

The inner history

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 25, 1999](#) issue

Sidney E. Mead died this summer at age 94. With Sidney Ahlstrom he dominated the study of American religious history a generation or two ago. When Mead, along with Jerald Brauer, invited me to study at the University of Chicago, I was 26 years old and had not spent an hour on what became my own teaching field for 35 years, American religion. I have not read obituaries of Mead, or written a tribute. Let me try one now by using his own words, which I quoted once before in a festschrift for Mead, edited by Brauer, called *The Lively Experiment Continued* (Mercer University Press, 1987).

"I was a historian of the historians, trained in all of the techniques of the craft, and if not the chief of sinners in this respect it was not because I lacked zeal. It was the students, who are not always such sources of blinding light, who met me on the historians' Damascus Road and began to turn me about. They made me think about what I was doing, and pressed me to expose my assumptions and premises—which being a modest scholar I was very reluctant to do.

"The teacher is saddened when the student imitates *him*, for he is not called unduly to influence students.

"This, then, is my teacher—a Pilgrim called to be something, to know something thoroughly, to communicate what he knows, to awaken and inspire, and to judge."

This prayer under Mead's desk glass frightened this student and friend: "God give me the courage to flunk my best friend tomorrow if necessary—and courage sincerely to weep with him afterward—and the ability to communicate to him why it was necessary so that he may become a constructive participant in the action."

When asked by a student, What's in history for me? Mead answered: "The most simple form of the answer is 'self-understanding—that is what there is in it for you.' Or, as one student wrote me, 'You reaffirmed my feeling that no amount of knowledge is worth two cents unless it somehow increases self-knowledge.'"

Mead went on to say: "I agree that self-identity is rooted in a sense of solidarity with the ideas and ideals of a historical community . . . [that the human] is the creature as well as the creator of his culture. . . . It seems to me to follow that the study of the history of the religion of one's culture is perhaps the most direct and efficacious route to self-understanding, and that insofar as the historian is immersed in his culture (as I am in mine) his history of the religion of his culture is his 'internal history and his approach will be autobiographical.'"

The historian needs imagination, which means "the complex ability intellectually to conceive and emotionally to entertain the possibility of what A. N. Whitehead called the 'vast alternatives' to one's cultural and hence personal ideals, and to the current specific notions about the limits of what is possible, and the means available."

The ideal historian "is a creative artist. To him written history is a drama . . . and all the world is a stage."

The stage is barer now, with Mead gone after a very long life, well lived.