

The National Museum of American Religion

NMAR Inc.

April 2014

The Problem

Throughout the American experience, religious liberty has profoundly influenced the nation's religious and historical landscape. It has shaped our values, guided our principles, influenced domestic policy, and molded our sense of national identity and mission. Despite its persistence in shaping the American narrative, the role of religion is not taught in our public schools, nor is it presented in the monuments and museums of the nation's capital. As a result Americans have in large measure not learned their own history or do not remember it. At the most fundamental level, we are collectively forgetting who we are.

The Solution

The National Museum of American Religion (NMAR) will remedy this deficit by telling the story of religion in America through the lens of religious liberty. This private museum will invite Americans and all visitors to explore the role of religion in shaping the social, political, economic and cultural lives of Americans and of America itself. The museum's presence in Washington D.C. will highlight the centrality of personal and organized religion to America's history and contemporary life, and the museum's vibrant exhibits will explore the impact of individuals and movements whose beliefs and values have contributed to the unique legacy of our nation.

While the museum will accession and display physical artifacts of American religious history, it will emphasize the use of visitor-centric interactive technology to engage the museum visitor. The museum will not favor any particular denomination or treat any faith tradition as "the" American religion. Nor will the museum make judgments as to whether religion's influence has been positive or negative. That will be left to each visitor to decide.

Beyond offering the visitor a unique educational experience, the museum will house three separate and distinct centers that will enable it to extend its educational reach. First, the Williamsburg Charter Clearinghouse, named after the Williamsburg Charter (written in 1988, a broadly supported call to renewal of our understanding of the First Amendment's religious liberty clauses), will engage the museum visitor in the history and salience of the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment.

Second, the K12 Religious History Education Center will encourage academic study of America's religious history in the public schools. This outreach will include encouraging schools throughout the country to visit the museum and providing special class-tailored tours.

Third, the American Religion Research library will provide space to house books and other media related to America's religious history and a central place for academic research in the subject area.

How

The history of religion in America is obviously a complex and contentious subject, and presenting its historical narrative poses a major challenge. The museum's narrative will be both thematic and chronological. It will feature three major narrative strands – religious liberty, religious diversity and social reform – organized by chronology. This approach will give the exhibits depth and meaning, and will also capture the dynamic quality of American religion as it has changed and evolved over time.

Religious Liberty

From the earliest settlements, the colonists faced two related questions: would people be free to worship – or not worship – as they chose? Or would the state dictate their religious beliefs and practices? These questions were legally resolved with the passage of the First Amendment's religious liberty clauses: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, nor prohibit the free exercise thereof." Since its passage, Americans have tested the limits of these two clauses and the struggle over their meaning has decisively shaped the nation's religious history.

Religion in the Marketplace

Outside of the religious beliefs and practices of the Native American peoples, what we now call the United States presented itself as a virgin land upon which one could plant, theoretically at least, any and all religious creeds. Congregationalists, Catholics, Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians all competed for followers in a vibrant religious marketplace. Some sects and denominations that challenged the dominant Protestant ethos were regarded with suspicion and inhospitality. Over time, these faiths, including Mormons and Catholics, found acceptance and were joined by Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and an array of non-Protestant faiths. Today the United States is arguably the most religiously diverse nation in the world.

Social Reform

Throughout American history, religion has driven social reform – the movement for public schools, the abolitionist cause, the temperance movement and the civil rights movement of the 20th century. Drawing inspiration from the meaning and message of the Bible, reforms have fought to eliminate poverty, guarantee liberty and promote equality. Yet their opponents have also turned to the Bible; in the Civil War, proponents of slavery found warrant for their cause in scripture. But such examples are exceptions. Overall, religion has inspired and fueled an array of causes intended to make American society more fair, just and equal.

A visit to the National Museum of American Religion should cause the museum-goer to leave breathless and thoughtful: "religious liberty has written that much of the American story?"

What

Suggested main narrative:

1. Religious motivations in Spanish, English, and French exploration and colonization. These movements can be understood properly only in the context of the Renaissance and Reformation.
2. The existence of Native American religions and civilization prior to and during European settlement. Knowledge of the content of Native American religions during the early period is limited, being largely derived from Christian missionary accounts.
3. The role of Spanish missions as social institutions in the first Spanish settlements and in expanding the Hispanic frontier northward, 1550-1848, in what is now the southwestern and western United States.
4. The role of Puritan religion in the foundation of the Bible Commonwealths of New England and in the shaping of the later nation's sense of mission. The Puritans were convinced that they had been led by God to create a "New Israel" based on biblical law that would be a model for old England. Though they wanted freedom for their own faith, they did not believe in or wish to establish freedom of religion for others, as witnessed by their attitude toward Quakers and Baptists.
5. The development of religious pluralism in the colonies of Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and to a large degree, in the Southern colonies. Long before the American Revolution, there was increasing public acceptance of the separation of church and state, especially in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. Early pluralism was chiefly Protestant, of course. It involved a number of nationalities (Dutch, English, German, and African) and a host of religious denominations, from the formerly established churches to the radically pacifist Quaker and Mennonite communities.
6. The work of Indian missions in shaping the relationships of the colonists with Native Americans, from John Eliot in New England through the Quakers, peace churches, and Methodists to Roman Catholic missions on the northern plains and in Alaska after the Civil War.
7. Religion and the Founding of America. The contribution of the Enlightenment's ideals of religious liberty and "civic virtue" to the thinking of the Founding Fathers, especially Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Mason. Popular support for a Bill of Rights, containing the provision that "Congress shall make no law respecting

- an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," came from many organized religious groups. The influence of the great colonial revivals, often called "The Great Awakening," 1728-1790, in the making of an independent republic.
8. The growth of the anti-Catholic and anti-foreign nativist movement in the first half of the 19th century, culminating in the 1840s and 1850s in the Know-Nothing party. A resurgence of similar sentiments in the late 19th century contributed to anti-Semitism, opposition to immigration, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.
 9. The place of religiously inspired moralism, Protestant millennialism, Methodist perfectionism, and the Christian Utopianism (exhibited by such groups as the Shakers) in 19th century movements for social reform.
 10. The role of Protestantism in the founding of American colleges and in the shaping of the common school movement. The latter preceded the public school movement and generally merged with it. On a mobile frontier, no one congregation was strong enough to support schools for even its own children, much less for all. By 1830, however, most churches and synagogues had discovered their common agreement about moral values, though Catholics and Jews objected to the Protestant orientation of public schooling. Catholics continued to develop their own parish and private schools.
 11. The part played by religion, as practiced by both whites and blacks, in the movement to abolish slavery, 1825-1866. The success of the abolitionist movement, however, should not obscure southern appeals during the same period to scriptural precedents to defend slavery.
 12. The function of religion, Catholic and Jewish as well as Protestant, in the formation of new communities on the frontier – as seen especially in the settlements of western New York, the Shenandoah and Mississippi valleys, Utah, and the Great Northwest Territory – and religion's place in the emergence of a mixed English and Hispanic culture in the Southwest.
 13. The significance of the great revivals of religion led by Charles G. Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and the Catholic Redemptorist fathers, 1810-1890. The rise of large voluntary associations such as the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the American Temperance Society is part of this movement. Urban social work, schooling for poor children and freedom for African Americans were partly fruits of the moral quickening of religious awakenings. At the end of the century, American Jewish women emerged as leaders of similar social crusades; their

- views were anchored in the same biblical texts that Protestant and Roman Catholic reformers had long employed.
14. The rise of indigenous religious movements in 19th century America, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Disciples and Churches of Christ, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.
 15. The centrality of religion in African American culture after the Civil War and the implications of this religious tradition for the history of African American schooling. Without knowing these implications, neither white nor black students can understand the situation of modern politics, where Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, and other ministers have led important movements centered in the African American churches.
 16. The place of the Bible in American literature and law. Biblical language was an important element in 19th century literature as well as in American court decisions.
 17. The place of overseas missions, Catholic as well as Protestant, in American foreign relations, from the first expressions of national interest in the Near East in the 1830s to such events as the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Spanish-American War, and the modern involvement of black and white Americans in shaping our nation's policies toward Africa and Latin America.
 18. Moral and religious consensus in the Progressive Era. Examples include the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, which eventually triumphed in the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment forbidding alcoholic beverages; the labor union movement, as represented in the leadership of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union by New York Jews; the movement for municipal reform; reaction to the Triangle Shirt Factory fire; the struggle to temper the excesses of unbridled capitalism; and idealistic attitudes toward World War 1, continued in the pacifist movement of the 1920s.
 19. The centrality of religion in the new immigrant subcultures formed in America between 1880 and 1910, including Czech Roman Catholic, Ukrainian Greek Catholic, Romanian Orthodox, Hungarian and Finnish Protestant, and Asian Buddhist (especially in Hawaii). Many Jewish sub-communities existed, including the one that was chiefly German, called "Reform," and the one designated "Orthodox," composed of Polish, Russian, Romanian and other Jews from central and eastern Europe. Each community was built around religious congregations; each helped its members adjust

- to life in the United States. In many Catholic communities, this purpose was also served by the local parish school.
20. The role of religion in providing health care, beginning with helping the urban poor in the 19th century, including the Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist deaconess movements; Roman Catholic sisterhoods; Seventh-Day Adventist sanatoriums; and Jewish hospitals.
 21. The significance of the rise of Fundamentalists to the restructuring of evangelical movements in the 20th century. The distinctions between Fundamentalists and the more traditional evangelicals (Southern Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, Disciples and Churches of Christ, and Wesleyans) are important. The Fundamentalists deeply affect conservative American politics to this very day. Students need to understand the tremendous growth of the Pentecostals and Roman Catholic charismatics and of such conservative denominations as the Missouri Synod of Lutherans or the Christian Reformed. They should also know how the resurgence of evangelicalism affected the peace churches and the African American denominations.
 22. The place of religion in the civil rights crusade surrounding Martin Luther King, Jr., and especially the roles of American Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic clergy in it. The moral and religious basis of King's commitment to civil rights was deeply rooted in his experience as an evangelical Baptist clergyman. The moral outrage of Jewish rabbis, who had during the previous 30 years of the New Deal considered themselves allies of African Americans, was echoed in the large commitment of Protestant and Roman Catholic laity and clergy to the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, the opposition of many religious congregations to civil rights, then and now, should be noted.
 23. The work of Reinhold Niebuhr and the "political realists," before and during World War II, in opposing the pacifism and isolation that had penetrated American religious communities. Isolationism, Niebuhr and his many students and followers believed, weakened the nation's resolve to oppose Nazism. Nevertheless, leaders of the Christian churches and of the American government did not translate this opposition into measures aimed at saving Jews from concentration camps.
 24. The recent revival of the religiously based peace movement, based on a convergence of religious forces from all faiths. The Catholic bishops have come to the verge of condemning all nuclear war, including the threat of massive retaliation to deter it. The Mormon bishops have spoken out to prevent the use of Utah land as a base for movable MX missiles. The Methodist bishops have joined religious liberals in the

- Unitarian and Quaker churches to oppose such weapons. And the evangelical New Call to Peacemaking, uniting evangelical Mennonites, Brethren (Dunkers), and Friends, has led the peace crusade among Protestants.
25. The revitalization of Judaism continues. Adolph Hitler's early anti-Semitism intensified a flight to this country of small groups of Jews from central and eastern European communities. Within this country, publicly expressed anti-Semitism evoked a counter-wave of visible Jewish self-affirmation. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Jews have reasserted their Jewish identity in bold new ways, and Reform Judaism has been particularly visible in the advocacy of social justice.
 26. Developments within the Roman Catholic faith, especially since the Second Vatican Council, such as the spread of a biblical approach to piety, liturgical renewal, ecumenical involvement, and the charismatic movement. Public discussion and debate within the American Catholic community about such matters as the role of authority, peace and justice issues, contraception and abortion, and the role of women have also become more evident. As Catholics have struggled with the question of how to be authentically Catholic in an American context, they have also gained greater acceptance as participants in American public life, as evidenced, for example, by the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency.
 27. Expanding religious pluralism in the United States, as revealed in the expansion of the numbers of American Muslims and Buddhists, and in the rise of new religious movements. Since 1776 religious sects and denominations in the United States have grown from several dozen to several thousand. The new challenges of living together in a pluralistic society are evident in the increasing numbers of church-state cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court and in the many controversies concerning the proper role of religion in the public schools.

Additional Museum Components

- American Religion as Social Utility
- Religion and the American Presidency
- Religion's Influence on American Foreign Policy
- Religion and American Jurisprudence
- Religion and War
- Women and American Religious History
- Persecution of Religions in America
- Religion's Influence on American Art and Literature
- American Religious Architecture
- American Religion Going Abroad

- The Charitable Work of America's Religions
- Religion's Role in American Prisons
- American Religion and Scientific Progress
- Religion in American Homes
- American Religious Humor
- America's Religious Palate
- Sports and Religion in America
- Unbelief in America
- Famous Sermons of American Religious Leaders
- American Family Bible Project
- Accessioning of Physical Collections

When

Because of both the sensitive nature, and the prevalence in U.S. history, of the subject matter, we have applied a careful and meticulous approach to the process of successfully establishing the National Museum of American Religion in perpetuity.

The approximate, high-level timeline is below.

- 2010 – 2013 Concept Formulation and Refinement | Establishment of Board of Advisors and Board of Directors | Incorporation, By-Laws, IRS 501c3 Application
- 2014 – 2015 Master Interpretive Plan and Market Analysis | American Religious History K-12 Curriculum Conference | Williamsburg Charter Conference | Museum Signature Film Project
- 2016 – 2020 Capital Campaign and Endowment Establishment Kickoff | Film Tour | Groundbreaking
- 2025 Grand Opening of National Museum of American Religion near the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Where

The best and only fitting place for the National Museum of American Religion is near the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Because this is a private endeavor, it cannot be situated on the Mall with the other Smithsonian museums. The exact location, and whether this will be a retrofitting of an existing building or new construction, are both unknown.