for all people in its frame." Weisenfeld listens to first-person claims of belief, but repeatedly maps those claims within the physical, material, and bureaucratic features of (what she calls) "religio-racial identity" that give them political and cultural salience in the United States.<sup>30</sup>

Despite a growing number of historical works such as Petro's and Weisenfeld's, the power of belief as a category of critical historical agency endures. Sociologists incorporate questions about belief as a metric in survey instruments; cognitive scientists pursue the synaptic sources for belief; and literary scholars find analytic possibility in belief's discernment in modern fiction. Historians, too, invariably find ways to identify beliefs as primary indicators of religion in history. What real effects does this have? Let me focus on a particular work of history to demonstrate the limits of belief as a conceptual focus.

### What Does Religion Do?

Of the many areas of growth in historical studies of religion, few are more dynamic than that of religion and its role in the history of capitalism.<sup>31</sup> Within this engaging bibliography, Jonathan Levy's *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (2012) stands out as an especially accomplished intervention. *Freaks of Fortune* describes the growth of corporate risk management. To document this largely nineteenth-century history, Levy narrates the emergence of actuarial practice, the rise and fall of the market in western farm mortgages,

<sup>28</sup>Thomas Csordas, *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Sherine Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God: Organ Transplants, Islam, and the Struggle for Human Dignity in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA, 2012); Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA, 2018); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ, 2016); Nathaniel Roberts, *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (Berkeley, CA, 2016).

<sup>29</sup>Anthony Petro's *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York, 2015), see especially 18–52.

<sup>30</sup>Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York, 2017), 5.

<sup>31</sup>For a critical appraisal of this uptick in history, see Nan Enstad, "The 'Sonorous Summons' of the New History of Capitalism, Or, What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Economy?" *Modern American History* 2, no. 1 (Mar. 2019): 83–95. For an observant critique with special attention to the history of religion, see Katherine Carté Engel, "Religion and the Economy: New Methods for an Old Problem," *Early American Studies* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 482–514.



the postbellum expansion of fraternalism, and the expansion of commodity futures. He illustrates these shifts with evidence that includes Freedman's Bank balances, assets of life insurance companies, and membership rolls for U.S. fraternal societies in 1890. What unites these diverse subjects is their shared commodification of risk, the embrace of which represents a significant attitudinal shift, according to Levy. Other historians have observed the critical role insurance companies played in the development of finance capitalism.<sup>32</sup> Levy focuses on how risk became an acceptable way for people to understand their relationship to their economic life. How, in other words, individuals came to understand themselves as necessarily flexible and mobile in their economic decision making and willing to risk their present stability on an indeterminate future. This is a history of a concept—risk—becoming materially pertinent. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this interest in belief and practice, Levy introduces the word “religion” early in his account of this transformation.

Or, rather, he uses the words religion, religious, and God as he explains what came before this epistemology of risk, namely an epistemology of providence. Before the nineteenth century, Levy writes, “Religious authorities counseled that in the end divine providence rule[d] over the future.”<sup>33</sup> As insurance and other risk management strategies became more common, nineteenth-century critics sounded a moral alarm, suggesting such hedges on future probability indicated a “sinful distrust of Providence.” In an 1846 fictional dialogue in the periodical *Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, one critic said, “To assure one's *life* seems to me to be wicked.”<sup>34</sup>

Religion is the determinative prehistory to Levy's history. He explains that certain institutions, like the fourteenth-century Catholic church, thought insurance was a form of usury and argued against it. Many of those who argued in favor of risk economies did so because they understood such economies as undercutting figurations evocative of the *ancien régime*: of staid hierarchy and old orders. “Divine providence determined the paternalist ethos that some were masters, in charge of caring for servants, wives, children, and slaves—the religious origins of the benevolent principle, not the insurance principle.”<sup>35</sup> Advocates for insurance and other futures investments encouraged investors to throw off those social hierarchies in which fortune was only conceivable for a predetermined few. Risk economies were democratic—open to all who were brave enough to participate.<sup>36</sup> Levy suggests that this democratization of fortune coincided importantly with a period of revivals often also described in historiography as democratizing.<sup>37</sup> “The first life insurance advocates marshaled a new vision of the ways of providence at work in liberal Protestantism which emboldened rather than constrained free will,” he writes. “In this, they drew upon powerful religious currents running through the

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<sup>32</sup>On insurance companies and the emergence of a risk society, see Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon, eds., *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago, 2002); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New York, 1992); Dan Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered: Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual* (Chicago, 2015); and Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States* (New York, 1979).

<sup>33</sup>Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 4.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>36</sup>Risk also would become something in which all economic actors would eventually—willingly or unwillingly—become complicit. Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York, 2008); Robert J. Schiller, *The New Financial Order: Risk in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2004).

<sup>37</sup>On democratization and revivalism, see Nathan O. Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT, 1989); and George M. Thomas, *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chicago, 1997). For a more critical view of the role of authority in revival activity, see Donald G. Mathews, “The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780–1830: An Hypothesis,” *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 23–43.

national religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening.” Levy draws a connection between the kind of salvation antebellum evangelicals advocated and the kind of personal responsibility these new economies demanded. “Salvation was something the sinner had to foresee, to act upon, and to become responsible for.”<sup>38</sup>

There is muddiness here—a translucent view of social history that is as understandable as it is evasive. Understandable because in *Freaks of Fortune* Levy impressively tackles the simultaneity of epistemology and bureaucratization, and it is difficult to parse where one informs the other. He tries to link people’s increasing capacity for risk with their diminishing investment in providential accounts of the world. In this context, is providence a *belief*? If it is, what is the evidence that it is something materially consequential to the actions of those to whom he can attribute it? The archive is, as Levy admirably admits, an inconstant comrade in the effort to clarify. While some preachers offer hysterical sermons about the effects of gambling, plenty of “providentialist explanations of future change persisted within nineteenth-century American economic culture.”<sup>39</sup> Providence is not exactly secularized (since John Rockefeller does report God got him his money), but it also is not ever specified by Levy for its religious content. Is it religious because groups of people have rituals developed to incant it? Or is it religious because it makes claims about divine authority in the lives of individuals? “Many nineteenth-century Americans continued to invoke a ‘providential hand’ guiding the centrifugal forces of their republic,” Levy writes. “But they also invoked the wheel of fortune ... to describe the secular voyage of a commercial, democratic, social order, buzzing with so many uprooted and masterless people.”<sup>40</sup>

Levy here wants to keep things loose, mirroring an archive that is not entirely coherent on providence as an ideology. I do not mind this looseness; indeed, it is one of the many features of *Freaks of Fortune* that makes its economic history seem so anthropologically realized: the world of these speculators is a world without simple right-angles or neat accounts. What is discomfiting is Levy’s frequent return to an idea of the secular—that the ultimate journey of the risk-taking investor was a “secular voyage” in possession of what Levy refers to later as a “democratic soul”: “To assume risk, to take it, make it your own, to master it, or even just to enjoy the existential thrill of it, was a birthright of the democratic soul, a soul born in commerce.”<sup>41</sup> What seems too smooth here by half is the easy assumption that commerce bears souls, and that those souls are themselves secularized by their origin in commerce. As a student of religion, I do not see the secular that Levy sees. If anything, Levy’s remarkable archive suggests a scrupulous effort to record and obsess about such recordings and of how to control chance despite its chanciness—to make in ritual terms an inconstant but committed set of values. I see a lot of religion in risk management. Levy sees a lot of existential sovereignty.<sup>42</sup>

Levy interprets this as a world that is “less local and personal and more impersonal and routine,” and by saying this, he wants to contrast the sterility of actuarial charts and bureaucratized mortgages with the posited intimacy of some earlier time when economic possibility was delimited by social structures of class.<sup>43</sup> The souls borne by commerce are secular; those carried by providence are religious. Levy understands those to be quite different points of origin; I do not. Historians of Christianity would press Levy harder than I will on the specifics of the providence he invokes: whose idea of providence, articulated by how many, reflected in what ways among the populace? The archive largely on display in the book is not from first-person ruminations but from public acts of corporate promotion, charismatic persuasion, or allegorical fiction, all of

<sup>38</sup>Levy, *Freaks of Fortune*, 74.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>On the mistake of understanding existential sovereignty as devoid of religion, see Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (Chicago, 2016).

<sup>43</sup>Levy, *Freaks of Fortune*, 72.

which assume a role for calculation that is democratic and dangerous—different from the past but continuous to it. “Actuarial science provided a new technique for the financial enclosure of a ‘risk’,” Levy describes. “It was an epistemological countermovement, so to speak, against the radical uncertainties of capitalism.”<sup>44</sup> It is hard, given this account, and given the general vagueness of Levy’s “religion,” to avoid the possible assignment of that word to this: religion here could be actuarial work itself, or the practice by which uncertainty is ameliorated through precise self-regulating activities that repeatedly reevaluate the individual’s relationship to a social whole.

However, it is important to Levy that economic things are *not* ultimately religious things. This is nowhere more apparent than his magisterial chapter, “Fraternity in the Age of Capital,” on the fraternalism that emerged during the late nineteenth century. What is magnificent about this chapter is the level of detail Levy finds to explain and account for the heyday of fraternalism—a notoriously difficult topic to access historically.<sup>45</sup> Levy explains the critical role fraternal orders played in helping people navigate the social diversity of emerging financial capitalism. With elaborate entrance rituals that followed a rigorous moral assessment of potential members, fraternal orders narrowed the potential risk of economic associations. Because of the advance character profile of every member, the cohort was financially pre-approved, creating secure social frames for money-lending and the issuing of bond certificates within a context of co-liability. Historian David Hackett describes these organizations as invariably religious, but Levy writes that whatever religious impulses existed within the fraternal order would “decay or fade.”<sup>46</sup> Relying upon Weber’s description of the transformations of sects, Levy writes:

To join an American fraternal society, Weber correctly noted, required that existing members approve of the prospective member’s moral worth. In the new fraternalism not the “ethical doctrine” of the “predestination Puritans” but the “ethical conduct” of the Protestant sect persisted. The upshot was that in a secular, capitalist era men self-consciously looked directly to one another for interpersonal trust and security—not to God. The security of the social order did not filter through a religious conception of the world. Fraternal literature did make vague references to “Divine creators” and “Supreme Beings.” But with the exception of the Catholic and Jewish fraternalists, most were a-religious.<sup>47</sup>

Why is it so important for Levy to explain that these organizations were not religious? Levy suggests that the rituals conducted within fraternal societies served a social, and not a religious function, and that this is a critical difference to observe when evaluating fraternal societies. In his writings on morality and society, Émile Durkheim argued that religion defined social life. “For we know today that a religion does not necessarily imply symbols and rites, properly speaking, or temples and priests,” Durkheim explains. “The whole exterior apparatus is only

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>45</sup>On the history of freemasons, see Joanna Brooks, “Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy,” *African American Review* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 197–216; Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, CT, 1991); Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); David G. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 2014); Loretta J. Williams, *Black Freemasonry and Middle-Class Realities* (Columbia, MO, 1980); and Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 16–64.

<sup>46</sup>Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree*.

<sup>47</sup>Levy, *Freaks of Fortune*, 203–4. Levy relies on Max Weber’s essay, “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1904), in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1979), 302–322.

the superficial part. Essentially it is nothing other than a body of collective beliefs and practices endowed with a certain authority.” Later, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim said it most plainly: “If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.”<sup>48</sup>

It should be clear: to account for his use of the term, Levy does not need to agree with Durkheim’s view of religion as the source of collective life. There are many theories of religion, each of which wagers a different defining center to what religion is.<sup>49</sup> For those who want to engage this wilderness of abstractions, there are many handbooks and companions available to the scholar unfamiliar with these materials.<sup>50</sup> Since it seems important to Levy that fraternal orders are a-religious, he has, by that categorical reappraisal, wandered into this exact theoretical territory. He therefore must be prepared to account for how he defines, and with what evidence he proves, what is and is not religion. Levy offers no evidence for the a-religious nature of the fraternal orders other than his insistence that they must be a-religious because they were not intimate collectivities. “For all of its reliance upon interpersonal trust, a fraternal society carried a nonprofit corporate charter,” he explains. “Fraternalism too depended on the corporate legal form.” This is the central case for his certainty about its lack of religiosity: because it is not personal, it is institutional—because it is not local, but bureaucratized. Bureaucratization, for Levy, is an inevitable feature of secularization.

The stakes of Levy’s interpretation are not small. Levy has hereby arrived at a present economic world, financial world, and corporate world, that is, by his rendering, without religion. Does believing in this purported secularization of the financial industries assist our interpretative work as scholars, students, citizens, or debtors? I leave that question outstanding. It needs reply, especially for those living in the gasping wake of magical thinking that defined so many stochastic decisions. Speaking more broadly, let us simply say that Levy’s decisions to reduce religion’s effects are not unusual. Many other historians perceive religion as disappearing, dethroned, or dangerously spectral. Religion often appears in historical scholarship as something that is less democratic, less flexible, and less open to individual expressiveness than other things—others things such as artistic activity, progressive politics, or a risk economy. Levy in particular suggests that religion offers an inchoate but nonetheless pervasive set of beliefs, or particular belief, and this belief just happens to be the one critical for the launch of his narrative of change over time. He argues that religion is not in things where people say it is not; he suggests religion cannot be a corporate thing, even though it can be imperial in its effects. Religion is not personal, nor is it exactly governmental: it is something that once exercised social control, and only appears in modernity when groups of people seek to exert social control, or to compel people to incantations.

Such an account of religion ought to be familiar to any historically minded person. It is an idea of religion as something that once did things. It is an idea of religion that can force things. It is an idea of religion where most truly free things are not. But the best work on religion does not understand religion as something true or false. The best work on religion asks how human

<sup>48</sup>Émile Durkheim, “Individualism and the Intellectuals,” in Robert Bellah, ed., *On Morality and Society* (Chicago, 1973), 43–57, here 51; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (London, 1915), 419.

<sup>49</sup>The most popular undergraduate text offering an account of such theories is Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (New York, 2014). A more inclusive introductory work on theories of religion is Meredith Minister and Sarah J. Bloesch, eds. *Bloomsbury Reader in Cultural Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 2018).

<sup>50</sup>Peter Connolly, ed., *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 2002); Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (New York, 2014); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (New York, 2007); Robert A. Orsi, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge UK, 2011); Hillary Rodrigues and John S. Harding, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Abingdon, UK, 2008); Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (Abingdon, UK, 2013); Mark Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998).

beings cohere, together, against all other pulls to disunity. Also, too, the best work on religion shows how disunity, violence, and pain can result from such acts of coherence.

Yet historical work often indicts such coherence as blind dumbness. This is how historians participate in a prejudicial discourse about religion, not because historians understand religion to be weak, but because they often assign to religion a specific kind of pushing, manipulating impact that history gets over through the power of rational thought, legislative action, and social hope. This is a very partial idea of religion. It is also a very delimiting notion of society.

### Whose Religion?

Historians often doubt that they can join with scholars of religious studies in the work of theory.<sup>51</sup> Yet histories of religion always have theoretical underpinnings whether recognized or not. Take, for example, the implied concepts of religion in Kevin Kruse's *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (2015), a study of the mid-twentieth-century relationship between Christianity, corporatism, and national politics in the United States, focusing in particular on the forces that colluded to stamp certain words on our money and assure certain bromides would conclude every presidential address. Kruse concludes *One Nation under God* with the following paragraph:

This history reminds us that our public religion is, in large measure, an invention of the modern era. The ceremonies and symbols that breathe life into the belief that we are “one nation under God” were not, as many Americans believe, created alongside the nation itself. Their parentage stems not from the founding fathers but from an era much closer to our own, the era of our own fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers. This fact need not diminish their importance; fresh traditions can be more powerful than older ones adhered to out of habit. Nevertheless, we do violence to our past if we treat certain phrases—“one nation under God,” “In God We Trust”—as sacred texts handed down to us from the nation’s founding. Instead, we are better served if we understand these utterances for what they are: political slogans that speak not to the origins of our nation but to a specific point in its not-so-distant past. If they are to mean anything to us now, we should understand what they meant to them.<sup>52</sup>

Kruse here wagers several theoretical ideas: religions are invented (“an invention of the modern era”); newer rituals (“fresh traditions”) can hold stronger sway over practitioners than established ones; the political (“political slogans”) and the religious (“sacred texts”) are not the same. Although Kruse asserts them as indubitable, each of these ideas is not self-evident. Each of these ideas is an argumentative assertion about the nature of religion.

I do not seek to launch a theoretical exploration. I point to Kruse in order to raise an instance of historical scholarship focusing on religion as a problematic controlling influence. The phrase “political slogans” tips Kruse’s hand, revealing the extent to which he defines religion as an effect of a strategic ideology. *One Nation under God* models the effort to use history in order to unveil the covert political agenda of certain twentieth-century American religion. History is, therefore, not a neutral tactic for Kruse.<sup>53</sup> History is an interventionist effort to correct ideas about the past.

<sup>51</sup>For a paradigmatic expression of this perspective, see Jon Butler, “Theory and God in Gotham,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 47–61.

<sup>52</sup>Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York, 2015), 294.

<sup>53</sup>This point is aptly illustrated by his Twitter personae, as described in Emma Pettit, “How Kevin Kruse Became History’s Attack Dog,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Dec. 16, 2018), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Kevin-Kruse-Became/245321> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019).

This is a position with a long and respectable lineage. Historians have shown definitively that many of the things some people think are old are actually quite new. Consider, for example, the idea of the nuclear family, or the homosexual as a social identity, or race as a classifying construct. Think further about gender equality, or notions of a free market, or the division of labor. Historians of religion would pile on further, pointing out that Hinduism is a modern concept, that Protestant leaders invented fundamentalism in the twentieth century, and that *jihad* only gained violent prescriptive power in late modernity. Yet despite the thoroughgoing work of historians to show these things—to show, as Kruse says, that these ideas come “from an era much closer to our own”—there are still people who believe these things are eternal. There are people who believe Hinduism existed four thousand years ago and that men have always been “men” and that America is Christian and God is eternally One.

In *One Nation under God*, Kruse joins that lineage, debunking any eternal associations we have with the slogans on our legal tender. Even more critical, he asserts something quite devastating about the modern American presidency, suggesting that as the military-industry complex ballooned in the wake of World War II, postwar presidents found discursive and ritual ways to expand the spiritual power of the state in the moment when corporations increasingly competed for control of its public. For many readers, such a history seems a relatively harmless affair in which Kruse shows the shallow roots of our national Christian sentiment. Yet strung throughout this account is a highly critical view of what religion is. In *One Nation under God*, religion is an ideological tool of powerful capitalists who are limp theological adherents. Religion is always the rationale for mistaken political action. It is never a substantive practice.

The accomplishments of Kruse’s history are many. When I observe that he could have done more to make his profile of religion more dialectical and complicated, doing so would have also perhaps lessened the potential hard-hitting effect of his history. Noting that Christian ideologues, however presidential or corporate, are also in situations of vulnerability is not consonant with the sharpest edge of his political purpose. And that purpose is to show how an all white, all cisgender male Legion of Doom cast (Dwight Eisenhower, J. Walter Thompson, Billy Graham, Cecil B. DeMille, and Frank Becker) perpetuated its power by nurturing an imperial vacuum of Christian discursive control.

Who could deny this portrait, coordinating as it does with all the obvious enemies of the twenty-first century? My own interest is to understand how those enemies succeeded even as they are so easily, by historical lights, disavowed. To come to such an understanding, scholars need to develop a more capacious understanding of Christian power—one understood not as a unidirectional decree but as an antagonism of strategies.<sup>54</sup> There is no idea of the United States easily disassembled from an idea of Christian power. Yet how historians diagnose and describe Christianity can establish dialectical understanding of how its power continues, and also how its power is distributed and differential, not centralized and cohering. Let me offer two examples of areas in which historians have provided such rich profiles of dialectical power relations in the history of religion in the United States.

Few religious systems specifically forbid slavery, and many specifically prescribe or commemorate some form of it. In the history of the United States, discussions about slavery have always also been discussions about religion, insofar as laws about, debates over, and social rules within enslavement describe the material relations between human beings as also valued economic and moral commodities. Recent histories of Christianity and its role in slavery have worked to dig into the intimacies of slave ownership, slave proselytization, and biracial worship, showing how much of the power in white Christianity included intimate seeing of and exchanging with its enslaved subjects. In *The Baptism of Early Virginia* (2012), Rebecca Goetz describes

<sup>54</sup>Work that engages this approach has a strong (if unstated) debt to Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of power. For a starting point, see Michael Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1983), 208–26.

how legal authorities made “Christian” overseeing mandatory as a component of labor control. “Christian servants required protection from their masters,” Goetz writes, “but African and Indian slaves required not protection but rather Christian oversight to mitigate their heathenish behavior.”<sup>55</sup> In *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity* (2008), Charles Irons describes how biracial worship became a fundamental component of evangelical identity in the Upper South. Presbyterians and Episcopalians, Irons tells us, “pursued black members ... as a part of their efforts to become more evangelical.”<sup>56</sup> And in *Christian Slavery* (2019), Katharine Gerbner describes how Christianity was constantly being adjusted and redefined in response to plantation slavery and Afro-Caribbean culture. These rich scholarly works describe a world of power and negotiation, knowledge and power, and power and strategy in which every participant is in motion, reacting to new information and seeking to seize opportunity from it. Christianity is a relationship of power in which individuals confirm their identities not through its acceptance, but through its negotiated reproduction.

As Gerbner demonstrates, missions were component to the maintenance of the enslaved. Histories of missionary formation also have been especially insightful in the last many years, bringing forward the adjacency of violence and churching, educational development and Christian control, and militarism and mission. In *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs* (2013), Emma Anderson uses the story of a cult surrounding seventeenth-century Jesuit martyrs to unfurl a layered account inclusive of First Nations peoples, Francophones, Anglophones, anti-Native pro-Jesuits, pro-Native anti-Jesuits, homogenizing Canadians, and historians (Catholic, Jesuit, Native, secular) alike. Anderson shows how religion continues not by the force of one of those groups, but through the creative and reactive energies of each party to one another. Missions survive through the conflict inherent to their work, not despite it. In *The Gods of Indian Country* (2018), Jennifer Graber offers a profile of the idea of Christian benevolence through a focus on the groups that evangelized the Kiowas in the nineteenth century. Graber demonstrates the centrality of religion to American genocide, as well as to its resistance. Religion was central to American genocide not because every Christian agreed with Indian removal—indeed, many did not—but because the work of conversion was, explicitly, cultural genocide. Alongside her rich description of missionary voices, Graber examines Kiowa calendars and Kiowa drawings to show how and why they might develop a substantive relationship to Christianity despite this overwhelming force of violence against their people. Both Graber’s and Anderson’s books are without spectacular supervillains or superheroes. They are committed acts of humane historicism in which everyone is a whole person, seeking legibility and power while also suffering and creating suffering. They make a *who* in the history of religion that is recognizable, vulnerable, and variegated.

### Beyond Prejudice

Several years ago, I wrote to colleagues who work in the study of religion in the United States and asked them to complete a short poll in which they named, first, their favorite book addressing religion in American history published during the previous ten years and, second, the book they deemed the most significant. Of the eighty-five replies that I received, there were many examining the meaning of “significant.” Despite this useful parsing, there was overlap in the answers. In addition to two works I have already mentioned (Darren Dochuk’s *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* and Bethany Moreton’s *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*), Robert Orsi’s *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (2005) and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan’s *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005) received

<sup>55</sup>Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore, 2012), 120.

<sup>56</sup>Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008), 102.

the most votes, indicating that they were books people both enjoyed personally but also recognized as serious contributions to the historical study of religion in the United States.<sup>57</sup> The success of those two volumes indicates a widespread desire for interventions into the complicated morass of definitional decision-making and historical equivocating about the role of religion in historical transformation. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi, an accomplished ethnographer and historian of American Catholicism, offers a series of detailed views of particular moments of intimate hermeneutics. Using his relationships with family members, and their particular struggles with institutions, embodiment, and sociality, Orsi decides that the word religion is primarily a category denoting a relationship, or multiple relationships, that occur in complicated fields of power. Orsi refuses the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, suggesting that a scholarly person (like a political person or a military person) is always negotiating multiple perspectives toward him/herself and his/her world. “How can historians and scholars of culture talk about the realness of presence within particular social worlds at particular times but always within the limits of our modern disciplines?” Orsi asks. “And how does serious engagement with the cultural realities of presence allow us to push against the limits of modern scholarship in religion?”<sup>58</sup>

Sullivan’s *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* is quite different from Orsi’s book in tone, evidence, and emphasis, yet she shares with Orsi an interest in the ways that religion is a subject produced through certain relationships of power. In her case, religion emerges through jurisprudence. The book describes a particular trial in which plaintiffs asked the court to prevent the city from replacing their chosen graveyard memorials (including sacred hearts and stars of David) with flat grave markers, as required by the terms of their burial contracts. What is interesting about the case is that the group of plaintiffs included people from a variety of sects making a common claim that the city had impinged upon their free exercise of religion. Nevertheless, the judge in the case had a hard time seeing the religion, and it is the process of discernment, occurring between these two parties, that supplies Sullivan’s documentary archive and argumentative title. The judge could not see the religion in these grave memorials because no religious institution required these grave memorials. The memorials were meaningful to the family members as representations they, as families, voluntarily used to demarcate their social identity in commemorative stone. The judge, functioning from what Sullivan refers to as an “evangelical epistemology” common throughout the judicial system, could not recognize the material expressions on those gravestones. “Religion—‘true’ religion some would say—on this modern protestant reading, came to be understood as being private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed. Public, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted religion, on the other hand, was seen to be ‘false,’” Sullivan explains.<sup>59</sup>

Orsi and Sullivan do not just tell us to look at religion differently, but to think about religion differently: to think of religion not as a thing that can be found, named, adjudicated, and studied, but instead think of religion as a dialectical process by which distinctions are named, sociality is explained, and relationship to power (natural and supernatural) is managed.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Besides the four volumes that received the most votes overall in that 2014 survey, these books received more than two votes as the most significant work from the last ten years: Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT, 2007); Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York, 2008); Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York, 2008); Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*; Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*; and Wenger, *We Have a Religion*.

<sup>58</sup>Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 12.

<sup>59</sup>Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 8.

<sup>60</sup>In recent years, another work, Sylvester A. Johnson’s *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge, UK, 2015), has joined Orsi’s and Sullivan’s work as a major contribution to this field referred to as the cultural history of the study of religion.



Tackling religion as a subject of historical inquiry is difficult for some of the same reasons tackling race and gender is so challenging: because the tools we use to study these subjects are the very same tools that have comprised their formulation as hierarchical distinctions between human beings. Being a scholar does not make you a person who can easily rescue anyone from bad thinking. The archive of scholarly activity includes as many specious acts of classification as it does impositions of righteous hermeneutic justice. What being scholars affords us is the opportunity to slow down the processes by which we decide our evidence and we process our interpretations. Scholarship presses us not to rely on precedent, but to undo the seams of thought and to ask ourselves how we know what we claim to know.

In the 1950s, the pioneering photojournalist Eve Arnold took many photographs of Marilyn Monroe. Most of the photographs capture Monroe as she lingers strongest in cultural memory: bikini clad, or lolling naked wrapped in satin sheets on a bed, or staring mysteriously from a leaning posture in a cocktail dress. One photograph stands out in the series. In 1955, Arnold photographed Monroe reading a worn copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is still debated whether this was simply an attempt to recast Monroe's image from the dotty blonde she often played on-camera, or whether it reflected an intellectual curiosity not normally—and not easily—captured by photography.<sup>61</sup> I am here seeking to draw on the iconicity of Monroe to think about the alerting, affecting iconicity of religion. At the outset of this essay, I mentioned social scientific research on counterstereotyping—research that has explored the effect of certain television programs (such as *The Cosby Show*) on changing attitudes toward discriminated minorities.<sup>62</sup> The photograph of Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses* tells us much in the surprise it elicits: it tells us what the viewer thinks is possible, and what the viewer imagines is improbable. Whether or not a scholar possesses a sectarian identity—whether or not someone has read *Ulysses*—our obligation is to account for the effect our suppositions about self, mind, sociality, and claims of the supernatural have on our interpretations. We do this for ourselves, absolutely. But more critically, we must do this within the archives of our historical exploration. The practice of the former has been described as scholarly reflexivity. The latter is critique.

Historians are not wrong that religion has manifold effects on the universe, but too often they do not see how their production of a cure—their production of *historicism*—is dependent upon the existence of an illness to heal. Every time a graduate mentor advises students to seek the stakes of their project in a historiographical problem, they bequeath this attitudinal and habitual pattern. To be clear: the problem is not problems. It is our lack of self-awareness that we—not the archive, not the historiography, not the students or our colleagues—are the origin of any problem we set. Insofar as historical work pursues the chronology of certain perceptions or prejudices, it—we, as authors of it—have the obligation to account for our relationship to these perceptions. This is the hardest work imaginable. It cannot be done with a confession of identity, or a glancing remark about the locatedness of the author. It can only be done through a tough reckoning with ourselves as interpretive actors, especially as we search, select, and storify materials in an effort to explain what we decided—through the very pursuit of an account—was not yet well explained in the annals of interpretation. As we begin to ask from whence our questions come—why this subject not that one, why this confusion not that

<sup>61</sup>Monroe's personal library, catalogued at the time of her death, suggests the latter, although the possession of books does not automatically convey the way in which they were read and possessed. To view the listing of the volumes in Monroe's estate, consult <http://www.librarything.com/catalog/marilynmonroelibrary> (accessed Mar. 9, 2019).

<sup>62</sup>For an indicative act of scholarship, see Diane J. Klein, "Latino Masculinities Under the Microscope: Stereotyping and Counterstereotyping on Five Seasons of *CSI: Miami*," *FIU Law Review* 3, no. 2 (2008): 395–421; Timothy Havens, "'The Biggest Show in the World': Race and the Global Popularity of *The Cosby Show*," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (July 2000): 371–91; Paula Whatley Matabane and Bishetta D. Merritt, "Media Use, Gender, and African American College Attendance: The Cosby Effect," *Howard Journal of Communications* 25, no. 4 (2014): 452–71.

one—we will see how strongly our ideas of reason, and the reasonable, affect the subjects we make through our work. And we may find, more often than not, that these ideas—often spectral, always relational—are tied to the social formation known as religion.

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