

Documenting North American Religions: The Role of ECAI

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The study and teaching of North American religions is flourishing. In a recent survey of religion scholars conducted by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) more members identified themselves as specialists in North America than any other region, and the number of paper proposals submitted to the North American Religions Section of the AAR has increased each of the last five years. More and more monographs are appearing all the time, and the field has a major journal (Religion and American Culture) and a dozen others regularly publish articles on related topics. Several fine encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, and scores of other reference sources gather basic information. No less than ten solid textbooks and four helpful collections of scholarly essays compete for classroom use, and a two-volume anthology of primary sources allows instructors to teach from original documents. And other sourcebooks are forthcoming. IUPUI's Center for Religion and American Culture in Indianapolis has collected and distributed several dozen syllabi for introductory courses on U.S. religion. Several other universities boast centers for the study of North American Religions, including Princeton University, Louisville Seminary, and Yale University. Each of these, and many other organizations and institutions, sponsor regular conferences. Funding agencies, especially the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lily Endowment, continue to generously support American religion specialists who are engaged in long-term collaborative projects. I could go on. My point is simple (and, I think, indisputable): the study of North American, and especially U.S., religions has never been in better shape. There have never been more scholars or resources.¹

Still, there is much to do. Specialists will have their own lists of neglected groups and understudied themes. Those lists, however, would miss the point. The primary challenge facing scholars of North American Religions is not simply to fill in knowledge gaps here or there. Rather, I suggest, three more fundamental, and vexing, challenges demand our attention. We need to (1) remap, (2) disseminate, and (3) internationalize. And the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) helps in each task.

This world-wide database project includes teams from all parts of the globe. Eventually, three scholarly teams will use relational database and GIS technology to redirect, collect, and display a wide range of data about North America: including maps, timelines, images, virtual reality, bibliographies, texts, and links to on-line sites. For the project's purposes, the North American region is divided into three subareas: MesoAmerica, Circumpolar, and Post-European-Contact North America. As part of the third area, ECAI has decided to produce the

first segment on religion in the United States. And, as I will suggest in this initial attempt to tentatively identify some of its functions and aims, it is that initial project on U.S. religion that promises to address three important challenges facing scholars in the field.

I. REMAPPING: NEW CARTOGRAPHIES AND NARRATIVES

If we follow the original plan in the grant proposal, the initial (three-year) segment of ECAI's North American project will emphasize demographic data--for example, census reports since 1790--and combine that with information about religious membership and worship sites. The resulting instrument could map the spread of ethnic and/or religious groups over time and place: for example, the migration, settlement, and congregation-building patterns of Swedish Lutherans, German Jews, Italian Catholics, or Asian Indian Hindus. It also would allow county-level analysis, with map layers thematically superimposed and shaded. That, in turn, would invite researchers and teachers to gauge the proportions of groups in a region and even reconstruct intergroup contact and exchange.²

The effect of all this would be new cognitive maps of the religious life of the United States, and that is exactly what we now need. For all the textbooks and reference sources, all the monographs and articles, the basic map of U.S. religion has changed little in the past several decades. The dominant impulse since the 1960s has been to include more and more in monographs and textbooks. So, on the surface, it looks as if the new model is inclusive. To some extent, that is true. More groups--African Americans, American Indians, Asians, women--now appear in studies and overviews. Still, and this is the basic problem, the narrative has changed little. Narrators continue to center white, male Anglo-Saxon Protestants from the northeastern states in the stories they tell in books and classrooms. These Protestants form the narrative center around which religious (and racial, gender, and economic) "outsiders" move in ever-widening concentric circles of power and value. Defenders of the old narrative point out (and sometimes bemoan) the many studies dedicated to "non-mainstream" or "marginal" groups. However, no matter how many monographs appear on Buddhists or Mormons or Black Baptists, the basic themes and plots in the story of U.S. religious repeat themselves. At the moment, no new narratives have emerged, and the field is divided among those who still find the old stories illuminating and those who do not (but have not yet found their way to alternative tales).³

The path to new stories, I suggest, begins with a fundamental reorientation, a new mapping; and that is what ECAI promises. For example, if we take the contemporary boundaries of the United States as given and then ask about the religious and ethnic diversity of 1790s America, a different image comes in focus. Historians commonly note that America in 1790

was overwhelmingly British and Protestant, and that is true if we consider only the British colonies. However, if we include lands that eventually would become the United States, and then enter the best available census and religious data for that expanded area, we draw a new map, one that includes more ethnic and religious diversity: for example, Spanish-speaking Catholics in the Southwest and American Indians throughout the transmississippi West. The same remapping can happen at the local level, where the technology will allow users to create new visual representations of multiple groups' presence in a county. In some counties, that will confirm the Anglo-Saxon Protestant-centered model; elsewhere it will decenter white Protestants, since at the county level proportions and interactions vary widely from place to place.⁴

In a similar way, we can create new thematic maps by marking up the large storehouse of data in creative ways: encoding not only by historical period (e.g., early National) and religious denomination (e.g. United Methodist), by biography (e.g., birthplace), and movement (e.g. Charismatic), but also by themes like race, class, and gender.

These new layered maps--spatial, chronological, and thematic--will not tell us all we want to know about how ordinary women and men lived religiously in the home or outside the churches. Nor will it tell us everything about how groups negotiated meaning and exerted power in the nation or a neighborhood. But the new mapping promises to provide new angles of vision and, therefore, more inclusive and textured stories.

II. DISSEMINATION: ENGAGING MULTIPLE PUBLICS

By combining and displaying available information in new ways, the project adds to what we know, but another challenge facing scholars of North American religions is dissemination--sharing what we know with wider audiences: educators, journalists, ministers, film makers, legislators, and (what Martin Marty has called) "the public public." Religion scholars commonly complain about the quality of religion coverage in the popular media and public schools, but few do much to change that. Scholars roll their eyes at the religion bestsellers at the local bookstore yet do little to counter popular perceptions of the role of religion in American life. (There are exceptions, for example in California, where scholars of religion have worked hard to change how the subject is presented in textbooks and discussed in the K-12 classrooms).⁵

Although scholars should strive to reach other publics by using all available media, computer technologies promise to have great impact in the dissemination of information about religion. Some projects already have begun to help. The Great American History Machine, although it

does not focus on religious information, has met with success in reaching other audiences, especially educators and students. Several other on-line projects have begun to make religion data available. The American Religion Data Archive (www.arda.tn), maintained by Roger Finke at Purdue University, stores dozens of leading sociological surveys on U.S. religion, and it allows users to search across data files, download codebooks, or conduct basic research. However helpful that is for scholars, the site might not attract non-specialists. Another site, sponsored by the National Humanities Center, is even more user friendly. Designed to aid high school social studies teachers who want to integrate religion into the curriculum, the "Divining America" webpage offers practical advice from religion scholars (www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve/divam.htm). So, for example, a high school teacher interested in adding something on Islam could turn to the page to find advice about how to use Malcolm X's autobiography, the video [Islam in America](#), and how to introduce the topic during the class discussions of slavery, the Great Migration, and civil rights. The American Religious Experience homepage, maintained by Briane Turley at West Virginia University and co-directed by several other scholars around the country, provides perhaps the best resources on the world wide web for teaching religion, especially in the college classroom (<http://are.as.wvu.edu>). The site offers syllabi, images, articles, video, reviews, and links to other useful pages.

In close relationship with the American Religious Experience page, we hope that ECAI's North American project's future homepage will help varied users--primarily teachers and students, but also journalists and other audiences. The site, as I now imagine it, might not only provide access to ECAI's data and maps, but also create, coordinate, and redirect other teaching and research resources. For example, I hope we can get permission to include and mark up an encyclopedia and biographical dictionary. We also could seek an agreement to scan the dozens of syllabi that IUPUI's Young Scholars in American Religion Program has created over the past five years, and we could invite others to add to those course descriptions. Extending the scope of the "Ask Hester Prynne" service at the American Religious Experience Page, we could add a new service for teachers to ask questions about the study and teaching of U.S. religion. We could add a bulletin board for teachers to share information, and we could continue to add student papers, as the American Religious Experience site already does. If our experience mirrors that of the Great American History Machine, a high proportion of our users will be K-12 instructors and students, and by making our maps, timetables, and images accessible to those audiences we can meet our role-specific obligations as scholars of religion to disseminate what we know, electronically expanding the boundaries of the study and the classroom.⁶

III. INTERNATIONALIZING THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF U.S. RELIGION

And we should expand boundaries in other ways too. We should internationalize the study and teaching of U.S. religion, a third challenge that ECAI promises to help meet. The challenge is twofold, I suggest: first, to overcome isolationist conceptual patterns and, second, to expand networks of exchange.

The first challenge arises because of the longstanding assumption that America is distinct. America's leaders, and most scholars who have written about the nation, have assumed that the United States, although it owes debts to Europe (rarely Africa or Asia), is fundamentally different. This "exceptionalism thesis" has early roots. British Protestant colonists announced confidently that God had destined the land for greatness. America was "God's New Israel." In this view, which developed and strengthened as the years passed, Washington (and sometimes Lincoln) was the new Moses who lead Americans toward their sacred destiny. Many have criticized America's civil religion, its unofficial piety outside the churches and in the political arena, but few have challenged one of its central doctrines: that the United States stands apart.⁷

Some scholars have challenged that premise. Students of colonial America, like Jon Butler, have noted the importance of the "transatlantic connection" with Europe. Daniel Walker Howe did the same in his work on Victorian culture in the U.S. and Britain. Those who chronicle Africans' fate in the Western Hemisphere have traced cultural connections with the slaves' homelands in West and Central Africa. William Hutchison and Winthrop Hudson have wondered aloud whether features of U.S. religion--for instance, the Protestant Social Gospel Movement or even America's claim on chosenness--was as uniquely American as we have assumed. A few students of U.S. history, although almost no scholars of American religion, have offered illuminating comparative studies--as with George Fredrickson's classic analysis of slavery in South Africa and the American South.⁸

However, with few exceptions, specialists in U.S. religion have failed to examine the claims of American exceptionalism forcefully or fully enough. Further, despite the attention to foreign missions and transnational migration, remarkably little scholarship (and almost no teaching) actually traces the influences of persons, practices, or artifacts across national boundaries. It is as if the scholars assume that the U.S. political borders function as history's stage, and only when actors step under the lights there do they enter a site of historical significance. But, as most scholars would acknowledge, criss-crossing religious and cultural influences has shaped U.S. religion, and not just in the recent so-called transnational era.

Europe, Africa, and even Asia have been the stages where actors have scripted and performed the drama of U.S. religious history.⁹

If the first challenge in the attempt to internationalize the teaching and study of U.S. religion is to overcome longstanding conceptual patterns that tend to isolate the nation, the second is to expand networks of exchange. This means nothing less than altering how U.S. religion is studied, taught, and written. With very few exceptions, most North American scholars of American religion are trained by U.S.-centered faculty to write in English for other North American scholars. Yet to meet the challenges to remap U.S. religion, to disseminate scholarship, and overcome conceptual isolationism, we need to expand our networks of scholarly exchange. That means changes in every institution that promotes the study and teaching of U.S. religion. Journals of U.S. religion should include international editors and reviews; conferences should include international presenters and respondents. Textbooks, and reference sources, should attend more fully to the transnational interconnections from the colonial period to the present. Even the training of graduate students needs to change, with much more attention to international contexts in Ph.D. exams and required courses. This might mean, too, adding language requirements and travel programs to graduate study in U.S. religion, thereby challenging conceptual patterns and constructing new networks and sites of exchange.

As many have observed, electronic media are ideally suited to crossing national borders and constructing exchange networks, and so the ECAI project promises great help in internationalizing the study and teaching of U.S. religion. Because the North American segment is part of the larger ECAI project, users will be able to move easily from North America to other parts of the world, thereby tracing transregional influences, for example following the paths of immigrants from the homeland to the new land (and sometimes back again). The very nature of this database project, then, is global.

But that is not enough. The North American religion segment of the ECAI project should do all it can to create new international networks of exchange. That can happen in many ways. Most fundamentally, that might mean offering the database, which will be offered by subscription in five years, at reduced rates to some international institutions and scholars. The webpage also can help. The outreach efforts I noted when discussing dissemination are even more important for international scholars and students, and we can use some of the same features to help. We can have online conferences, with scholars from many nations contributing papers on a common theme. A feature can be added to the project webpage to allow instructors and researchers from across the globe to seek and offer advice about teaching and research. They could post their own syllabi, and consult those we will store.

International scholars, who often will not be trained or employed in departments of religion, also might welcome bibliographies and reviews of textbooks, reference sources, and monographs. We should seek international scholars to participate fully in the North American team, including its webpage, and as some of us who are co-directing the American Religious Experience page have done, begin to use electronic media to teach collaboratively. Briane Turley has used that media to allow scholars from other institutions to lecture in his course on U.S. religion; and he and I have asked our students to share course outlines and paper guidelines. We also have posted our students's papers on the common webpage. In the future, I plan to coordinate syllabi and readings, and create a discussion list for students, while teaching a course simultaneously with a colleague at a foreign institution. ECAI's North American team can help coordinate this global exchange through its database and webpage.

But--a concluding caution--these efforts must not reproduce the history of U.S. and European colonialism: the world is not a mission field, coveted territory, or global market. But if international scholars function as full partners in a collaborative venture to remap, disseminate, and internationalize the study and teaching of U.S. religion, then the ECAI project has a chance to help meet the most pressing challenges facing interpreters of America's religious life.

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2 Notes

3 The American Academy of Religion (AAR), Research Interest Survey, 1997. The results of that survey were presented and analyzed in Tim Bryson, "Modern Western Christianity Dominates Member Research Interests," Religious Studies News 12 (Sept. 1997): 6. In that survey, more AAR members chose North America as the region they studied than any other (1,832), and only two areas of specialization received more responses than North American religions: the Christian tradition received the most votes (2,683), and the contemporary period garnered the second highest total (2,190). Several bibliographies of U.S. religion have appeared, and those are cited in a volume that abstracts many influential books and articles in the field: Anne T.

Fraker, ed., Religion in American Life: Resources (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xiii. There are several helpful encyclopedias covering particular denominations, themes, or regions, and two that cover U.S. religion more broadly: Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988; and Edward L. Queen II, Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., and Stephen R. Prothero, eds., The Encyclopedia of American Religious History (New York: Facts on File, 1996). Several biographical dictionaries help. Most comprehensive is Henry Warner Bowden, Dictionary of American Religious Biography, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1993). Especially helpful on smaller sects and new religious movements is J. Gordon Melton, Encyclopedia of American Religions 5th ed. (1978; Detroit: Gale Research, 1996). Recently published readers for the classroom include Henry Warner Bowden, ed., American Church History: A Reader (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds., Religion in American History: A Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); David G. Hackett, ed., Religion in American Culture: A Reader (New York and London: Routledge, 1995). Two other essay collections assess the field: Harry S. Stout and D.G. Hart, eds., New Directions in American Religious History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Thomas A. Tweed, ed., Retelling U.S. Religious History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Textbooks on U.S. religion include Catherine L. Albanese, America: Religions and Religion 3rd ed. (1981; Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1998); Julia Mitchell Corbett, Religion in America, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997); Edwin Scott Gaustad, A Religious History of America, new revised edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); Winthrop S. Hudson and John Corrigan, Religion in America, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1999); George M. Marsden, Religion and American Culture (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990); Martin E. Marty, Pilgrims in Their Own Land: Five Hundred Years of Religion in America (Boston:

Little Brown, 1984); Peter W. Williams, America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures (New York: Macmillan, 1990). The anthology of primary sources is Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., A Documentary History of Religion in America, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). Some syllabi appear on the Center for Religion and American Culture's homepage (www.iupui.edu/it/raac/home.html); the Center published all syllabi produced by fellows in the Young Scholars in American Religion Program between 1993-99: Course Outlines: Young Scholars in American Religion (Indianapolis: Center for the Study of American Religion (CSAR), Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), 1993); Course Outlines: Young Scholars in American Religion (Indianapolis: CSAR, IUPUI, 1996); American Religion Course Outlines, 1997-99 (Indianapolis: CSAR, IUPUI, 1998). For a description of a typical year's activities at one of the funded centers for U.S. religion see Pew Program in Religion and American History at Yale University: 1997 Annual Report (New Haven, Conn.: Pew Program in Religion and American History, 1997).

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5 As scholars of U.S. religion know, from 1850 until 1936 the federal government solicited and recorded (always imperfect) statistics on worship places and church membership. So we have religious data for 1860, 1870, and 1890. The census for 1880 remained unpublished and apparently is lost, but publication resumed in 1890. After that the survey was undertaken in the sixth year of the decade (to ease the burden on the Bureau of the Census), so other religious census data followed in 1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936. For example, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894). For two sociologists' attempt to use, extend, and interpret this data, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, The Churching of America, 1770-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy (New Brunswick,

N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992). During the 1940s, state and federal governments ceased gathering information on religion, so for the remainder of the twentieth century other measures--including Gallup Polls and other surveys--provide the only data. For example, scholars at the City University of New York conducted the National Survey of Religious Identification in 1990. For the researchers' analysis of their survey see Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society (New York: Harmony Books, 1993). Interpreters of U.S. religion must treat these surveys suspiciously and use them judiciously since they, like the earlier religious census data, imperfectly represent institutional religion, ignore hybrid spiritual identities, and obscure extra-ecclesiastical practices. Still, this quantitative evidence remains important.

6³ On the narratives of U.S. religion see Tweed, ed., Retelling U.S. Religious History.

7⁴ After surveying five periodicals in the field, the distinguished American religious historian Martin E. Marty concluded that recent scholarship has favored non-mainstream groups: "The notion of a preoccupation during the decade with the historiography of 'center' and 'periphery' or 'margins,' with 'mainstream' religion versus all other religions, with the 'Protestant' part of the acronym White Anglo-Saxon Protestant and the idea that the mainline Protestant alone attracts notice, meets decisive refutation when one looks at the work of the historians. The Protestant denominations, despite their reputation as hegemonies, could well have complained that the historians were neglecting them." As Marty points out, scholars have shifted focus to neglected religious and ethnic groups since 1980, although funding agencies, especially Lilly and Pew, have made sure that the Protestant mainstream has received its share of attention in the past decade and a half. But Marty's observation, which seems mostly

right to me, does not go to the heart of issue here. Even if more recent monographs and articles deal with non-Protestant groups, the fundamental problem remains: the textbook stories and presupposed narratives have shifted little. White male mainline Protestants from the Northeast remain at the center of most sweeping narratives of U.S. religion. Martin E. Marty, "American Religious History in the Eighties: A Decade of Achievement," Church History, 62.3 (September 1993): 377.

8⁵ One institution that is working to improve public understanding of religion, especially in the media, is the Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. See a recent issue of its magazine: Religion in the News, 1.2 (Fall 1998).

9⁶ Reference books that might be marked up include Queen, Shattuck, and Prothero, eds., The Encyclopedia of American Religious History and Bowden, Dictionary of American Religious Biography.

10⁷ There is an enormous literature on American exceptionalism, too vast to cite here. See Seymour Martin Lipset, American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," American Quarterly 45 (March 1993); and Larry G. Gerber, "Shifting Perspectives on American Exceptionalism," Journal of American Studies 31 (August 1997). On exceptionalism and U.S. religion see for example N. J. Demerath III, "Excepting Exceptionalism: American Religion in Comparative Relief," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 558 (July 1998); and Edward Tiryakian, "American Religious Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 527 (May 1993). For a helpful collection of primary sources on U.S. civil religion see Conrad Cherry, ed., God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny, revised and updated

edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). See also Ernest Lee Tuveson, Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role (reprint; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

11⁸ Jon Butler, "The Future of American Religious History: Prospectus, Agenda, and Transatlantic Problématique," William and Mary Quarterly 42 (April 1985): 167-83. Daniel Walker Howe, ed., Victorian Culture in America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976). William R. Hutchison, "The Americanness of the Social Gospel: An Inquiry in Comparative History," Church History 44 (Sept. 1975): 1-15. William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Winthrop Hudson, "How American Is American Religion?", in Jerald C. Brauer, ed., Reinterpretation in American Church History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). George M. Fredrickson, White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

12⁹ Of course, some scholarship highlights transnational influences, for example the forthcoming volumes in the Afro-American Religious History Documentary History Project. See David Wills and Albert J. Raboteau, "Rethinking American Religious History: A Progress Report on 'Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Project,'" Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin 20 (Sept. 1991): 57-61.