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Getting Religion: A Forum on the Study of Religion and the US

Introduction: Recent Developments in the Study of Religion in the US

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Back in 2007 the American studies scholar Richard H. King was wondering if those in his field had paid enough attention to religion in the modern US. Perhaps researchers had overstated the significance of the secular left and various social- and cultural-liberation movements, he suggested. Said King, "most of the efforts to understand contemporary American society and culture as the site of the postmodern have largely ignored the growth of conservative forms of religion in America." He also thought that "liberal historians have until only recently largely ignored the emergence of a religiously-saturated conservative politics, except to bemoan it."[1]

This roundtable follows up on King's line of questioning and looks into the current, extensive research on American religion. Participants below ask question like: what recent developments are worthy of our attention? How does the focus on religion redirect our study of the United States? How has work on religious movements, influences, ideas, and practices shaped our understanding of literature, politics, race, film, and more? Several of the participants challenge others to branch out into other fields in order to better understand the subjects we study. Some describe the growing interest in religious and cultural studies and highlight scholarly developments that span the last century. Each tells us something about how American studies might look different with greater attention given to religion. This introductory

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[1] Richard H. King, *Postmodernism vs. Evangelical Religion in Post-1960s America* (London: British Library, 2008), 2–3.

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essay is followed by contributions from Sandra Scanlon (University College Dublin), Paul Harvey (University of Colorado, Colorado Springs), Abram Van Engen (Washington University in St. Louis), Uta Balbier (King's College London), Megan Hunt (Northumbria University), and Matthew Sutton (Washington State University). The participants gathered on a typically overcast, northeastern day in March 2015 at Newcastle University as part of Northumbria University's US History Research Group and Newcastle University's Americas Research Group. Along with those two universities, sponsors included Harvard University Press and the US Embassy, London.

It would be useful to begin by stating what might seem to be the obvious. The study of religion is not the same as religious advocacy or boosterism. It is not indoctrination or preservation. Scholars tend not to plead for the maintenance or celebration of religion. Those who study religion in the academy are, for the most part, critics who consider how religion *works* and what religion *means*.[2] That is especially important in the American context. Boston University religious historian Stephen Prothero pointed this out in the same year that King offered his thoughts on the place of religion in the modern US. "Religion has always been a major factor in US politics and international affairs," said Prothero. He goes on to note,

> Neither the American Revolution nor the Civil War is comprehensible in a religion vacuum. The same goes for social reform movements such as abolitionism, temperance, women's rights, civil rights, and environmentalism – and, of course, for contemporary debates about abortion, stem cell research, capital punishment, animal rights, global warming, intelligent design, state lotteries, birth control, euthanasia, gay marriage, welfare policy, military policy, and foreign policy.[3]

To borrow from the title of a very influential book on religion in colonial America, Americans seem to be *awash in a sea of faith*.[4]

But there is considerable debate about how to make sense of that faith and just how it has washed over Americans. How does religion operate? How do scholars make sense of belief and practice? What role does religion play in society? The sociologist Jean-Pierre Reed recently observed that some Western scholars still treat religion as "an ideology of domination that reifies social reality into an unchangeable given and justifies the status quo."

[2] See, for example, Robert A. Orsi, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); George D. Chryssides and Ron Geaves, *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–5.

[3] Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 5–6.

[4] Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

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Says Reed, "In many historical cases the authority of those in power has been legitimated by religious doctrine, and as such, it has been used to oppress the peasantry and the working class (Bourdieu, 1991), women (French, 1992), and people of color (Kiernan, 1995)."[5] Other factors have been at work, which have made religion seem like an unworthy topic. In the mid-1980s the historian Leonard I. Sweet pointed out scholars' dislike of conservative religion. Historians were not drawn to study that with which they had so little connection and/or sympathy, he reckoned.[6] More than a decade later the historian of Catholicism John T. McGreevy pointed to something else to help explain the lack of interest in religious subjects. Historians' primary narrative for the post-Civil War era, he observed, had either been political (the growth and impact of a liberal, activist government) or organizational (the bureaucratization of American life). Religion did not quite fit that picture.[7]

Some years ago I asked Prothero why he thought so many in the humanities had been slow to recognize the place of religion in American life. "Because academics are secularists," he shot back. "And I think we all have the tendency to extrapolate from our own experience," he reasoned. "So you have a bunch of professors at Harvard or Princeton who aren't moved by religion, and they find it hard to imagine anyone else who is. The academy, the law, and the media are the three strangely secular areas of American culture."[8]

The absence of religion in American history once had many sources. But one of the most important may have to do with what historians or American studies scholars were naturally drawn to. The religious historian Matthew S. Hedstrom notes the decline of religion in academic circles in twentieth-century America. "The United States has yet to experience mass secularization, such as occurred in northern and western Europe after World War II," says Hedstrom, "yet American intellectuals did indeed shed their religious commitments in great numbers over the last century." He concludes, "The loss of religion's intellectual standing in the twentieth century had consequences for all fields of history, but most especially for intellectual history.

[5] Jean-Pierre Reed, "Religion as Custom and Political Resistance: An Unorthodox Interpretation of EP Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*," *Critical Sociology*, 39, 2 (2011), 239–58, 239.

[6] Leonard I. Sweet, "The Evangelical Tradition in America," in Sweet, ed., *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 1–86, 73, 74.

[7] John T. McGreevy, "Faith and Morals in the United States, 1865–Present," *Reviews in American History*, 26, 1 (1998), 239–54, 241, 242.

[8] Randall J. Stephens, "Religion in American History: An Interview with Stephen Prothero," *Historically Speaking* (May–June 2008), 12–14, 13.

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Put simply, religion nearly vanished from the historiography of modern America."[9]

Regardless of whether religion works as a force of political resistance, speaking truth to power, in the words of civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, or serves as a bulwark of conservatism, religious communities, movements, and individuals deserve to be studied because of their prevalence on the landscape of American culture. Today there are fewer and fewer off-hand dismissals of religion as a serious topic of study. That could be explained by any number of recent trends and events. The secularism predicted with such confidence by sociologists and humanists in the 1960s failed to materialize. In fact, religious observance and the place of religion in the public spotlight only grew from the 1970s forward.

Since September 11, 2001 the study of American religion – through literature, history, sociology, politics, film, and a host of other fields – has been booming. That might have been surprising news to scholars fifty years ago. In the 1960s renowned sociologists like Peter Berger predicted that America would become more and more like secular Europe. Organized religion, he told the *New York Times* in 1968, was headed for "self-liquidation." That, of course, did not happen. In the coming decades Berger made an about-face. "[T]he assumption that we live in a secularized world is false," as he bluntly put it in the late 1990s. "The world today, with some exceptions … is as furiously religious as it ever was." Now scholars and journalists are asking how this upsurge in religious belief and practice relates to standards of tolerance, ethnic identity, and political engagement. Stanley Fish sensed the growing importance of religion in the wake of 9/11: "When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion."[10]

[9] Matthew S. Hedstrom, "The Evangelical Mind in a Secular Age," *Modern Intellectual History* (July 2015), 805–17, 806. Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History*, 90, 4 (March 2004), 1357–76. Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Religion in the Historiography of the Modern America," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78, 1 (March 2010), 129–62.

[10] "A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion," *New York Times*, 25 Feb. 1968, 3. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 32–33. See also essays in William H. Swatos and Daniel V. A. Olson, eds., *The Secularization Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); C. John Sommerville, "Secular Society Religious Population: Our Tacit Rules for Using the Term Secularization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37, 2 (June 1998),

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Historians of late have explored Mormonism and the law, the invention of religion as a special category of study, religion and the labor movement, and the intersection of pop culture and religion, to name just a scant few areas of fruitful study. The list of current research topics and rewarding areas of scholarship is too long for an essay of this size. I would like to focus, then, on just some promising research and then draw on the wisdom of other scholars in the field to think about how the study of American religion has changed in recent decades.

Historians and religious studies scholars are shedding new light on some old subjects. Judging from recent scholarship on mainline, liberal protestantism, to paraphrase Mark Twain, news of the mainline's death has been greatly exaggerated. The chief denominations include Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, Methodist, Lutheran, and Unitarian. Yet one of the major religious trends of the second half of the twentieth century was the steady numeric decline of such groups, coupled with the rise in conservative evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. New research on establishment Protestantism and liberal theologians, though, is recasting the recent past. Icons of mid-century religious liberalism – including Martin Luther King Jr., Letty Mandeville Russell, James Pike, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr – still exert their influence in the years and decades after their deaths. (One could add to this Catholics like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Dorothy Day.) The continued relevance of liberal Christianity is grounded in Americans' changing ethics and value structures. The causes that liberals championed so fiercely in the postwar years – ecumenism, disarmament, civil rights, feminism, and economic and social equality – now have much wider appeal than they had fifty years ago.[11] Recent books on the impact of liberal Protestant publishing and book culture, as well as ones on the continued relevance and influence of the mainline, are reshaping the field.[12] Much of this research shows how liberal

249–53; and Alan Aldridge, *Religion in the Contemporary World: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 66–96. Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 2. Stanley Fish, "One University under God?", chronicle.com, 7 Jan. 2005, accessed 6 May 2008.

[11] James F. Findlay, "Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Journal of American History*, 77, 1 (June 1990), 66–92; and Michael B. Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954–1973* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[12] On evangelical demographics see "Religious Landscape Survey: U.S. Religion Map and Religious Populations," at http://religions.pewforum.org/maps (2008), accessed on 14 Dec. 2013; and David A. Roozen, "Oldline Protestantism: Pockets of Vitality within a Continuing Stream of Decline," Hartford Institute for Religion, Hartford Seminary, 2004, at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozen_article5.html, accessed 21 April 2014.

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Christianity has endured in spite of its institutional decline. Intellectual historian David Hollinger argues,

> The leaders of the classical denominations of the old "Protestant Establishment" … pushed their constituencies in a variety of anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-imperialist directions that have come increasingly to characterize American culture outside the Republican Party … Much of the long-term influence of the ecumenical Protestant elite is missed if one looks for it only within the dwindling ranks of church members. The secular children and grandchildren of this demographically declining community of faith were marked by the liberalism of this old Protestant elite. Post-Protestant America owes much to its Protestant past.[13]

With this legacy in mind it is not surprising that Barack Obama has called Niebuhr his favorite theologian.[14]

The new work being done on old-guard Protestants and their disgruntled fundamentalist cousins, of course, represents only a fraction of the field. (Matthew Sutton summarizes the latter in his contribution to this roundtable.) Other leading scholars in religious studies and history are calling for a shift away from Protestantism and evangelicalism, or the so-called main currents of American religion. In 2011 a group of scholars – including Robert A. Orsi, Richard L. Bushman, Wallace Best, Lila Corwin Berman, and Catherine L. Albanese – came together at the American Historical Association meeting in Boston to consider what the field would look like with a focus "Beyond the Protestant Nation." Albanese argued that the "'Protestant-nation' historiography delivers an impoverished account of what went on in the past and what is going on today." That standard narrative, she thought, obscured mystical religious experiences, the occult, spiritualism, and the more amorphous nature of religious influence and affiliation. The

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Jason S. Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York: New York University Press); Matthew Bowman, *The Urban Pulpit: New York City and the Fate of Liberal Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark Thomas Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006). See also Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "The Burdens of Church History," *Church History*, 82, 2 (June 2013), 353–67.

[13] Randall J. Stephens, "Liberal Protestantism in 20th-Century America: An Interview with David A. Hollinger," *Historically Speaking*, 14, 5 (Nov. 2013), 11–13, 11.

[14] "Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr," Pew Research Center, at www.pewforum.org/2009/05/04/obamas-favorite-theologian-a-short-course-on-reinhold-niebuhr (4 May 2009), accessed 18 March 2015.

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attention of others in the roundtable turned to Catholics, Mormons, and African American religious dissenters and skeptics. Berman asked what it would be like if scholars read American Jewish history as going "against the grain of certain fundamental assumptions in United States historiography." Jewish history had far too often been, she thought, viewed through the lenses of assimilation, Protestant-centered ideas about spirituality and renewal, Christian church organization or theology. As a result, the story of Judaism was too often colored with Protestant tones. Developments within Jewish history that did not fit the pattern were ignored. Orsi aptly described such erasures in relation to Catholics. Literary scholars and historians write about American cities with scant attention to Catholicism. Others study the lives of artists and activists – Robert Crumb, Mario Savio, Andy Warhol, Phyllis Schlafly, and William Buckley – with equal inattention to the tradition. "The absence of Catholics from so much U.S. history," remarked Orsi, "represents the radical constriction of what is meant by 'religion' in the study of the American past, of what sorts of religious behaviors are to be taken account of and which are to be disciplined by excision from the story."[15]

Beyond these brief observations there are myriad ways that the field has been changing in recent decades and years. In conclusion I would like to turn to the insights of religious studies scholars and historians I have recently interviewed. I have asked each of them the basic question: "What do you think is different about the field now compared to when you completed your

[15] Thanks to Christopher Cantwell for organizing this enlightening 2011 AHA session. All of the following appeared in *Fides et Historia*, 44, 2 (Summer–Fall 2012): Catherine L. Albanese, "American Metaphysical Religion," 59–61; Lila Corwin Berman, "American Jewish History against the Grain," 62–66; Wallace Best, "A History beyond 'Belief,'" 67–74; Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Mormon Story," 75–79; Robert Orsi, "I'm Starting to Think This Is Not about Catholics," 80–83. See also Paul Boyer, "In Search of the Fourth 'R': The Treatment of Religion in American History Textbooks and Survey Courses," in Bruce Kuklick and Darryl G. Hart, eds., *Religious Advocacy and American History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 112–26, 118–19; Chandra Mallampalli, "World Christianity and 'Protestant America': Historical Narratives and the Limits of Christian Pluralism," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 30, 1 (Jan. 2006), 8–13; Ronit Y. Stahl, "A Jewish America and a Protestant Civil Religion: Will Herberg, Robert Bellah, and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Religion," *Religions*, 6, 2 (June 2015), 434–50; Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford, 2011); Catherine A. Brekus, "Interpreting American Religion," in William L. Barney, ed., *A Companion to 19th-Century America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 317–33; and Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr., "Historiography of American Protestantism: The Two-Party Paradigm, and Beyond," *Fides et Historia*, 25, 3 (Fall 1993), 4–15.

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graduate work?"[16] The interviewees range from senior to more junior scholars, men and women, whose work stretches across space and time. Several considered the shift to new subjects and new ways of writing about them a major change. Peggy Bendroth, who specializes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, remarks, "The new project was to understand religious belief and behavior in all its wild diversity. The experiences of previously unknown people, like fundamentalist women, were suddenly important, as windows into an American religious culture far more complex and diverse than most scholars had been willing to guess." That was reiterated by Kate Carté Engel, a colonialist, who thinks the kinds of topic and movement being studied have expanded tremendously. The field, she observes, has also benefited from the renewed interest in religion within the historical profession.[17]

Others have been struck by the multidisciplinary turn as well as the attention to areas of life neglected by a previous generation of scholars. Those who study material culture, sensory history, the neuroscience of religion, or new media are now more commonly integrated into the field. Judith Weisenfeld thinks this openness has something to do with the turn to so-called "lived religion" and popular expressions from the 1990s forward. Candy Gunther Brown agrees that this marked a watershed in the study of American religion, taking in how diverse groups and individuals experienced faith on a day-to-day basis. "Christian denominations were still front and center," she says of the early 1990s when she was completing her graduate work, "and we were just discovering the voices of those who weren't clergy, men, white, and Protestant."[18] David Morgan of Duke University, who specializes in religion and visual culture, sums up this new work. "We pay much more attention to everyday things," he observes, "to music, to clothing, to images, to food.

[16] Nearly ten years ago historian Robert Orsi told me that he thought American religious historians "celebrate those aspects of American religious history that are admirable from a neo-orthodox perspective." He called for further studies to be written "without the edge of moral condemnation that otherwise characterizes the field." His critique may be less true now, considering the scope of topics studied and the variety of methodologies. The accidental Whiggery he sensed may be a thing of the past. Randall J. Stephens, "Beyond the Niebuhrs: An Interview with Robert Orsi on Recent Trends in American Religious History," *Historically Speaking* (July–Aug. 2006), 8–11, 9.

[17] Randall Stephens, "Four Questions with Peggy Bendroth," http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/four-questions-with-peggy-bendroth.html (12 May 2013), accessed 18 March 2015; Stephens, "Four Questions with Kate Carté Engel," at http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2014/08/four-questions-with-kate-carte-engel.html (12 Aug. 2014), accessed 18 March 2015.

[18] Randall Stephens, "Four Questions with Judith Weisenfeld," at http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/four-questions-with-judith-weisenfeld_12.html (12 March 2014), accessed 22 March 2015. Stephens, "Four Questions with Candy Gunther Brown," at http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/four-questions-with-candy-gunther-brown.html (21 Jan. 2014), accessed 22 March 2015.

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We are not stuck on fine art or geniuses or blue chip theologians or grand narratives or the Protestant mainstream, or any notion of a 'dominant culture.'"[19]

With this kind of vibrant, expansive interest in subject matter and the assistance of ethnography, cultural studies, and history it is easy to see why the field has grown so much since the late 1990s. In 2009 the American Historical Association (AHA) reported that for the first time "religious history recently surpassed all other topical categories in our annual look at AHA members, raising interesting questions about what is attracting fresh interest in the field." Ranking below "religion" were "social," "cultural," and "political" history. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the subfield of religious history continues to grow. In December 2015 the AHA's "survey of 40 years of field specializations" showed that "diplomatic, economic, and intellectual history" had fallen "to less than half of their percentages among faculty 40 years earlier." Over those same four decades the number of historians specializing in religion had grown by 147 percent.[20] Where the study of American religion will take scholars in the coming decade – whether that includes greater concentration on transatlantic currents, religion and the environmental crisis, the blurring of the lines of sacred and secular, comparative secularism, or the neuroscience of religious experience – is more difficult to gauge or guess. The contributions that follow suggest ways that American studies could be enriched by greater attention to religion and they offer insight into what we might gain in such efforts.

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[19] Randall Stephens, "Four Questions with David Morgan," at http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/four-questions-with-david-morgan.html (12 Dec. 2013), accessed 22 March 2015. See also Stephens, "Four Questions with Jason C. Bivins," at http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/four-questions-with-jason-c-bivins.html (12 Feb. 2014), accessed 22 March 2015; and Stephens, "Four Questions with Sarah Pike," at http://usreligion.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/four-questions-with-sarah-pike.html (12 March 2013), accessed 22 March 2015.

[20] Robert B. Townsend, "A New Found Religion? The Field Surges among AHA Members," at www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2009/a-new-found-religion-the-field-surges-among-aha-members, accessed 10 May 2016. Townsend, "The Rise and Decline of History Specializations over the Past 40 Years," at http://historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2015/the-rise-and-decline-of-history-specializations-over-the-past-40-years (Dec. 2015), accessed 15 Dec. 2015.

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2012 he was a Fulbright Roving Scholar in Norway. He has written for a broader audience in the *Atlantic, Salon, The Independent*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *New York Times*. This roundtable was made possible with the financial support of the Harvard University Press; the US Embassy, London; Northumbria University; and Newcastle University. Special thanks to senior lecturer in history at Newcastle University Ben Houston for help with organizing the initial event.

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Three Questions for American Literature and Religion

ABRAM C. VAN ENGEN

Once upon a time, we had a very stable myth of religion's place in American literature. The Puritans left a legacy of Calvinism; that became Unitarianism; and Unitarianism finally gave birth to Transcendentalism and the American Renaissance, leading finally to later nineteenth-century attempts by some authors to replace religion altogether with literature. This story was mapped onto a narrative of secularization: the passing of Calvinism reflected the broader collapse of religion and the coming of a secular culture. It was a pleasing myth because it was so elegant and coherent, and because it *did* seem to explain certain select writers who were revered, in part, because they could be so well explained by this myth.

When scholars started seriously studying sentimental literature in 1977 – with Ann Douglas's *Feminization of American Culture* – we discovered a whole culture of writers who seemed never to have given up their Christian ideas and beliefs. At the same time, these writers and their deep Christian faith were dismissed as hangers-on, detractors, diminishments of a former Calvinist rigor. They were inconsequential *pop* culture, not America's best, and they didn't have much of a serious theology anyway. Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* argued otherwise. Studying the "cultural work" of sentimental fiction, she found in it resources for social reform that placed women at the center of action, enabling a form of feminism based in the

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