

Stephen J. Stein

Steve Stein, who retires after 35 years in the Department of Religious Studies, is distinguished among scholars of American religious history as one who recognizes and celebrates the extensive possibilities of the First Amendment. When the founding fathers wrote that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” they could not have foreseen the explosion of religious energy that would mark nineteenth-century America, nor the new religious movements fostered by immigration and by intense regard for apocalyptic visions in the twentieth. Steve’s essay, “The Changing Economy of the Spiritual Marketplace in the United States” (2001), sees new religious movements as exciting and sometimes challenging aspects of an experiment in progress. His large service course, *The Cult Controversy*, gives him a chance to examine stereotypes about religious belief and practice, and his courses on sectarianism, religious violence, diversity, outsider groups, and various expressions of “end-time” prophecy and activity introduce students to the wide-ranging possibilities of the American religious imagination.

Steve’s intellectual journey was unpredictable. In fact one would imagine a more prosaic life from a young man born in Missouri to a military family, educated all over the Midwest, and sent to college at Concordia. And, although a classical undergraduate education – particularly its insistence on mastery of biblical languages – prepared him in some ways for his life’s work, he went to Yale to distance himself from religion narrowly conceived. At Yale, under the tutelage of Sydney Ahlstrom, Steve pursued a question about the sheer persistence of the apocalyptic dimension of religion: what kept certain believers on the edge of the end of the world? In a seminar on Jonathan Edwards, the religious genius behind the First Great Awakening in the 1740s, Steve was directed to the Edwards manuscript collection at the Beinecke Library. There he met a visiting scholar who warned him away from the manuscripts because Edwards’ handwriting was excruciatingly difficult to read. That challenge led to Steve’s semester project, a transcription of one of Edwards’ manuscript notebooks; and his success, along with the relation of the text to the problem of apocalyptic energy, infected Steve. His dissertation and a major part of his life’s work have been about Edwards’ commentary on the Bible. He has published groundbreaking studies including more than a dozen articles on Edwards, and has edited four volumes of the massive Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. In a wider dimension, he has edited – along with Bernard McGinn and John Collins – *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (2003).

Steve’s interest in millennial texts and prophecies as they refracted through American religious history into frightening and glorious visions of the future led him beyond Edwards to his magisterial study of the Shakers, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers*, and from there to his most recent works, *Alternative American Religions* and *Communities of Dissent*. His work on the Shakers was partly a geographical accident because of some engaging unpublished Shaker documents in the Lilly Library. His book and his many articles on the Shakers gave Steve a wide popular audience since Shakers appeal to scholars and collectors interested in material culture, as well as to those fascinated by their counter-cultural religious values. As a member of the board of directors of the Shaker Museum and Library, Old Chatham, New York, he is able to apply his scholarly work to practical ends.

Simultaneous with his work on the Shakers, Steve has tracked the relentless energy of apocalyptic vision as it manifested itself in new American religions (Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses) and in recent new religious movements that tend to make headline news (the Branch Davidian community in Waco, Texas). Steve’s involvement with new religious movements has informed his significant article, “Religion/Religions in the United States: Changing Perspectives and Prospects” in the *Indiana Law Journal* (2002).

Steve, who was named Chancellor’s Professor in 1995, has been exceptionally active in service to the Departments of Religious Studies (chair for eight years) and American Studies (director for three years), the university, and the profession, where, among other things, he served as president of the American Society of Church History (1994). He has been a member of several editorial boards including the Yale University Edwards project (since 1985), and co-edits an important series, “Religion in North America,” for Indiana University Press. Neither he nor anyone else can keep an accurate count of his book reviews, encyclopedia articles, or dictionary entries. His mentoring of graduate students in religious studies and in the history department is legendary in its attention to detail, encouragement, and sustained involvement.

When asked about the most exciting or unexpected thing in his professional life, Steve said it was its coincidence with the burgeoning of the academic study of religion in a state university. In essence, the Department of Religious Studies and Steve have both grown into the interdisciplinary project that privileges no religion and is genuinely interested in a myriad of religious expressions.

Discussion about retirement plans brings two looks to his face. One is serious, the scholar who will continue to do what he is now doing, directing doctoral dissertations, staying active with the Shaker Museum, and beginning work on the *Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*. The other is smiling, the dotting grandfather of Sahalie and Alexandra, the proud dad of Beth and Steve, and happy husband of Devonia. Twenty years ago Steve and Devonia bought 80 acres in Greene County, spent years clearing a road, creating a meadow, clearing stumps, building (literally) a salt-box house, making a place for a pond, and generally enjoying "the land." It is easy to imagine him thinking about Edwards and other intellectual matters as he rides around on his mower, walks in the woods, floats on the pond with his grandchildren, and plays the role of the lucky adopted Hoosier.

Mary Jo Weaver