

Religion in Early America

A symposium hosted by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History is exploring religion as an integral component of our inclusive American story and our shared histories. Under this important initiative, the Museum is pursuing a major program of exhibitions, symposia, and object collection, which will inform all aspects of our work.

While the United States is widely described as a “nation of immigrants,” it is also a nation of religions. Intersecting with Native communities and beliefs, many European settlers came to practice their religion freely. Enslaved Americans similarly brought their own religious traditions. During the crafting of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, there was much debate over whether there should be one religion for the new nation or many. The founders decided not to establish one religion for all, but to accept and protect the diversity of religions. They did allow, however, for the persistence of religious establishments at the state level.

At this day-long symposium on Friday, March 20, 2015 led by Stephen Prothero, the National Museum of American History brings together leading scholars to explore three major themes that characterize the role of religion in the formation and early development of the United States. The first theme is the principle of religious **freedom** that was incorporated into the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution and that has been an enduring principle of the nation. The second theme is the **growth** of many forms of religion in the new United States and how they shaped American society during the first half of the 19th century. The third theme is the **diversity** of religious traditions in the American colonies, and how they needed to be considered as the nation came into being.

A major goal of the symposium is to inform the planning of the eponymous exhibition “Religion in Early America” that is scheduled to open on the second floor of the museum's West Wing in 2017, along with the companion exhibitions “Democracy in America,” and “Many Voices, One Nation.” The latter focuses on American immigration, migration, and diversity. The new religion exhibition, which has the same themes as the symposium, will display a stellar array of objects and will be an essential component of the three new imagined floors of the West Wing. The Museum is organizing its programs and exhibitions around the ideas and ideals of America.

Stephen Prothero is a Professor of Religion at Boston University specializing in American religions. He received his BA from Yale College in American Studies and his MA and PhD from Harvard University in the Study of Religion. A historian of American religions, he has written seven books, including *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Indiana University Press, 1996), which won the Best First Book award of the American Academy of Religion in 1997, and *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), which was named one of the top religion books for 2003 by Publishers Weekly. More recent projects include the New York Times bestseller *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (HarperOne, 2007), *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter* (HarperOne, 2010), and *The American Bible: How Our Words Unite, Divide, and Define a Nation* (HarperOne, 2012).

We look forward to receiving any feedback related to this symposium. Please send your comments to rosae@si.edu.

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Schedule and Speakers

Welcome and Introduction – 9:00 am to 9:15 am: John L. Gray, Director, and Stephen Prothero

Session 1 - 9:15 am to 10:20 am: Religious Freedom (moderator Stephen Prothero)

Kathleen Flake, Richard Lyman Bushman Professor of Mormon Studies, University of Virginia. Publications include *The Politics of Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004). She researches both change and continuity in religious communities over time and the influence of law on religion.

Micheline Pesantubbee, Associate Professor, Religious Studies and American Indian Native Studies, University of Iowa. Publications include *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World* (University of New Mexico Press, 2005). Her research program focuses on Native American religious change spanning the period from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

David Sehat, Associate Professor of History, Georgia State University. Publications include *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2011), which won the Frederick Jackson Turner Award from the Organization of American Historians. Sehat writes broadly on American intellectual, political, and cultural life.

Session 2 - 10:30 am to 11:50 am: Religious Growth in Second Great Awakening (moderator Stephen Prothero)

David Holland, Assistant Professor, Harvard Divinity School. Publications include *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He is a scholar of American religious history and casts a broad and inclusive net in understanding the deep intellectual, theological, and cultural currents driving New England church history.

Amanda Porterfield, Professor of Religion, Florida State University. Publications include *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (University of Chicago Press, 2012). Her interests focus on the historical interplay of religion, politics and law, the history of American religious thought, the historical study of Native American religions, and the history of Christianity.

John Wigger, Professor of History, University of Missouri. Publications include *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford University Press, 2009). His research interests focus on American religious and cultural history. He is currently writing a book on Jim Bakker, PTL, and American religious culture.

Break – 12:00 pm to 1:20 pm

Session 3 - 1:30 pm to 2:50 pm: Religious Diversity (moderator Peter Manseau)

Kathryn Gin Lum, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford University. Publications include *Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2014). Her teaching and research focus on the lived ramifications of religious beliefs and on the intersections between religion and race in America.

Michael Gomez, Professor of History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University. Publications include *Black Crescent: African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). He is a cultural and social historian of both Africa and its diaspora and has completed a new two-volume work on the history of early and medieval West Africa, with a focus on imperial Songhay.

Peter Manseau, Publications include *One Nation, Under Gods: A New American History* (Hachette, 2015). He is the guest curator of the National Museum of American History's upcoming "Religion in Early America" exhibit. He is a novelist, journalist, and historian whose most recent work focuses on religious minorities in United States history.

Nancy Schultz, Professor of English, Salem State University. Publications include *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent* (Free Press, 2000). Her scholarship interrogates the intersection of literature, history, and religion. Schultz's expertise is in the history of U.S. Catholicism, American literature, and American Studies, and she has also done extensive work on the history of Salem, Massachusetts.

Concluding Remarks – 3:00 pm to 3:15 pm – Stephen Prothero

Book Signing (Theater Entrance) 3:15 pm to 3:45 pm – Stephen Prothero and Peter Manseau