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## What is "American" in American Religion?

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## Online Forum

**What is "American" in American Religion? (February 2014)**

### What is "American" in American Religion? (February 2014)

Sylvester Johnson, Kathryn Gin Lum, Rhys H. Williams

The bibliographies employed by approaches and methodologies used to study "American religion" are varied, complex, and overlapping. Most scholars are embedded in particular approaches—or sets of approaches—but there is something to be gained by stepping back to look at the field as a whole, particularly the terms we share but rarely define.

One such term is "American." Generally speaking the term has been studied and taught as an ideal, a region, a people, a culture, or a nation state, among other things. All of these approaches are apparent today in what we call "the study of American religion."

Keeping in mind the complexities of the various methodologies of working on things "American," how do you see the distinctions among these approaches? What are the advantages or disadvantages of any one of them? In essence, what approach to "American" should we begin to emphasize (or, alternatively, de-emphasize) in order to better understand the complex relationships between religion and "American" culture?

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Contending with the meaning and implications of "American" in the study of American religion is both timely and fraught. The establishment of Ph.D. programs in "Religion in the Americas," most notably, has prompted a larger discussion about what scholars of American religions should be studying and how graduate students should be trained. The growth of transnationalism as a method of intellectual study, moreover, has only amplified analytical attention to this subject.

At the root of the matter is the question of whether *only* the US should be regarded as "American." There is, after all, no active debate over whether the United States of America should be considered American. Interrogating the content and scope of "American," rather, concerns instead whether "American religion" proper comprises Kumina in Jamaica, Judaism in Argentina, Candomblé in Brazil, or Pentecostalism on Haiti—all as additive to "the given" of religion within the geopolitical borders of the US. This issue can be posed to slightly different effect: should programs in American religion, by design, undertake the study of US-only religion, regarding religion outside of US borders as extraneous and of no special relevance to their program

area for the conduct of research, graduate training, and teaching?

It might be tempting to give assent to such an agenda. For many decades, after all, the rubric of US religion—books and courses on “Religion in the United States”—has held considerable sway. Supporting the weight of this historical pattern is the concern that “religion in the Americas” excludes or marginalizes specialists who focus on the US and who do not study religion outside its borders. Related to this is the insistence that nation-states remain important and merit study as such. Finally, there is the enduring appeal of the organicist interpretation of culture, which regards culture as a discrete, differential essence that separates nations from one another (*viz.*, a homogenous US culture that distinguishes the US from Canada and Mexico).

There are several, deal-breaking problems with this US-only approach to studying American religion, however. First, the rubric of US religion has typically elided the historical reality that scholars of US religion have always framed US religious history as a trans-Atlantic formation rooted in the robust study of the Christian Reformation and its specific assemblage of social technologies and material practices in Western Europe—printing and book history in Germany and Switzerland; national churches and toleration in Holland, Scotland, England and Germany; Counter-Reform in Italy, Spain, and France—the Jesuits' emergence, preeminently; Catholic missions; the transnational, revivalist networks (e.g., of Methodism) embodied by George Whitefield and Francis Asbury; and the Atlantic crossings of White European immigrants transplanting pre-existing religious institutions and creating new ones. This is how denominational church historians accounted for US religion in the 1800s.<sup>(1)</sup> It is why Sidney Ahlstrom opened his monumental *Religious History of the American People* in 1972 with an extensive “European Prologue.” And it is why survey histories of religion in the United States continue to foreground religion in Europe, even as these more recent surveys have included attention to Africa, immigration from East and South Asia, the indigenous empires of the Incas and Aztecs, and the hundreds of other nations of American Indians. This point bears repeating: *there exists no institutional practice of studying US religion as US-only religion*. There are profoundly historical reasons for this. Religion in the United States emerged through transnational, Atlantic networks and institutions. So, scholars have written about it in precisely that way (although often with too little attention to non-Whites). There is an even more basic reason for this. There was no such thing as the United States until the 1770s. And for decades following, most of what is currently the US belonged to Native nations, the French empire-state, and the Mexican Republic. (Several portions of what is imagined as the US still belong to Native American nations.)

Second, to conjecture that the framework of “religion in the Americas” excludes US-only specialists (who by training are skilled in and teach about European religion and its trans-Atlantic networks) is analogous to claiming that the subfield of US religion excludes those whose specialty is religion in New England or in New York or in the US American West. This is not exclusion; it is *inclusion*. More importantly, “the Americas” purview as a formation of transnational method is not predicated on adding nation-states as impermeably bounded entities to a list of polities in a given region. Rather, the emphasis is on rendering the way religion in New York and South Carolina, for instance—taking the case of the Shango Temple and Oyotunji Village, respectively—has emerged in great measure through the genealogy of Orisha devotion in Cuba. Or, to take another example, one can understand the history of Pentecostalism by rendering visible its healing networks established between US cities and those in Brazil. This is not the disavowal of studying nation-states. It is recognizing, rather, that when we study nation-states, we should do so with attention to the linkages, movements, and networks through which religion has been formed in those polities.<sup>(2)</sup>

Third, culture in the US is an assemblage of practices, institutions, affects, and materialities whose provenance is not only ethnic (i.e., Cherokee *qua* indigenous, Irish *qua* European, Senegambian *qua* African, etc.) but also technological, militarist, commercial, and sexual. To some degree, for instance, US culture is a product of multinational corporations downsizing and exporting US jobs abroad. Other roots lie in the administration of global finance, which determines access to credit and shapes consumerism. Sources of US culture, in other words, are often multinational and replicate cultural patterns in multiple global geographies. The organicist account of culture, thus, is simply counterfactual. Defining “American culture” as US-only, then presuming it is homogeneous or essentially differential, fictionalizes its formation and fails to account for the actual geography of cultural difference (which does not obey national borders). The result is a racial imaginary of American culture and of the US proper.<sup>(3)</sup>

This brings me to my final point. There is a massive specter lurking in the shadows of this discussion, rarely venturing into discursive light: the status of the US as a racial state. The US is the product of White settler colonialism; it was created as an Anglo-American republic of White-only citizens. The more recent, formal inscription of multiracial democracy in the US—encoding citizenship for non-Whites and legislating attending privileges like voting and property ownership—has not altered its essential, architectural form as a racial, settler state.<sup>(4)</sup> This is the most important reason why most surveys of US religion have begun with Europe and have followed White settlers (usually English-speaking) from the eastern seaboard to California, eventually, to render an account of American religion. As a matter of fact, the “American” in studies of American religion has most frequently and predominantly been English-speaking White settlers and their White descendants, not indigenous Americans and not Africans, who constituted the majority of those crossing the Atlantic (usually enslaved and involuntarily) until the early 1800s.

Racial state formation has been a central, causal factor in establishing the currency of “American” to signify the US to the exclusion of other Americans. Writing of the many losses that US actions have created in Latin America, Eduardo Galeano has poignantly noted, “We have even lost the right to call ourselves Americans, although the Haitians and the Cubans appeared in history as new people a century before the *Mayflower* pilgrims settled on the Plymouth coast.”<sup>(5)</sup> It is no small irony, in this light, that the US has officially celebrated Columbus Day as a US *national* holiday since 1937 to mark the American arrival of Europeans (Columbus landed and settled in the present-day Dominican Republic, not the US).

It is not wrong or misconceived to focus on the US nation-state, although it should not be treated as some hermetically sealed polity. And I am not suggesting that every program in American religion must be rooted in transnational methods. It is time, however, for American religion programs broadly to devote the level of attention they currently render to religion in Europe, to teaching about and understanding religion among Americans outside of US borders. This will not be easy, since it will require departure from racial state ideology. But on intellectual grounds, it is justified and compelling. Doing so will create new conversations and affiliations among scholars publishing research in Spanish, English, and Portuguese. It will institutionalize the ability of Religious Studies departments to become a home for the study of indigenous American religions as well as other American religions like Yoruba, Candomblé, and Vodun. It will mitigate the marginalization of Catholicism in American religion programs (American Christianity has been overwhelmingly Catholic). It will richly enhance subfields like African American religions (most Black American Christians have been Catholics, and African-derived religions have a more robust presence in Latin America). Last but not least, it will broaden the job prospects for American religion PhDs

1. Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America. Or, An Account of the Origin, Progress, Relations to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States. With Notices of Unevangelical Denomination* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1844). Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). Edwin Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). John Corrigan and Amanda Porterfield, eds., *Religion in American History* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

2. Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012). Candy Gunther Brown, ed., *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (1994).

4. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

5. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

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"America" and "American" are signifiers of belonging and exclusion as much as they are designators of place and nationality. This was brought home to me in the first panel I ever attended at the American Historical Association. The subject of the panel was how to make American history more transnational. One of the panelists suggested that historians devote more attention to the American West. Not only was the West not a part of the United States for much of its early history, but the West also harbored populations defined as "foreign" by nineteenth-century American missionaries: Chinese and Native Americans.

According to the speaker, studying the West and these populations qualified as studying non-US history, and hence made US history more "transnational."

I was, at the time, a nervous first-year graduate student who could hardly fathom speaking up from the audience. But as I listened to the idea that studying my home state (California) and my "people" (Chinese immigrants) was somehow to study the "foreign," I found myself standing up to defend their (and by extension my own) "Americanness." Just because missionaries defined certain populations as foreign did not mean that we should follow in their footsteps. After all, missionaries' categorizations reflected xenophobic and ethnic biases: while identifying nonwhites as foreign, they classified European immigrants as a domestic population under the aegis of home missions, along with American migrants of European descent. To continue to view nonwhite residents of and migrants to western regions as foreign rendered them perpetually "other" while using them to help our own work feel transnational.

But even as I said these things and recall them now, I had and continue to have nagging doubts about what it means to claim "Americanness" for people who might not have wanted the label, and for regions that were not yet a part of the United States and might never have become so were it not for the contingencies of history. Informing these nagging doubts is a longstanding debate from the field of western history that revolves around the question of whether the West is a place or a process.

In a nutshell, adherents of the "process" school conceive of the West as active idea: of expansion, exploration, extermination, excavation, exchange. Process school historians owe an intellectual debt to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Most would now disavow the intellectual assumptions underpinning Turner's work (the "frontier" is no longer conceived of as a receding space to be conquered by the advance of "civilization"). But they appreciate the idea of the West as movement, preferring the term "borderlands" to "frontier" for the way it conveys an active space of encounter. Conceived of as borderlands, the entire US is folded into the process of Western history, and the national borders defined by political and military actions become porous boundaries under constant flux and negotiation.

"Place" historians, by contrast, argue that the West is not an ongoing process but a politically determined region whose exact boundaries are subject to debate, but typically said to encompass "that contiguous section of the continent west of the Missouri River acquired by the United States."<sup>(1)</sup> They see the process paradigm as too broad and too uni-directional (East to West, Atlantic to Pacific). Advocates of the West as place argue that it is the region's uneven terrain, unpredictable weather patterns, natural resources, and multicultural inhabitants that make it unique. And it is these very features that have made the West easily exploited by Eastern powers

(including the United States federal government), to the extent that some have considered it a colonized territory instead of a fluid borderlands.

The place or process debate, once invigorating, has more or less turned into an acknowledgment among historians that the West has been both place and process, a shifting region instantiated by peoples on the move. But as tired as the debate might have become—now a mainstay final exam question in undergraduate survey courses on the American West—I think it still has potential to illuminate what it means to study

"American" religion.

The place and process debate echoes the title of Thomas Tweed's recent *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Tweed writes: "Religions... involve finding one's place and moving through space."<sup>(2)</sup> Religions offer adherents a sense of belonging and rootedness relative to their geographic, ethnic, gendered, familial, and vocational (among other) locations in the world. But religions are also quests, encouraging people to go on pilgrimages and missions, to flee persecution or engage in crusades.

American religious history was once oriented around the idea of the quest—a kind of "process" school conception of what "American" means. If Frederick Jackson Turner was the dean of the frontier thesis, Perry Miller was the originator of the similar Puritan paradigm, where American religious history began in the New England colonies and moved westward as colonists' "errand" into the "wilderness" changed them from British subjects to American settlers.

Just as with the "process" school of Western history, so there are obvious problems with the Puritan paradigm. America was never an empty wilderness. The frontier thesis and Puritan paradigm's East-to-West orientation privileges groups that move in that direction (and groups that originate in Europe) as "American" while depicting all other peoples as those to-be-encountered and either dismissed as foreign, willingly or unwillingly folded in, or violently subjugated. But of course the Puritans themselves were certifiably "foreign" when they crossed the Atlantic. That they do not carry an aura of perpetual foreignness in historical memory says more about religio-racial constructions of European and other migrants as "American" than about the Puritans' intrinsic Americanness.

Bringing some of the insights of the West-as-place historians to the study of American religion can help to alleviate some of these problems. If we define "America" as the region that would eventually become the United States, acknowledging the broader Americas that this definition elides for the sake of shorthand, then we might define as "American" all who were/are physically in or came to that region, whether documented or not, and define as "American culture" the whole multi-cultural array of their practices, traditions, and beliefs. Defining America as region means beginning the story of religion in America not with the Puritans but with indigenous peoples. It means bringing the Spanish and French into the picture well before the English, and presenting English colonization as a competitive enterprise in the wake of the Reformation. It encourages us to pay attention to the ways that different local environments, both natural and built, influenced religious practices, whether immigrant or indigenous. And it encourages us to see the first half of the 1860s not just as a time of Civil War between a North and South that prayed to the same God, but also of plains warfare between people whose fundamental conceptions of religion were irrevocably changed by bloodshed.<sup>(3)</sup>

These may seem obvious points, but they bear emphasizing to our students: that American religious history is not about the dominance and decline of one particular tradition or one particular group of people, but has historically been about syncretism and violence, competition and cooperation. Defining America as "region" should not indicate static-ness, but rather dynamism and diversity.

And yet, I still think we should address and teach Miller and the Puritan paradigm of process. While it might not be "true" or inclusive in a historical sense, the idea of America-as-mission and the American as one-on-a-mission is "true" in the mythical sense of a story that Americans have told about themselves and presented about themselves to the world. It is "true" in the way it captures the imperial ambitions at the heart of American democracy that have strained the nation's borders since its inception. If the advantage of America conceived of as region (/place/dwelling) is that it opens a kaleidoscopic array of subjects in different times and places, the advantage of America conceived of as mythical idea (/process/crossing) is that it wrangles fractured communities into an imagined unity bound and bloated by a mutual sense of obligation and purpose. Where once this purpose was framed as the responsibility to convert the world, it is now phrased in terms of bringing democracy and "freedom" to the huddled masses. As jingoistic as this conception of America might be, it has been enormously influential in domestic politics and foreign policy, used to tell Americans that, as a whole, they will rise or fall together depending on how they behave and how they vote with their ballots and bucks. And it has shaped as "American" those who contribute to this collective sense of purpose, while excluding as "un-American" those who seemingly do not.



Just as the term "American" often has an implicit "good" or "bad," "real" or "not really" attached to it, so "religion" is also a term that frequently comes with an implicit "true" or "false" modifier. As numerous scholars have shown, it has often been westerners (defined more broadly than the American West, of course), and most often Protestants of European descent, who have claimed the ability to comparatively categorize what counts as "religion" and what does not. Those with the power to claim what "true" religion is have also claimed the power to define the good or real "American" as the one with the "right" religion. Hence, to bring us full-circle, the perpetual air of foreignness that accompanies certain religious traditions and their practitioners in America: where once it was the "heathen" Chinese and Native Americans,<sup>(4)</sup> now it is accusations that Barack Obama is a closet Muslim who had to have been foreign-born.

To claim to have "religion" and to claim to be "American," then, is not only to seek the comfort of a rooted identity or to set out on quests to find or convert likeminded individuals. It is also to stake out place by engaging in processes of border patrol.

1. Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
2. Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 74.
3. See Jennifer Graber, "Mighty Upheaval on the Minnesota Frontier: Violence, War, and Death in Dakota and Missionary Christianity," *Church History* 80:1 (March 2011): 76-108, esp. 79.
4. See Joshua Paddison's excellent *American Heathens: Religion, Race, and Reconstruction in California* (Huntington Library Press and University of California Press, 2012).

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Over fifteen years ago I wrote a lengthy encyclopedia entry on "American Religion" (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, W.H. Swatos, ed. Altamira Press, 1998) for an encyclopedia that focused on social science approaches to religion. I opened the piece noting that whether there is an "American religion" is subject to some dispute, but I basically argued for its existence, if a bit indirectly, by focusing on the content and assumptions behind social scientific and historical work on religion in the United States (including patterns established during the colonial period). I examined scholarship on several characteristics of religion that scholars have claimed to be particularly "American." These characteristics included revivalism, experientialism over formal education, local organization (similar to what is called "de facto congregationalism"), and denominational pluralism. As I reflect on the argument I made then, and what is useful for engaging in scholarship today, I think I endorse my previous approach. "American" religion is a concept best used as what Max Weber would call an "ideal type," with its characteristics developed inductively by what Americans do "on the ground." As such, it is both an analytic and a "folk" category, and I think that ambiguity is useful.

In the historical literature on American religion, the emphases on the collection of features I examined as particularly American was part of shifting the "American religion" story away from the declension narrative of the Congregational/Calvinist mainline to a focus on the arrival, ascension, and spread of pietist/evangelical Protestantism. When New England Puritanism's history began to be replaced as the quintessential American story by the history of Methodism and other early frontier faiths, these features of the latter religion became pronounced. This perspective offered by historians was complemented by developments in the 1990s in the sociology of religion that began to pay attention to the ways that religious communities provide space for subcultural reproduction among immigrant groups and minorities, and the ways in which the institutional field was open to entrepreneurial innovation and religious hybridity. Whether or how sociologists used "supply

side" economic metaphors to describe the phenomenon was sometimes a matter of dispute, but there was basically an agreement on the fundamental contours of forms of religion that came to dominate American life from the early national period on.

These characteristics, as practiced currently or historically in the U.S., suggest "ideal type" through which we can examine persistent tendencies and processes of change in American culture and religious practice. The ideal type of American religion has for the most part been developed inductively – from case studies and histories of religious change and adaptation in the U.S. Accordingly, these qualities could vary in importance and prominence if the patterns of expression and adaptation among religious Americans change. The successive waves of different forms of Protestantism that arose in the U.S. helped shape what was a definable cultural and institutional pattern, which then expanded to accommodate the more diverse groups that arrived later historically. While this constellation of characteristics can be thought of as distinctly "Protestant" both because of its origins in the U.S. experience and its "elective affinity" (there's Max Weber again) with aspects of Protestant theologies and practices, it often seems to take the more generic "American" label. That is significant – it roots a key aspect of national identity in the religious expression of a particular tradition, and then obscures that connection—making "American" available as an implicit property of one group of believers.

Defining American religion in this analytic manner—as a set of organizational and cultural characteristics generated inductively—is a response that to the framing questions of this Forum that perhaps betrays my "sociologist's" sensibilities (along with the references to Weber, I suppose). As an analytic approach, it is built on substantive content of religious life, but its focus is a mix of cultural elements, organizational features, and communal practices rather than formal doctrine or belief. It allows for the isolation of key features that can be varied in comparisons between groups or between eras, and as such can help to form explanatory arguments. But even if we don't treat the question as a problem posed for "variable" sociology and causal explanation that tries to disentangle the "most important" causal factor, this ideal type fits in well with documented trends and developments in American religion. It is a reflection of what people in the U.S. have done when they inhabit religious worlds, and it is formative in that it represents pressures to which groups with contrasting features must accommodate or resist.

So, for example, there are competing narratives as to whether there is a basic "coherence" or a fundamental drive toward "diversity" as the prime motif in American religion. Is there a vibrant and encompassing "mainstream" – that may well be hegemonic? Will Herberg's assertion that various faith traditions were but different expressions of an underlying "American way of life" posited coherence within the category of American religion. Those who focus on the processes of "Anglo-conformity" in the lives of newcomers also posit coherence, even as the notion of Anglo-conformity itself pictures the process of assimilation as less voluntary or benign. On the other hand, most comment on American religion point to its diversity and variety. A frontier society settled by waves of immigrants from all over the world made institutional establishments difficult to maintain; the contemporary U.S. is perhaps the most religiously diverse country in the world. And every religious tradition in the country is further divided by groups practicing varying degrees of orthodoxy or hybridity. The local control and voluntarism that result help produce groups marked by high within-group solidarity, but high across-group difference.

These defining characteristics may thus point to dualistic analytic properties that are simultaneously key to understanding seemingly opposing dynamics. They have become elements of the larger American culture, and they are supported and undergirded by an institutional context and a legal structure that pressures religion toward coherence and consensus despite our vaunted diversity and variety. This is certainly true in formal organizational terms; largely driven by the demands of tax-exempt status American religious groups overwhelmingly develop particular organizational forms. It is also true as a mode of expression—for example, the sincerity of individual belief and the freely chosen religious identity are considered uniquely legitimate and authentic, even among traditions that are more formalist, communal, and behavioral in expression. Thus, the elements that are used to explain the diversity of American religion—for example, the localism and experientialism, can also be used to explain the coherence in what we call distinctly "American" religion.

But I am arguing that American religion is also a "folk" category as well as analytic category – it is used by



people to understand who they are, and who is like them and not like them. As such, the boundaries of the phenomenon are expansive and a touch ambiguous. As used 'on the ground' by Americans working to understand their world, the idea of a distinct "American" religion allows people to expand their notions of which populations should gain acceptance. It allows for a recognition as people say, "well, they do things a little differently, but fundamentally they are 'just like us.'" At the same time, the labeling as "American" can be withdrawn or disputed when people want to dispute the legitimacy or acceptance of a group. "That's not American" is a powerful charge, and can mask the extent to which the actual feeling is "they are *too* different from us." I think of my students at Loyola who are often amazed that Catholics were ever a persecuted minority, or that practices they think of as constituting authentic religion began as Protestant ways of being to which American Catholics adjusted over time.

The challenge for scholars, I think, is to be faithful to the folk usage of the terms and the political and social normative evaluations that they contain, even while remaining reflective as to how those normative and political uses are deployed, are adjusted, and are contested. We don't want to participate unknowingly in the reproduction of any folk critique, but an analytic construction divorced from it keeps us too far from the ways in which religion actually works "on the ground."

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Posted by Edward Smith on Feb 3rd, 2014

As a Canadian who teaches a history course that attempts to encompass the British Isles, continental Europe, Canada, the U.S. and Mexico [although the focus is on North America], I am drawn to Sylvester Johnson's essay. Both Kathryn Lum and Rhys Williams [what a purely Welsh name!] assume 'American' to mean the political entity, the United States of America. Only Sylvester Johnson ruminates on the meaning of the term 'American'. I attempt to teach this course by focussing on commonalities and examples of certain theoretical points. The three i emphasize are the relationship between religion and the state - using a comparative method among the various countries in the course, 'dis-integration' - the gradual and sometimes abrupt separation of religion and/or religious belief from public discourse, and the 'other' - attempting to get students [and to be honest, myself] to grapple with the idea and definitions of the other. Pursuing these three underlying themes is best done by looking at a very broad definition of American as North American and the European and African and Asian [including Middle Eastern] cultures which are part of this maelstrom.

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