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Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History

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Journal of American History, Volume 90, Issue 4, 1 March 2004, Pages 1357–1378,
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3660356>

Published: 01 March 2004

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It has seldom been possible, much less wise, to assess American history before the Civil War without taking religion seriously. The Puritans fascinated nineteenth-century historians and novelists alike, although the

portraits left by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville easily outlasted those crafted by George Bancroft or even the truculent Brooks Adams. Then in the 1930s Samuel Eliot Morison and Perry Miller transformed the Puritans' crabbed image by taking them seriously as intellectuals.

“Puritanism was one of the major expressions of the Western intellect,” Miller proclaimed, and his reassessment stimulated an outpouring of American Puritan studies that continued into the 1990s. This mountainous scholarship not only revised our view of the Puritans, but led to a renaissance in American historical writing generally.¹

...

Historians have long found religion important well beyond New England. For two centuries they have written extensively about Quakers, evangelicals,...

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Online ISSN 1945-2314

Print ISSN 0021-8723

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