

Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, with people's memories refreshed by media "anniversary" stories, observes Ruscio, a professor declined a job offer from his own Elizabethtown College because the professor's spouse feared living so close to Three Mile Island.

With effort, Ruscio notes, individuals can develop critical habits of mind that protect against media fearmongering. Unfortunately, he adds, that offers scant protection against "ill-advised *policy* decisions" by government in response to popular, media-generated misconceptions.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Why Study Religious History?

"The Failure of American Religious History" by D. G. Hart, in *The Journal of the Historical Society* (Spring 2000), 656 Beacon St., Mezzanine, Boston, Mass. 02215–2010.

Trying in recent decades to make their discipline more relevant and academically respectable, religious historians have ended up trivializing it, argues Hart, a professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

"The past three decades have witnessed a great expansion of non-Protestant academic studies of religion," he says, "but no serious engagement of the fundamental intellectual question of what religion is doing in the academy."

EXCERPT

The Enlightenment 'Project'

In recent decades it has become fashionable to condescend to the Enlightenment as the world of unworldly pamphleteers foolishly wedded to the theory of progress, unhistorical in its contempt for the past and committed to a cold, prosaic rationalism. . . . Nowadays, when someone speaks of the "Enlightenment project," a term that instantly reveals its user's partisanship—we know that this is a way of pronouncing the whole enterprise a failure.

Counter-arguments, no matter how soundly grounded, have not helped much. Anyone who cares to read the major texts of the Enlightenment, whether British or American or Continental, can recognize the injustice of these charges: The theory of progress [for example] was a 19th-century speciality, whereas Voltaire wrote his poem on the Lisbon earthquake and Candide to ridicule the theory of perfectibility....

Still, the question remains: was all the philosophes' expenditure of energy worth it? Their attack on unreason was principally directed against the ravages that religious beliefs and religious practices had wrought through the centuries. Once the truth about the fallibility of the Bible and the absurdity of accepting childish fairy tales as revelations had been established, they hoped, the way to a more reasonable, less heartless, life would be open. No doubt, the philosophes' confidence in the healing powers of reason was excessive. We have learned that secular tyrannies can be as murderous as religious ones, and that philistinism can flourish amid universal literacy. . . . And yet reason is always better than irrationality, moderation always better than fanaticism, liberalism always better than authoritarianism. If the three are bound to fail, or at least to be compromised in the clash of opinion and self-interest, these enlightened principles remain the only acceptable prescriptions for human, and humane, survival.

—Peter Gay, the noted historian whose works include *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966–69), in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Oct. 6, 2000)

It was only during the 1950s that religion, which previously had been confined largely to seminaries and university divinity schools, emerged as a separate academic field, when private colleges and universities began to establish religion departments. Many state universities followed suit during the next decade. But “clerical motives dominated the field. Not only did religion faculty still harbor older notions of caring for the souls of students, but the courses they offered were virtually identical to the curriculum at Protestant seminaries and divinity schools, minus the practical work in pastoral ministry,” Hart says. Reflecting “a mainstream Protestant hegemony” and narrowly focused on church history, religious historians at the time gave short shrift to Mormons, Christian Scientists, African Americans, and others outside that mainstream.

To rectify this and to integrate their subject into the respectable ranks of professional history, religious historians began in the 1970s to turn away from the Protestant mainstream. They took their lead from social historians, and set out to demonstrate the relevance of religion to “the victims of American hegemony.” Leaving “the straight and narrow path” of church history, they

took “the long and winding road of diversity,” through the study of minorities: Jews, ethnic Catholics, evangelicals, African Americans, women, Hispanics, Native Americans, and gays and lesbians.

This academic strategy, Hart writes, “inevitably identifies religion with the latest census statistics rather than with the practices and beliefs of religious traditions and communions.” It also fails to add much to what other academic historians have been doing in their studies of cultural diversity. Those historians “largely remained indifferent to American religious history.”

But “pure church history,” even if carried out with more intellectual integrity than in the past, “would not have succeeded any better,” Hart says. Accounts of “the religious life of individuals and communions” are of little interest to those outside the particular fold.

What historians of religion in America should be addressing, in Hart’s view, are the ways in which religion has influenced “the policies, institutions, and culture that have shaped the United States.” The failure of religious history, and the reason the field remains marginal, he says, is precisely that “it has focused for most of the past three decades on marginal topics.”

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Searching for Web Equality

“Shaping the Web: Why the Politics of Search Engines Matters” by Lucas D. Introna and Helen Nissenbaum, in *The Information Society* (July–Sept. 2000), Taylor & Francis, 325 Chestnut St., Ste. 800, Philadelphia, Pa. 19106.

Commercialization has already dampened hopes that the World Wide Web will serve as an egalitarian force. Now, Introna, a lecturer in information systems at the London School of Economics, and Nissenbaum, a lecturer at Princeton University’s Center for Human Values, worry that “biased” search engines are making some Web sites more “equal” than others.

The World Wide Web contains, by one estimate, some 800 million “pages.” Search engines steer users to particular Web pages. A 1999 study of leading search engines found that none indexed more than 16 per-

cent of the total, and that all combined covered only 42 percent. An unindexed Web page is almost impossible for users to find if they do not know its Uniform Resource Locator (URL), or “address.”

Who decides whether to index a particular Web page? At “directory-based” search engines such as Yahoo!, editors do most of the work. The criteria for inclusion are vague, and apparently not applied with any consistency, Introna and Nissenbaum assert. At Yahoo!, by one estimate, a submitted Web page has roughly a 25 percent chance of being accepted. Inclusion becomes more likely, the