Things of the Spirit: Documenting Religion in New England

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Abstract: Before archivists can document a large and complex phenomenon such as religion in New England, they must understand the outlines of its history, particularly in the more recent period. This article reviews the long story of religion in the region and focuses in particular on developments since the Second World War. The more important influences in this time include changes in economic and social life, suburbanization, changing traditions within particular denominations, growing ecumenical activity, and the use of mass media by religious professionals. The article concludes with a series of suggestions for how archivists, both individually and collectively, can identify and preserve documentation for these subjects.

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EVER SINCE THE BEGINNING of the seventeenth century, when small groups of dissenting English Protestants undertook their "errand into the wilderness," religion has been singularly important in the lives of New Englanders. The region owed its very existence as a European settlement to the search for religious purity, a search that has continued, with varying degrees of success, from that era to the present. The sources that document religious life are many and varied; all organized religious groups habitually maintain detailed records about their members, as well as about their own activities as institutions. These records provide evidence not only of the overtly religious, liturgical, and devotional aspects of the groups' activities, but also their involvement in all facets of life, including education, social welfare work, art and architecture, and politics.

Any attempt to preserve this documentation must be founded on an understanding of religion and the distinctive role it has played in the life of New England. This story has, of course, been told many times, but it is an important one to remember, especially because it encompasses such variety. Both inside the established churches and outside them, New Englanders have always thought of themselves as a religious people. An overview of the history of religion in these states, with particular emphasis on the more recent past, may therefore be a useful starting point for the task of documenting this aspect of life.

New England's Religious Tradition and Its Records

The Puritan commonwealths of seventeenth-century Massachusetts and Connecticut were not as monolithic as many historians later made them seem. Despite the imposing and detailed descriptions of the "New England mind" by Perry Miller and his disciples, Puritanism encompassed within itself a broad range of opinion on theological and religious questions. The common thread running through these was an "intense and evangelical advocacy of the Christian obligation to know and serve God."[1] The centrality of that obligation meant that all aspects of life had to be made to conform to religious belief and practice, and that even apparently unrelated matters were in fact part of this larger concern.

A firm sense of the pervasive character of religion was particularly evident whenever the Puritan establishment faced the dilemma of dealing with outsiders. From the beginning, the desired purity in New England religion was challenged by groups that, to the establishment, represented anything but that. Baptists, Quakers, and Jews found a welcome refuge in Rhode Island, where "geographical accident" provided "a very sharply defined reverse image of convictions dominant in Massachusetts and Connecticut."[2] Significant numbers of Roman Catholics did not arrive until the beginning of the nineteenth century, in part because the Puritan oligarchy considered them to be subversives by definition, going so far as to legislate against any Roman priest as "an incendiary and disturber of the public peace and safety, and an enemy of the true Christian religion."[3] In combatting diversity—a struggle that was, in the end, unsuccessful—as in building their own godly commonwealth, the Puritans fixed the importance of religion on the New England region.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the religious impulse gradually evolved into a "common-core Protestantism" in which the distinctions

[1]Darrett B. Rutman, *American Puritanism: Faith and Practice* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 13.

[2]Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 181–82.

[3]A Massachusetts law of 1647, quoted in James Hennesey, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 37.

between groups within the Reformed or Calvinist tradition were muted. A certain degree of "denominational interchangeability" yielded what could be identified as the "Protestant establishment." This did not mean that only the Puritans and their successors shaped the later stages of New England religion. As some recent scholarship has shown, the influence of those outside this tradition and even of those who found themselves compelled to embrace unbelief and atheism was considerable.[4] Still, it was to the establishment that any new groups had to look before elaborating their own differences. Whether positive or negative, the relations of newcomers to the Protestant establishment determined the extent to which they were able to exert a larger influence on New England life.[5]

The unexpected arrival of vast numbers of immigrants in the middle of the nineteenth century offered the most enduring challenge to this hegemony. Catholics and Jews, coming from outside the religious mainstream, initially had only limited impact on New England's religion. The hard demographic facts were in their favor, however, and the force of numbers eventually gave them a significant role. These groups influenced the religious culture they found on their arrival, and they were in turn influenced by it, if only by having to overcome overt hostility and discrimination.[6]

At the same time, divergent forces within Protestantism itself were seeking new expression, and a burst of religious energy was released, resulting in ever more varied forms of belief and practice. Though this trend affected the entire country in the nineteenth century, New England's role was conspicuous. America has produced only a few genuinely indigenous religious movements, but a surprising number of them had their origin or their principal effect in this region. Adventism, for example, the belief in the imminent second coming of Christ and the resulting end of the world, found its prophet in William Miller, a wandering preacher from Vermont who attracted many followers in that state as well as in upper New Hampshire and New York. After the "Great Disappointment" of October 1844—when the world did not end as predicted—and Miller's death five years later, two other New Englanders, Ellen Harmon of Portland, Maine, and Joshua V. Himes of Boston, organized Adventists into an enduring denomination which, though it relocated its headquarters to the Midwest, still maintains a strong presence in central Massachusetts. Later in the century, Mary Morse Baker Eddy, a New Hampshire native, took the inchoate beliefs in homeopathic healing of two Maine natives and forged them into a systematic Christian Science, with its permanent denominational center at Boston. Communitarian religious impulses also took root in New England soil, beginning with the English immigrant, Mother Ann Lee, and her Shakers at the end of the eighteenth century, and followed by John Humphrey Noyes, who established "complex marriage" groups in Vermont and Connecticut before moving to Oneida, New York, the place with which they are most commonly associated. Other groups that eventually flourished elsewhere could trace their genealogy back to New England, including the most successful of all indigenous American religions, Mormonism,

[4]R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

[5]The rise of the Protestant establishment and what it did and did not mean is discussed in Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 843–48 and 1079.

[6]On immigration see, for instance, Hennesey, *American Catholics*, 102 and 116–27; and Stanley Feldstein, *The Land That I Show You: Three Centuries of Jewish Life in America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1978), 100–46.

founded on the private revelations to Joseph Smith, a Vermont farm boy, and institutionalized by Brigham Young, another Vermonter.[7]

New England thus arrived at the beginning of the twentieth century with perhaps the broadest range of religious phenomena of any region in the country. It remained a place in which religious beliefs of all kinds could find expression, despite the cyclical rises and falls of interest in religion that had characterized the nineteenth century and would continue into the twentieth. Intended by its first settlers to be theologically closed and monolithic, it had become instead open and varied.

The records for documenting that diverse religious history came under steadily increasing intellectual control in both public and private repositories. During the first two hundred years of settlement, distinctions between public and religious records were sometimes hazy. New England town governments relied on the local churches to keep their own version of certain kinds of public records, particularly those of births, marriages, and deaths. Since many towns traced their origins to the status of being the second parish within an existing town, there was a frequent mingling of civil and church business in the same records. Even after disestablishment of the Congregational church in the early nineteenth century, the states continued to view church records as quasi-public in nature. These records could stand in civil law, and, in Massachusetts and elsewhere, if a church ceased to function and no appropriate denominational repository could be found, its records could be placed in the custody of the town clerk, who would treat them like other public records.

At the same time, private archives and libraries regularly paid attention to expressions of religious belief; in the documentation they assembled and made available for research, all kinds of religious records played a significant part. Some of the earliest organizations that took the collection and preservation of historical materials as their goal, including the Massachusetts and Connecticut historical societies and the American Antiquarian Society, amassed large collections that could be used to study religion. When these societies were organized at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, history as such was focused on the colonial past, and a great deal of documentation was accordingly gathered on Puritanism, its leaders, and its adherents. Similarly, colleges and universities with origins in the colonial era necessarily gathered religious records, often unconsciously. Because these schools were themselves founded largely for religious motives—whether as upholders of Puritan orthodoxy like Harvard and Yale, as missionary enterprises like Dartmouth, or as outposts of heterodoxy like Brown—their own institutional archives contributed to religious history. They also served as collecting points for other materials, such as personal papers, publications, and the records of individual congregations. This tendency was repeated in schools founded later by particular groups, including Boston University (Methodism), Tufts (Universalism), Brandeis (Judaism), and the nearly two dozen Catholic colleges in the six-state area. Local historical societies also collected religious materials, especially from the established churches in their own communities. Often gathered as much for genealogical or antiquarian purposes as for

[7]Each of these groups has an historical literature all its own, but for a useful summary and analysis of this "sectarian heyday" in New England and elsewhere, see Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 472–509. For some recent work on Mormonism, see Richard L. Bushman's controversial *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), and Leonard J. Arrington's more substantial *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

historical scholarship, these records proved valuable not only for local history as it was traditionally defined, but also for the major town-based studies of Puritan New England that began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s.

In more recent years the establishment of new archival programs affiliated with particular denominations has further enhanced the documentation of New England religion. Some groups have formed their own denominational historical societies, which collect archival records in addition to conducting such other programs as publications, exhibits, and educational outreach. Jewish groups in particular have adopted this approach, some defining their range in local terms (such as the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association), some staking out a larger responsibility (such as the American Jewish Historical Society at Brandeis University). Other denominations, including Methodists and Unitarian-Universalists, have also followed this pattern. In those traditions with a more organized (frequently, though not necessarily, hierarchical) structure, archival programs were established for entire denominations or geographical divisions: several Roman Catholic and Episcopal dioceses in New England adopted this approach, as did some Lutheran synods, Quaker yearly meetings, and the Christian Science church. Even some individual congregations, such as Trinity Church (Episcopal) and King's Chapel (Unitarian) in Boston, established archives of their own. Regardless of their precise denominational and structural context, these programs flourished and thereby contributed greatly to documenting what might be considered the traditional content of New England religious history during its first three hundred years.

Twentieth Century Social and Religious Change

But what of the more recent past? How has New England religion been changing in the twentieth century and especially in the period since the Second World War? What new trends and phenomena have asserted themselves? New England has perhaps lost its role as a leader of change in American religion, as other sections—the West Coast and the South, for example—have exerted more influence. Nonetheless, archivists and librarians must seek to understand the nature of these changes before they can set out to identify and preserve the documentary evidence of them.

Some of the most influential changes in New England religion in the last forty years have come from factors external to religion itself. The most important of these was the change in the nature of New England's population, a change that resulted from a combination of factors. The effective end of foreign immigration in the aftermath of the First World War, reducing newcomers to a mere fraction of their nineteenth-century numbers, meant that the population was not subject to the great shocks of the past. While it continued to grow at an impressive rate, particularly in the "Baby Boom" years following the Second World War, the rate of diversification of the region's ethnic and religious character slowed. New groups continued to arrive, but with none of the rude speed, force, and size of those of the previous century.

At the same time, New England moved from an industrial to a "post-industrial" economy based not so much on heavy manufacturing as on high technology and an expanding service sector. This transition was not always smooth, and it left many smaller cities behind in prolonged periods of decline and decay. By the early 1970s, however, the changeover had been largely accomplished. One of the results of this shift was an expanded and broadly-based middle class, consisting in many cases of the sons and daughters of immigrants who were achieving levels of salary, accumulated property, and leisure unknown to their parents. This was accompanied by, and in

"The men and women in the pew" gather in Boston's Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Cross, April 1947. Compiling sources for the social history of religion means pointing the camera at the congregation as much as at the altar. Photo courtesy of the Archives, Archdiocese of Boston.

many cases founded upon, a steady rise in the level of education. The G.I. Bill of Rights sent on to higher education thousands of men, and much smaller but still growing numbers of women, who would otherwise have been unable to afford it, thus suiting them for careers their parents could not have imagined.

Economic and social changes opened the door to other changes as well, including an internal migration out of the major urban centers and into the rapidly growing suburbs. This trend could be seen throughout New England as the large cities steadily declined in population while their surrounding suburban rings increased. In 1950, for example, the city of Boston accounted for 36 percent of the total population within the area formed by Route 128; by 1970 it accounted for only 24 percent. Even more striking was the case of Hartford, where the population completely reversed itself in only twenty years. While Hartford contained within its limits almost two-thirds of the population of central Connecticut in 1950, by 1970 it claimed barely one-third.[8] To be sure, many of the suburban towns had long histories of their own, complete

[8]These comparisons are based on U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census for 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), vol. 2, table 17, and *Population Census for 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972), vol. 1, table 20. Both tables are entitled "Population and Land Areas of Urbanized Areas."

with an articulated social and religious life. Still, New England's population was definitely shifting. The end of immigration brought not a return to homogeneity, but diversity of a different order.

The effects of these changes on religion were considerable and complex. As people moved away from the physical and mental world of their parents they experienced differing reactions to the "faith of their fathers." On the one hand, some abandoned their inherited religious affiliation along with other aspects of their parents' world. Though statistical evidence of this is hard to come by, there was throughout the postwar period a popular perception that secularization was advancing steadily and that each generation was less religious than its predecessor. Suburbanization had its impact here, too. People no longer passed the local church several times each day in moving about their urban neighborhood. Instead, they had deliberately to get into their automobiles and drive to it for a particular purpose; the church thus lost its central physical and psychological importance. On the other hand, many people found a new interest in the traditional religion of their family, seeking to hold on to and reaffirm it while everything else about their lives seemed to be changing. Scholars frequently perceived religious revivals during this period, based at least in part on this desire.[9]

Of far greater importance to the nature of religion in New England were the changes taking place within organized religion itself. The most apparent of these were the changing forms of religious expression, especially in liturgical practices. Roman Catholicism was perhaps most conspicuous here as, in the 1960s, it completely reformed its liturgy, abandoning the centuries-old Latin Mass for services in the vernacular. Such changes, which were not accomplished without opposition, spilled over into other denominations, where they were similarly troublesome: if even Catholicism, a religion that prided itself on adherence to tradition, could alter so radically and quickly, might not other denominations undergo similar changes? Episcopalians, for example, revised their Book of Common Prayer in the 1970s, replacing the traditional prose of the older version with more contemporary language, a change that proved at least as controversial among church members as the nearly concurrent decision to ordain women to the priesthood. "Folk Masses" became popular, even in denominations that did not celebrate "the Mass" as such, replacing traditional hymns with newer ones, and the organ and choir with guitars and tambourines. The search for "relevance" frequently became all-encompassing, with longstanding liturgical and devotional practices being abandoned in favor of newer, experimental ones.

Changes in religious expression were more than skin deep, for they had their parallels in changes in doctrine and church structure. The nature and role of ministry, for example, was expanded and redefined throughout this period. The ordination of women was gradually approved by nearly all the major Protestant denominations. Quakers had a long commitment to sexual equality; and Congregationalists, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ had all ordained a handful of women in the nineteenth century. Other groups officially sanctioned women clergy in the postwar period: Presbyterians and Methodists in 1956, Lutherans in 1970, Episcopalians in 1976. By

[9]See Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1955). More recent assessments of renewed religious interest may be found in Theodore Caplow, Howard Bahr, and Bruce Chadwick, *All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and Fran Schumer, "A Return to Religion," *New York Times Magazine* (15 April 1984), 90–94, 98.

the last date, women's ordination movements had taken shape within Judaism, where they met with limited success, and Catholicism, where they met with none.[10]

In addition to this obvious change in the gender of the clergy, the role of lay people in ministerial functions was expanding. Increasing interest in lay participation combined with a declining number of religious vocations in most denominations to bring about more active work on behalf of religious groups by people who were not and did not want to be religious professionals in the same sense as ordained ministers. Hospital and college chaplaincies, for example, began to enlist lay staff who, though trained in theology as well as counseling and psychology, did not conduct the formal worship services of the various denominations, as chaplains traditionally had. Even in highly structured groups the distinction between the clerical and lay states began to blur: in the early 1970s, for example, the Catholic church began to designate permanent lay deacons who could perform a range of functions previously reserved for priests, with the exception of saying Mass and hearing confessions. This gave these deacons a larger spiritual role than that accorded their counterparts in those Protestant denominations that had always used deacons.

Just as the expansion of ministries led to a breaking down of the distinction between clergy and laity, it helped break down the distinctions between what was considered the proper sphere of action for religion and what was not. While many people both inside and outside organized religion had previously thought it competent to engage only in "God-talk," they soon found religion increasingly involved in the things of this world as well. Some denominations, notably Quakers and smaller black churches, had long traditions of social and political involvement. The activist trend broadened in the 1960s and 1970s as clergy and laity took leading roles in the movements to advance civil rights and to oppose American involvement in the Vietnam war.

Most of this activism was concentrated at what was commonly perceived to be the liberal end of the political spectrum. In the 1970s and 1980s this example was followed by conservatives, who, motivated by equally sincere religious beliefs, pressed for changes in public policy on such issues as abortion and organized prayer in public schools. While divided over issues such as these, religious people of all political persuasions cooperated in a variety of social action programs designed to combat urban decay, homelessness, racism, and alcohol and drug abuse. Religion in New England, as in the rest of the country, "went political" in the 1960s, observed Martin Marty, a prominent historian of American Protestantism; then, in the 1980s, it broadened its approach to "go public with the message." The changing theological underpinnings of these diverse involvements were described by Harvard University's Harvey Cox, whose mid-1960s *Secular City* seemed to herald a new age in which organized religion would deemphasize its traditional otherworldly content in favor of direct action for social change. Twenty years later, in *Religion in the Secular City,* Cox reasserted the importance of specifically religious belief and a "return to the sacral" that could nonetheless support a positive role in the secular world.[11]

[10]See Virginia L. Brereton and Christa R. Klein, "American Women in Ministry: A History of Protestant Beginning Points," in Janet Wilson James, ed., *Women in American Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 171–90.

[11]Martin E. Marty, "From Personal to Private, From Political to Public Religion," inaugural lecture on religion and public life, Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, University of Notre Dame, 9 February 1984; Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) and *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

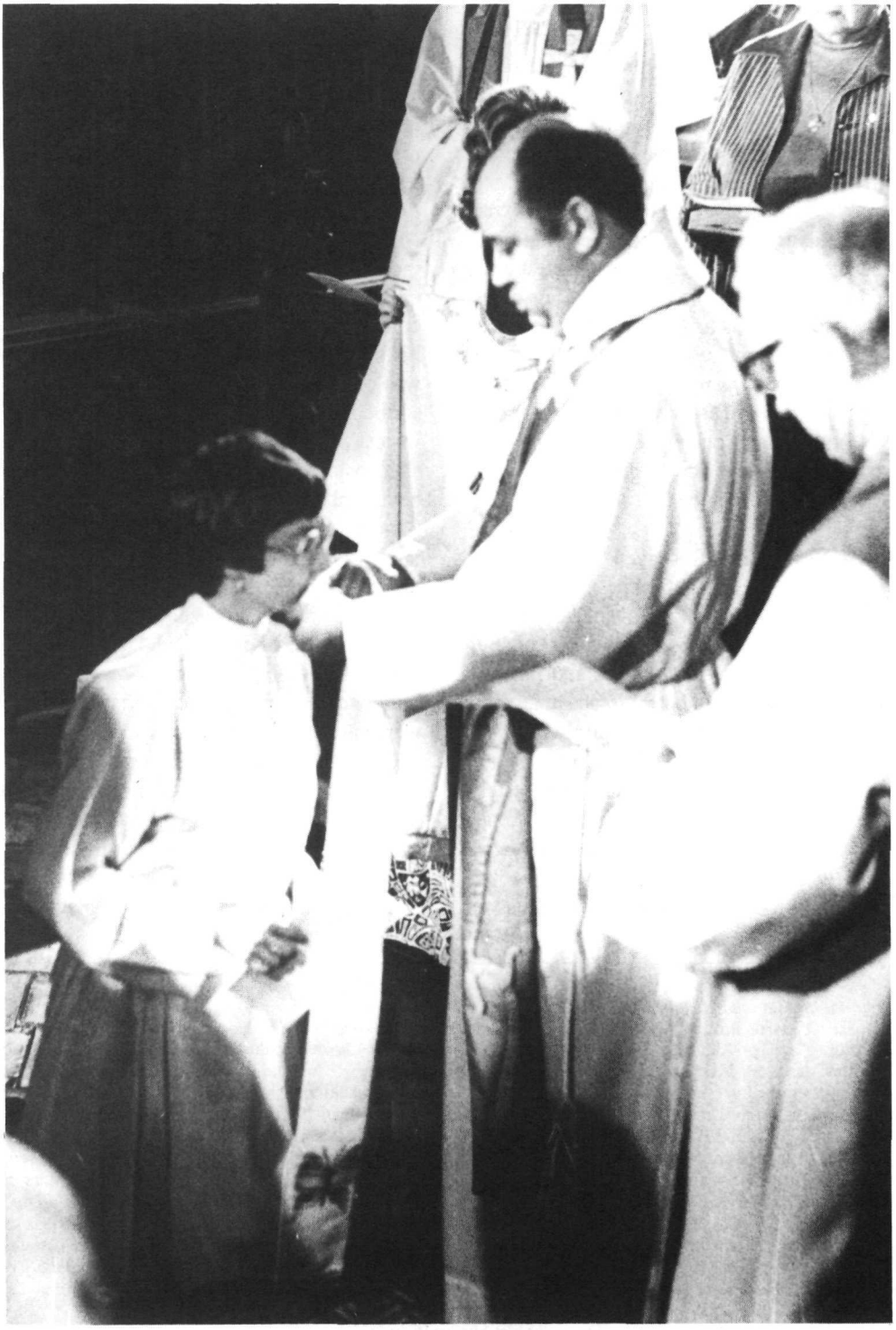
Many of these social action movements were avowedly ecumenical in their approach, drawing on members of many different denominations and groups, most of whom had little or no tradition of cooperating with one another. An interdenominational group with New England roots called Clergy and Laity Concerned, for example, was organized early in the anti-Vietnam war movement and set the ecumenical pattern for religious participation in that effort.[12] Such cooperation in a specific cause was possible because of a growing trend toward ecumenism in postwar religion. Though national in scope, ecumenism had a particular applicability in New England, especially with the mergers of several previously separate denominations. The disparate Congregational churches of the region, the direct descendants of the Puritan founders, organized the United Church of Christ in 1957. Unitarians and Universalists, both heavily concentrated in New England, formed a joint denominational structure in 1961. By the 1980s New England's Lutherans were likewise participating in denominational consolidation and discussing areas of doctrinal and practical agreement with other groups, especially Roman Catholics and Episcopalians. Cooperative liturgical services were conducted with increasing frequency. A growing consensus began to emerge that the similarities among religious groups ought to be emphasized, just as differences had been in the past, so that believers could have a greater impact in the world at large.

At the same time, a movement in the opposite direction, toward a heightened sectarianism, also began. As early as 1949, the stirrings of ecumenism in Roman Catholicism were challenged by a Cambridge, Massachusetts, Jesuit priest, Father Leonard Feeney, who was eventually excommunicated for vigorously preaching that all non-Catholics were automatically damned and that any cooperation with them was therefore out of the question. Two decades later, such new religious and quasi-religious sects as Scientology, the Unification Church, and groups based on Eastern mysticism or on a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible began to take root. Though many of these groups originated outside New England, the region produced its share of adherents. As these groups became more visible, they were watched with suspicion. The classical distinctions between "sect" (originally a dissenting or schismatic church group) and "cult" (originally a neutral term for any system of belief and its followers) were blurred; "cult" came to signify a small, fanatical, and usually sinister splinter group. The major cities became centers for their activities, and many established agricultural communes in rural areas of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.[13] Some of these groups proved to be marvelously eclectic in their approach, combining new insights with traditional features and crossing many cultural barriers. Some, such as several local "Jews for Jesus" organizations, even managed to blend apparently incompatible elements. Such groups found their strength outside the mainline religious traditions, but they still provided an outlet for the religious energies of thousands of New Englanders.

The archivist who seeks to document the role of religion in New England in the period after the Second World War must thus be aware of a widening sphere of activities

[12]See Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham Heschel, and Michael Novak, *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Association Press, 1967). This book, prepared by three distinguished theologians—Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic—sets forth the case against the war derived from their separate but compatible traditions.

[13]For the strange career of Leonard Feeney, see John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 49–64. Many descriptions of the activities of religious communes in New England have been published.



In recent times, many denominations have expanded their definition of ministry. Here, the Reverend Jeanne Sproat is ordained the first woman priest in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, January 1977. Photo courtesy of the Archives, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.

that may properly be considered religious. Religion was no longer something that happened only in churches and synagogues, presided over by a closed group of professionals. Instead, participation in religion and acting on its demands became an urgent task for all believers. Those believers were themselves changing, becoming better educated, moving to the suburbs, and altering the economic foundations of their lives. Religious beliefs and expressions were also changing, as believers adapted traditional forms to the apparent demands of modernity, seeking newer ways to apply their religion to all aspects of life, and cooperating with one another across the traditional denominational boundaries.

New Patterns in Research

While these changes were proceeding the nature of research on the history of religion was also undergoing a transition, placing new demands on the archives and libraries that sought to document it. In absolute terms the amount of research into purely religious topics in history declined. Whether because of a diminished faith in the ability of religion to help define the national character, as one historian has argued, or because of the fluctuating level of religious practice among historians themselves, religious history as it had been practiced by such historians as Perry Miller was on the decline during the period after the Second World War.[14] Denominational historians continued their work, and many fine studies were produced.[15] Elsewhere in the body of historical work, however, religion was given a less prominent place than formerly.

In part this was the result of the rise of the so-called new social history. Spurred on by historical studies of subjects from the colonial era to more recent times, many historians began to recognize that their task was only partially complete when they described the activities of small, elite groups. Instead, they began to turn sustained attention to large groups of people who could be described and analyzed collectively, even though they were historically "inarticulate" and did not leave behind the traditional kinds of historical evidence. Through advances in computerized manipulation of large amounts of quantified data, newer social historians could draw conclusions on a larger scale in the implicit belief that these were more accurate historical descriptions because they were more complete and systematic.[16] In religious history this trend resulted in a change of focus away from the elite, generally all-male leadership of churches and synagogues toward "the man and woman in the pew," opening new subjects for research that had previously been

[14]See Carl N. Degler's comments on the decline of religious history in his "Remaking American History," *Journal of American History* 67(1980): 7–25, esp. 13.

[15]Historians of Protestantism have tried to synthesize the massive amount of denominational, monographic literature. Sydney Ahlstrom's *Religious History of the American People* is the most comprehensive of these efforts. Martin E. Marty has similarly attempted to provide "maps" for the mainline denominations and has also stressed the importance of the relationship between religious belief and social behavior; see his *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984). Historians of American Judaism have undertaken a great many studies of specific Jewish communities while relying on older surveys of the field, such as Anita Libman Lebeson, *Pilgrim People* (New York: Harper, 1950) and Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954). Useful, more recent studies include Feldstein's *Land That I Show You* and Max Dimont's *Jews in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978). Historians of Catholicism have notably broadened their horizons beyond the biographies of bishops that used to dominate the field. Hennesey's *American Catholics* symbolizes this change, and Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), outlines a newer social history method for American Catholic history.

[16]One of the battle cries of this effort to look at history "from the bottom up" was sounded by Jesse Lemisch in "The American Revolution and the Papers of the Great White Men," *AHA Newsletter* 9 (November 1971): 7–21. See also Lemisch, "The Papers of a Few Great Black Men and a Few Great White Women," *Maryland Historian* 6 (1975): 60–66.

too little studied or ignored altogether. The characteristics of church membership, for example, came under scrutiny as historians began to combine religious sources with other social history sources to examine the wider context of religious belief. Puritan studies remained strong, but shifted away from the fine points of Augustinian theology toward research on social conflict and change in specific communities. Even that old chestnut of New England religious history, the Salem witch hysteria of 1692, ceased to be a subject for purely religious consideration and became instead a study in broad social tension.[17] Statistical facts about the things of this world were found to be of value when considering the things of the next.

Related to this emphasis on the social history of religion was an extension of interest into the ways in which organized religion sought to have a wider influence in the world. Most religions have usually undertaken a variety of educational, charitable, and social action programs, and the increased emphasis on these within the churches led many historians to search for their historical origins. Such subjects proved ideal candidates for graduate thesis and dissertation research, consisting of case studies of particular schools, hospitals, and relief programs; little work has yet been done to synthesize these individual studies. Similarly, interest in the study of religious missionary endeavors, both foreign and domestic, grew. These naturally centered around the activities of particular denominations, but some crossed sectarian lines to look at Protestant and Catholic missions among American Indians and Christian proselytizing of Jews.

Other subjects that are, surprisingly, only now coming under examination are the history of popular belief and the devotional and liturgical life of religious groups. These phenomena are a central part of the religious experience, but until recently they were largely ignored by researchers; if scholars treated the topic at all, they concentrated on the formally expressed creedal statements of the denominations. Now historians are becoming interested in more broadly-based questions of the content of religious belief and its meaning to the believer. What sense of spirituality did the members of a church or synagogue possess, and how was that expressed and transmitted? How did the majority of people believe and practice their religion? How did these beliefs and practices vary from the officially-sanctioned formulas? What was the impact of ideas from other religious groups and from the secular world? How did religious art and architecture express the community's sense of belief? What did the changing forms of prayers and music signify in the evolution of religious ideas? Such questions cannot be ignored if historians hope to penetrate to the heart of what makes groups of believers different from other groups in society.[18]

Though scholars from all denominations have begun to consider these issues, Jewish historians in particular have studied them, aided by the library and archives of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) in Waltham, Massachusetts. Earlier surveys of Jewish history often emphasize Jews as an ethnic group, devoting insufficient attention to such specifically religious questions as the changing role of the sermon in Jewish worship services and that of the rabbi in community life. Even more interesting, historians are now looking at variations in ritual and observance that resulted from the immigrant experience in America,

[17]See, for example, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

[18]For an analysis of these trends and their implications for archivists, see Robert Shuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *American Archivist*, 45(1982): 135–41, and James M. O'Toole, "What's Different About Religious Archives?" *Midwestern Archivist*, 9 (1984): 91–101.

including the expanding social significance of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony for boys and the invention of a new, comparable ceremony, the Bat Mitzvah, for girls. They are studying the rise in importance of the observance of Chanukah, at least partly a response to the Christmas celebration of the dominant Christian culture, and the parallel decline in importance of such traditional feasts as Purim.[19] Studies of this kind, applied across the board to other religious groups, will further illuminate the significant content of religious experience.

Documenting Modern Religion

Understanding recent trends in religion and in the scholarship about religion is the starting point for the archivists, librarians, and curators of New England in their efforts to document religion more fully. Beyond that, archivists must adopt an active strategy to document the changes in religion and to satisfy changing research demand. Such a strategy will have three basic components.

The first of these is the definition or redefinition of the collecting policies of individual repositories. As long as the history of religion was studied along institutionally defined lines, the collecting of records could follow the established patterns, and acquisitions policies could remain largely unstated and implicit. As long as New England's religious experience was seen simply as the foundation and endurance of the Protestant establishment—with Catholic, Jewish, and other groups constituting mere variations on a theme—archives and libraries could concentrate on gathering only certain kinds of records. Institutional records were seen as the most important because religion was thought to express itself chiefly through institutions with enduring lives of their own. Similarly, the writings of key religious leaders were assembled on the premise that the beliefs of particular groups were given fullest expression by their principal thinkers, writers, and preachers. Because ecumenical activities were limited, historical evidence about them was collected as a byproduct of documenting individual denominations.

Both the changes in religion and the changes in research in recent decades mean that this structured but unconscious approach is no longer sufficient. The lives of institutions remain significant, but more important are the lives of the people who make those institutions work. Religious life is external, but, more important, it is internal. Preachers may well preach; but what do believers believe? How do they believe it, and how does that change as they themselves change? Traditional sources are not always enlightening in answering such questions. Accordingly, archivists and curators must expand the scope of their collecting to include the records of individuals and groups of lay people engaged in religious activities, those that are outside traditional structures, and even those that are occasionally at odds with official church positions. Within Roman Catholicism, for example, it is not enough to collect the records and papers of bishops, parishes, and other institutional agencies. It is necessary as well to collect and study the records of movements to both the left and the right of the official positions: groups engaged in antiwar and social justice campaigns or pressing for more institutional change on the one hand, groups opposing previous or potential change on the other.[20] Denominational or diocesan archives may not, for a variety

[19]The trends were discussed at the 1981 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists by the librarian of the AJHS, Nathan M. Kaganoff, in a paper entitled "From Dusty Cellar to Best Seller," which has unfortunately never been published. See recent issues of the quarterly, *American Jewish History*, for some of the work on these subjects.

[20]On the availability of archival sources and possible fields of future study, see James M. O'Toole, "Archives Revival and the Future of Catholic History," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 3 (1983): 87–102.

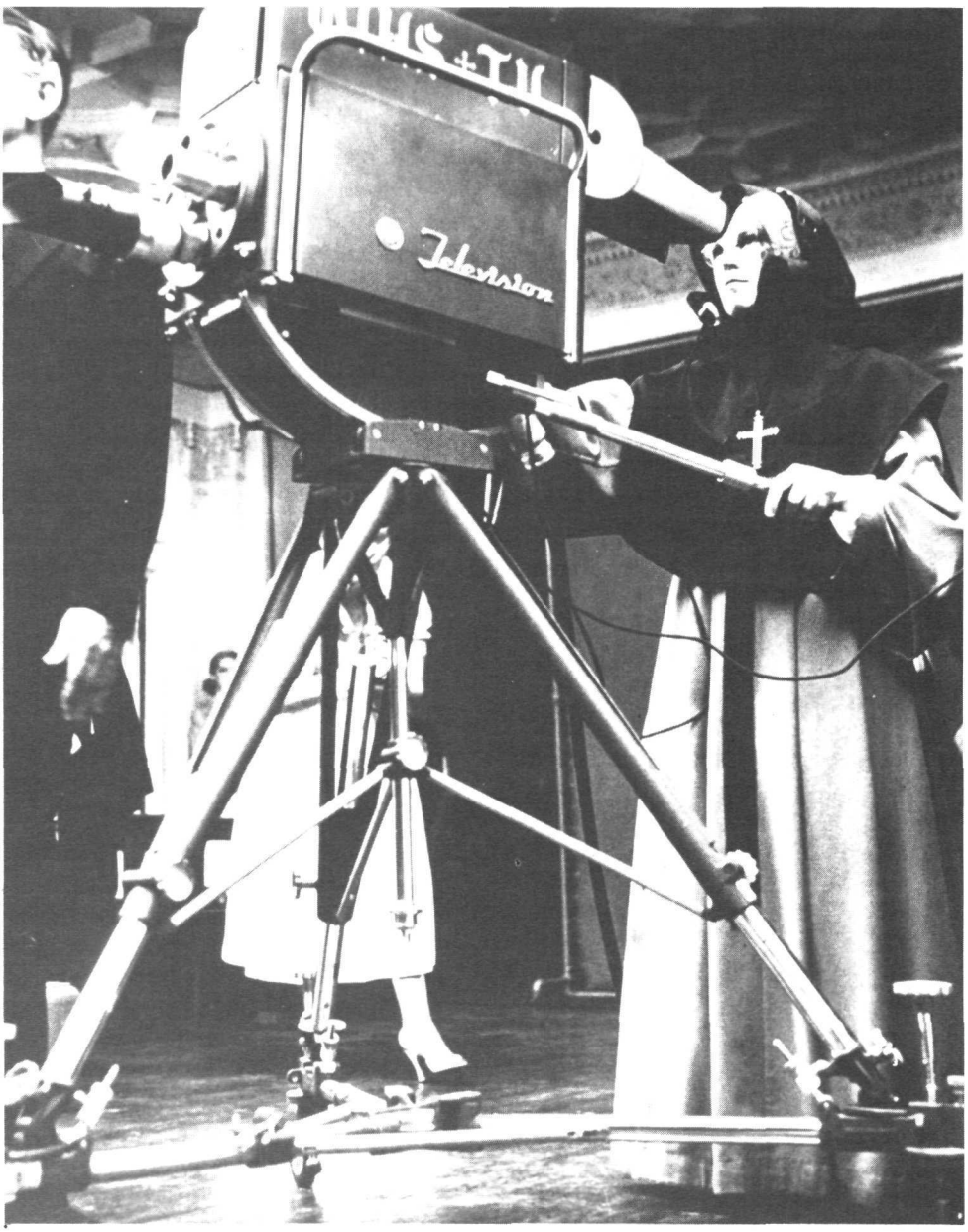
of political and institutional reasons, be able to assemble the records of such nonofficial groups. Church-related colleges could fill this collecting void.

Records that document all aspects of religious life, not just denominational history, must be sought and preserved. Sources for studying popular belief in particular deserve a higher priority. This material, including prayer books, hymnals, and even more ephemeral material, may well be hard to find. Prayer groups and other evangelical associations that concentrate on personal conversion and holiness leave different kinds of records of their activities, and in some cases they leave none at all. What they do produce needs to be preserved for the significant evidence it contains. Samples of religious art and decoration, as well as of liturgical and other religious music, also should be collected, even in sources that have a transitory, ad hoc character. The Boston College library has established a "liturgical collection" that assembles much of this material from the Roman Catholic tradition; institutions connected with other denominations should undertake a similar effort. The implications of this for the process of appraisal of records are enormous. Such materials are produced and distributed in large quantities, but in the past they have not been adjudged especially valuable. Archivists must evaluate them in a different light in an effort to broaden the base of the documentary record. That broadening must be expressed in the collecting policies of repositories.

Related to this is a second component of documenting religion in New England more fully: the development of an expanded, more inclusive definition of the word "records." The written sources of the past, in the form of letters, diaries, accounts, and manuscript sources, have long been the mainstay of archival collections. Other types of nonliterary sources—still photographs, sound recordings, motion pictures and videotapes, artifacts of all kinds—have been collected and preserved by repositories, but usually in an unsystematic way. These sources have been seen as distinctly secondary to written records, as being literally illustrations of themes and issues that were documented most fully in written records.

The balance may never shift entirely away from traditional manuscript sources, and it probably should not, but archivists would do well to give more attention to identifying and preserving other, graphic sources that document New England's recent religious experience. In the last half-century, still and motion-picture photography have become increasingly common, increasingly affordable by the large majority of people. This means that a great many average people are taking pictures and are unconsciously creating photographic records, many of them centering on family-based religious events: baptisms, first communions, bar mitzvahs, weddings. At the same time, the mass media have expanded at a phenomenal rate, and they contain much evidence for the study of religion. Religious newspapers and periodicals have proliferated, even though many have been able to sustain publication for only brief periods. Religious broadcasting on the radio and more recently on television has become increasingly common. Most of the major television centers in New England now have UHF or cable stations that specialize in religious programming, some of them surviving financially on an odd mixture of situation comedy and detective show reruns on the one hand and preaching and religious talk shows on the other. As cable and community access television continues to expand, this trend may be expected to continue and to benefit groups outside the mainline religious traditions in particular. Because much of this broadcasting is interdenominational or nondenominational (though some of it is tied to particular groups), tapes and recordings are likely to fall through the gaps between denominational repositories unless a concerted effort

is made to find and save it. Religious archivists could cooperate with their colleagues at nonreligious institutions who are interested in the history of journalism and broadcasting to promote the preservation of such materials. There are unfortunately few nonarchival allies in this effort. Television stations in New England, as in most parts of the country, give virtually no attention to their own archives, leaving this critical



Traditional religions have adopted modern methods for disseminating their message. A Boston nun, shown here, learns how to operate a television camera in the late 1950s. Both the camera and the nun's habit have changed considerably since then, but not the attempts by all religions to reach a wider audience. Photo courtesy of the Archives, Archdiocese of Boston.

medium perhaps the greatest undocumented area of modern life. Denominational archives, such as those of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Boston and the Episcopal diocese of Massachusetts, could gather material from their own organizations, but Boston University, which has an interest in journalism, entertainment, and the arts, could assemble interdenominational publications and broadcasts.

When archives redefine their collecting policies, therefore, they should use as broad a definition as possible of what records are and of what events and phenomena are worth documenting; visual, aural, and graphic records must be included. Such an approach, of course, creates new problems, principally because these kinds of records are no less voluminous than their modern manuscript cousins. They also may be harder to find and control. Appraisal standards are therefore at least as important in dealing with such material as with traditional documents in an effort to preserve an adequate record within the limits of archival space and finances. Archivists must appraise records not only from the institutional perspective for which their theory and training have prepared them; in that context, nontraditional records might be judged too insignificant or peripheral. Records that document ordinary members of the denomination (such as the programs of church events and materials pertaining to the associations and clubs of lay people) deserve a place in the archives with those that document organizational structure (such as administrative files). A more systematic effort should be made to preserve records that have the ability to convey religious belief and feeling more directly and succinctly than the institutional files of a church or synagogue.

Finally, both the necessity of clearer collecting policies and that of gathering a wider, more balanced range of sources point in the same direction: toward interinstitutional cooperation. Calls for cooperation are commonplace; cooperation itself is not. The importance of such activity, however, is readily apparent in a world that is as diverse, fragmented, and even feudal as that of New England religion. It is certainly true that more institutions are now collecting religious records than in the past. Denominational archives and archives that are part of institutions affiliated with religious groups have grown in number in the last decade. The most recent edition (1986) of the membership directory of New England Archivists lists thirty-three such repositories in the six states. Non-religious archives continue to collect religious records that come within their spheres of collecting interest, whether geographical, subject, or based on particular periods. The number of archival players has continued to increase, exacerbating the scope of the problem if each repository continues to go its own way.

A formal documentation strategy, such as that outlined recently in the professional literature, will be at least as difficult to undertake for New England religion as for other subjects.[21] Denominational divisions fragment this topic even more than other aspects of modern life, on the one hand increasing the practical difficulties of planning for coherent documentation, and on the other, multiplying beyond manageable size the number of required expert participants. Still, repositories and individuals can take the first steps toward effective cooperation. The private historical societies of New England could be more attentive to records documenting the religious experience of all people in those states. They

[21]Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49 (1986): 109-24, and Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (1987): 12–47.

could, for example, actively seek to become the repositories for the archives of still-functioning religious organizations, and they could attempt to assemble papers from a denominationally representative group of clergy and laity. Special subject collections, whether in women's history, foreign trade, or the arts, could identify records that show the overlap of religiously-motivated work with their own particular interests. All these repositories must work together to ensure that key records are preserved. What, for example, should be the boundaries in collecting between denominational archives and the archives of schools and colleges that either are or were associated with that denomination? The former might concentrate on the records of the institutionalized religion, while the latter focus on materials relating to individual believers and their activities. How should religious archives cooperate with non-religious archives that are documenting, for example, the history of social welfare programs in order to preserve the records of the many such programs that have had a religious foundation? Here again a useful distinction might be made between the official records of such activities and those of more personal, individual efforts. Private repositories could also gather interdenominational materials for which no single repository is suitable. Unrestrained collecting on all sides will prove wasteful of resources and will risk fragmenting the overall documentary record even further, a result that erects unnecessary barriers to research and study.

The institutions themselves must take the lead in advancing cooperation through both formal and informal contacts among themselves. New England Archivists, while not a formal coordinating agency, can provide the context for such cooperation through programs at its meetings, publications in its newsletter, and perhaps by assembling special groups to plan specific cooperative efforts. Individual archivists might also take responsibility for establishing official contacts with related archivists and repositories—maybe even in the form of explicit "treaties" that specify collecting responsibilities—in areas of potential overlap.

Interinstitutional cooperation must also mean enhanced communication between archivists and librarians. Archivists do not collect original, unpublished sources in a vacuum, as they are coming increasingly to recognize. Instead, they collect those records in conjunction with the collecting of published sources by libraries. Indeed, most archivists assume that research in their materials must naturally be part of a larger research effort in libraries, an effort that usually comes prior to consultation of the archives. The relationship between archives and libraries is important; and in selecting the materials they will preserve, organize, and make available, each must take into account the complementary efforts of the other. Deciding who will assume responsibility for collecting the "near-print" material that frequently falls through the cracks is particularly important.

For religious archivists this kind of cooperation with librarians consists first of knowing what published sources already exist, a task that can seem deceptively simple. Many religious sources such as newspapers, magazines, and personal statements exist and are well known; others, such as periodical and informal congregational bulletins and newsletters, are notoriously ephemeral. The bibliographic skills of librarians in locating and identifying such material can be helpful to archivists in placing their own collecting of unique sources into the context of other available material. Similarly, archivists must keep themselves current with material that is being published today. This is valuable not only in understanding current and future research trends, but also in identifying potential directions for collecting that might otherwise be overlooked. An ecumenical outlook is particularly important. Religious archivists

are too frequently isolated from one another inside denominational shells, unaware of sources and trends elsewhere that are similar to their own. As with cooperation among different kinds of repositories, the cooperation between archives and libraries starts with individuals, but organizations such as New England Archivists can help by increasing the possibility for formal contacts.

Organized religion has been an important feature of the life of New England for three and one-half centuries and, despite regular assertions from believers and nonbelievers alike that it is declining, it manages to endure. As with Mark Twain's death, reports of its imminent demise are exaggerated. Instead, religion has changed along with the changing people of this region and their changing cultural circumstances. As believers seek to apply what they take to be timeless truths and values to changed and still changing circumstances, the variety of religious expression will continue to grow, and archivists will be needed to collect its documentary evidences. The collective task of archivists is advanced by understanding what these changes have been and now are; by more clearly defining the scope of their collecting responsibility; by being creative and openminded in the sources they assemble; by working closely with their professional colleagues. The challenge is an exciting one.