Introduction

Narrating U.S. Religious History

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"God created America and took three persons with Him from Heaven," begins a Seminole story called "Indian History." "Out of the soil He created four more people, and from these seven people all Indians descend." The narrator, a Seminole who relayed the story in the 1950s, explained further: "Some white people think that the Indians came from another country and traveled over a narrow piece of water in boats, but that is all wrong, for God created the Indians just as He had created Adam and Eve." The account continues as God founds and sacralizes the features of Seminole daily life. God gave five things and showed Indians how to use them—the flintrock; the tomahawk pipe; the medicine herb, Wild King; corn; and tobacco. God also established the religious and political order, appointing one of the Indians as chief, another as floor speaker, and a third as medicine man. Extending the chronology until and after the first contacts with Europeans, the story continues. "From then on and until Columbus came, America was a wonderful place to live," the narrator suggests. "The weather was always just right. . . . They never had any hurricanes or cyclones and things like that until after the white people discovered America."[1]

Unless you are a Seminole, you probably did not hear this account of America's origins in school or at home; yet it conveys several personal truths and makes several moral claims for those who narrate and hear the tale in their ancestral homeland in what is now the southeastern United States. The story reclaims the dignity of American Indian

peoples by narrating their sacred origins and their common bonds with whites. It challenges the usual account of the peopling of the continent, which suggests that Indians journeyed across the Bering Strait tens of thousands of years ago, and in so doing it establishes Indian rights to confiscated land. The contrast between the utopia before the arrival of Europeans and the dystopia afterward captures another truth of American Indian history. Perhaps the weather was not perfect before European conquest and Indian displacement, but certainly the social, political, and economic "climate" worsened afterward.

As with this Indian narrative, the stories that fill history textbooks are important because they negotiate power and construct identity. They situate us in society and tell us who we are. Historical narratives often reflect, and shape, the social and economic order: individuals and groups excluded from narratives are excluded from more than stories. Those who do not find themselves or their experience represented in the most widely told stories engage in struggles—private and public, quiet and noisy—to make sense of themselves and locate their place among others in the wider society. Historical narratives, then, never are "just" history. There always is a great deal at stake for narrators and readers, always much to gain and lose in power and meaning.

In part this helps to explain the origins of this book—as well as the impassioned and widespread debates in the humanities about the "canon." Current teachers of U.S. religious history, including the contributors to this volume, have been shaped by several cultural and professional shifts in the past three decades. The religious landscape of the United States, first of all, has changed since the mid-1960s. The nation's diversity always has been greater than is usually acknowledged, yet there is some truth to the claims that around 1965 or so it intensified. The so-called religious mainstream—mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and liberal and moderate Jews—has decreased in number and visibility just as conservative and alternative religions—from Pentecostals to New Agers—have attracted followers and notice. This "decline of the middle" has joined with other recent developments, such as denominational switching and liberal and conservative splits, to create a "religious realignment." Another shift also intensified America's diversity. Changes in the immigration laws in 1965 cleared a path for new immigrants to travel to the United States, many of them from Asia and Latin America. The result has been that Latino Catholics and Protestants and Asian Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists are more visible in the cultural terrain. Finally, the civil rights movement and the libera-

tion movements among women, Chicanos, and Native Americans also were crucial for focusing attention on groups that had been neglected. For many observers, by the 1990s America's diversity seemed greater than ever.[2]

The changes in the humanities and social sciences since the 1960s have mirrored those in the culture at large. Social historians and feminist scholars, for instance, began to devise research strategies to give voice to the voiceless. More and more interpreters have emphasized diverse peoples and ordinary folks. African slaves, Irish maids, displaced Cherokees, and Victorian housewives are now as important as male presidents, generals, reformers, and novelists of British descent. Many historians have come to believe that the usual historical narratives have overlooked large numbers of peoples and that historians ought to tell other stories. Lawrence Levine, a past president of the Organization of American Historians, has made this point. "To teach a history that excludes large areas of American culture and ignores the experiences of significant segments of the American people," he argued, "is to teach a history that fails to touch us, that fails to explain America to us or to anyone else." For Levine and most other U.S. historians, the old "grand narrative" of consensus and progress in American history, which was peopled by white males and set in public spaces, no longer makes sense of the national past.[3]

I believe that the same is true of the grand narratives of U.S. religion, and—although there are differences among us on some issues—so do all of the contributors to this volume. Textbook narratives that attempt to tell "the whole story" of U.S. religious history have focused disproportionately on male, northeastern, Anglo-Saxon, mainline Protestants and their beliefs, institutions, and power. In recent years those of us who teach and write U.S. religious history have participated in lively, and occasionally acrimonious, debates about the scope and history of white, male, mainline Protestant influence. Our students and many others have joined the debate. To oversimplify a complex conversation, on one side are those who think that comprehensive narratives of American religion ought to highlight these elites, since their political and cultural influence has been so great, although other characters should be included as they intersect with them and, so, enter the plot. On the other side are those who, while acknowledging mainline Protestants' public power, suggest that the standard stories obscure a good deal of U.S. religious history. New stories, they suggest, are needed.[4]

This book, which is a collection of stories about America's religious

past, began as a response to that challenge. And it *is* a challenge. As teachers and authors try to incorporate the innovative monographic literature of the past several decades that has dealt with diverse peoples and ordinary adherents, some have wondered aloud whether coherent stories are possible. Diversity threatens to overcome all narrators who are sensitive to it. If coherent stories *are* possible, can we compose narratives that make sense of the religious past yet draw on new motifs and plots and include a wider range of settings and characters?[5]

I decided that was possible, or at least worth attempting. Such an imposing project, however, seemed to call for collaboration. So several of us who shared a commitment to recasting the usual stories of U.S. religion gathered together. But more than that commitment was needed if we were to succeed—or at least fail imaginatively and usefully. We needed to think through the issues together. The contributors here have had much more contact with each other than usually is the case in most edited collections of this sort. We had a planning session in 1991 and more sustained discussion in two longer weekend meetings in 1993 and 1994. At the first weekend meeting we discussed abstracts of each of the chapters; at the second we directed our encouragement and criticism at first drafts of the essays. Before and after those encounters, we communicated by letter, telephone, and electronic mail, offering each other citations and suggestions. To help us anticipate possible objections to the project and further clarify our own thinking, we also invited several "friendly critics," as one of them labeled their role. Five prominent scholars in the field—Mark A. Noll, David D. Hall, Leigh Schmidt, R. Laurence Moore, and Edwin S. Gaustad—participated in our conversations. I urged those respondents to tell us what we were doing wrong, and they obliged. We did not follow their advice on all matters, but they refined our thinking in many ways.

During our second meeting one of the respondents, turning playful, teased us by suggesting that we seemed a bit like a band of marauding revisionists. I think that there is some revision in the book, and readers will decide whether we have been marauding. But we are hardly a "band." We disagreed with each other about several issues along the way. If we agreed that we wanted to nudge our colleagues (and ourselves) toward different stories, we wondered—at least initially—whether we should write case studies or the more synthetic essays that appear here. If we all granted that there are some parallels between historical and fictional narratives, we disagreed somewhat about how much they resemble one another. If we agreed that we would not try to

replace the old grand narrative with another, we remained somewhat divided about whether such metanarratives are possible, or desirable, anymore. But if we were not a homogeneous group speaking with one voice, neither were we so divided that we could not find common ground. What struck me about our meetings was that a group of scholars with different research interests and distinct personal histories could manage to allow differences to stand and, at the same time, find some commonality of viewpoint.[6]

By temperament and training, historians usually are focused on the particulars of the past, but our chosen task demanded that we consider larger issues as well—the history of scholarly writing about U.S. religion and, broader still, the nature and assessment of historical narratives. Before our first major meeting we read articles on both topics, and as a starting point for our conversations I circulated an initial draft of this introduction, which is more focused on historiographical patterns and theoretical issues than most prologues to studies of U.S. religious history. I take it that my interest in the history of narrative surveys of U.S. religion needs little justification: if we are trying to work our way toward other narratives, it makes sense to look at earlier attempts to tell the story. Some readers might wonder, however, why I discuss the character and assessment of historical narratives, as I do later. They might protest that I thereby raise irrelevant theoretical questions or distract from the main business of introductions—introducing the chapters. But I believe it is useful to consider these theoretical issues because all historians hold presuppositions and beliefs about what they do and what narratives are, whether or not they identify those for readers (or themselves). Self-consciousness and clarity about method and theory are important in all historical work, but they seemed indispensable in a volume like this—if we were to avoid unwittingly replicating the old narrative patterns, which situated some Americans on the margins of the story and the society. Further, it would be odd, even irresponsible, for us to call for other stories about the past and not offer a working definition of "historical narratives" and a preliminary set of criteria for evaluating them. As director of the project and editor of the volume, I took it as my task to propose a conceptual framework that might form a basis for our discussions. Revising that framework in conversation with my collaborators and the invited critics, I arrived at three convictions about some of the most fundamental conceptual issues of the project. These shaped not only the content of this introduction but also the character of the chapters and the organization of the book.

First, although significant differences distinguish fictional from historical narratives, emphasizing the common features between the two and analyzing historical narratives in literary terms—considering motif, plot, characters, and setting—are useful in both the assessment of others' stories and the construction of our own. Second, narratives trace changes over time, so it makes sense that scholars have emphasized the temporal in their analyses. I suggest, however, that it is helpful to attend to the spatial more fully. Historical narratives orient individuals and groups in space as well as time. They not only place readers in a stream of events but also locate them in natural terrain and social space. As I have suggested with my analysis of the Seminole story, narratives themselves also become social sites at which readers negotiate meaning and power. Third, narrators, and the tales they tell, never stand nowhere in particular or everywhere at once: they always are situated. Narratives, then, are "sightings" from particular sites. From this perspective, the essays in this volume are attempts to self-consciously narrate U.S. religious history from a variety of geographical and social positions. Our aim is not to reconstruct a single grand narrative, but to offer several situated stories and ask readers whether these illumine regions of the past that had remained obscured in the older surveys.[7]

I divide this introduction into three main sections, and the titles of the subsections play with homophonous terms that inform my thinking about narratives—sight, cite, and site. We began our collaborations in the first meeting by considering the nature and assessment of historical narratives, or *sightings,* to use my term. That is where I begin here also. In the following section I refer to—or *cite*—the textbook surveys of U.S. religious history and identify patterns in the narrators' choice of ordering elements. I conclude by describing the contributors' attempts in this volume to consider other motifs and settings, and so illumine other characters and sketch other plots, as they *site* the narratives of the religious history of the United States at varied positions in the social and geographical landscape.

Sightings: On Historical Narratives

Historians often have chosen narrative form to write about the past. Of course, there are other effective ways of writing history, including the thematic analysis often favored by social historians. All historical knowing and writing is not narratological. Rather, following the philosopher

William Dray, I believe that the "construction of narratives is an admissible and prominent, although not universal, aspect of historiography."[8]

If we can assume that narrative history is at least one effective mode of representing the past, what are historical narratives? Narratives may include the other three forms of composition—argumentation, exposition, and description—but most fundamentally they are stories that move beyond mere chronicle. Chronicles, sometimes called "plain narratives," are only chronologically arranged lists of events. The only ordering relation in chronicle is, as Louis Mink noted, "and then . . . and then . . . and then." Historical narratives, in contrast, are *ordered* chronicles, usually with a beginning, middle, and end, that construct meaning out of the human past. They highlight some features and obscure others, according to the interests of the narrator, as each of the chapters in this book does.[9]

Historical narratives, like fictional ones, establish interrelationships among actions recounted by using *ordering elements*. Like novelists, historians employ these elements to show "how a situation at the beginning of a temporal series leads to a different situation at its end." These ordering elements include the author's description of the setting and characters and the choice of motif and plot. In the movement between historical evidence and narrative framework, historians consciously and unconsciously draw on their individual imaginations and cultural resources to choose a motif and construct a plot that makes sense out of the selected evidence. In the narrative that emerges from this imaginative process, historians offer readers one ordered account of what the selected evidence means. The reader, as an active participant in the narrative situation, completes the process of meaning-construction and storytelling by tugging certain interpretive threads in the narrative fabric or, to change the image, by filling in the silent spaces of the story.[10]

If there are parallels between fictional and historical narratives, the two must be distinguished, as our common language usage indicates. The historian's work is imaginative construction. Facts, and the plot structures about them, do not await discovery. Storytellers and readers constitute facts and construct plots. At the same time, I pull back from the strongest versions of the constructivist view. Historical narratives are constructions, but they are more than constructions too. Almost all historians will report that "evidence" also is experienced as an "other" that stands apart from us. Evidence seems so independent of our constructions at times that we are drawn to language which attributes

agency to it as we describe our work to each other. The evidence "led me" this way or that, we tell our students and colleagues. Of course, we do not mean this in any crude way; letters, documents, and artifacts usually do not *do* much of anything. In context, however, this language makes sense. It points to the ways in which "evidence" often appears to us as more than our constructions.[11]

Put another way, there are constraints on interpretation and criteria for assessment. Anything does *not* go. Historians have a role-specific obligation to be accountable to the past—however we might understand that duty—in ways that novelists do not. In my terms, then, historical narratives are sightings from particular geographical and social sites that employ various ordering elements to construct meaning out of the human past. In addition, although criteria are culturally constructed and no universal standpoint for assessment is possible, readers can give reasons for preferring one narrative over another.

Readers can use at least three kinds of criteria to assess historical narratives—aesthetic, moral, and epistemological—and all three are relevant as we try to analyze traditional stories and construct different ones. First, readers can use aesthetic norms to assess historical stories. Narratives can be more or less skillfully constructed. To use literary terms again, the setting, or background against which the action takes place, can be more or less vividly recounted. Characters can be drawn more or less fully and their motives can be more or less clear. A motif, a simple recurring element that serves to unify the extended narrative, can be interwoven into the text more or less effectively. Finally, some plots, or patternings of the chronicle of events, are more imaginative than others.

Aesthetic standards are important for some readers, but they rarely spark critics' passions as the application of moral standards do. This, I think, is the source of much of the emotional intensity witnessed in recent debates about the standard narratives in literature, history, and religion. Muscles tighten and faces flush because critics find some narratives inadequate on moral grounds. The often unspoken criticism of some earlier synthetic narratives of U.S. religion, as in other fields, is that they mirror and perpetuate unjust social or economic conditions by condemning some historical groups to play only minor supporting roles in the story.

These sorts of moral challenges usually are grounded in other, epistemological, critiques. The most fundamental criticism of a historical account is that the interpreter "got it wrong," however that might be understood. The proposal, explicit or implicit, that we should use moral

or pragmatic criteria to assess narratives often rests on a more fundamental conviction—that the standard narratives distort the past. Narrators can commit two sorts of transgressions in this regard—sins of commission and sins of omission.

On the first point, readers can challenge the truth value of a narrative's empirical claims. Every historical narrative includes any number of assertions about the past. For instance, consider an account about the Civil War that places the key battles in the northwestern states. Historical sources, verbal and material, suggest that the Battle of Gettysburg was not fought in, say, Oregon. No matter how aesthetically pleasing or morally uplifting the story might be, that narrative is inadequate. It is, we want to say, simply wrong. We could offer other examples, more or less ridiculous, to make the point: George Whitefield was not a Jesuit missionary in New Spain and Dorothy Day was not the founder of the Mormons. We would challenge any accounts that made such claims. It seems commonsensical to say, then, that the constituent assertions of narratives each must offer persuasive interpretations of the historical evidence. Historians tolerate an error or two on minor matters, such as a wrongly recorded date of birth for a minor character, or an inaccurate quotation from a primary text, but each such error diminishes the persuasiveness of the story.[12]

Narrators also can commit sins of omission. Readers can challenge a historian's treatment of the setting, characters, and plot on epistemological grounds by suggesting that the story is not as inclusive as it claims to be. Historians portray more or less completely the characters or quasi characters—such as nations, cities, and ethnic groups—that are relevant to their announced subjects. For example, as social historians have argued in recent decades, to claim to tell the story of "the American people" without attempting to make sense of the experience of so-called ordinary historical actors is to constrict the past and misrepresent the subject.

To criticize narrators for "constricting" and "misrepresenting" the past is to assume that historical knowledge is possible. Naturally, I believe it is, as do the other contributors to this volume. Such knowledge always is limited, in part because historians inevitably stand in a particular place as they view the past; but this knowledge is no less reliable for being situated. As the feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway has argued, all reliable knowledge is situated. Extending Haraway's analysis, I suggest that self-conscious geographic and social positioning, not pretenses to universality or detachment, is the condi-

tion for making knowledge claims. Both epistemological absolutism and relativism, in different ways, claim to locate the knower everywhere or nowhere. On the contrary, it is precisely because we stand in a particular location that we are able to see, to know, and to narrate. We cannot see everything, and we cannot even simultaneously notice everything that a single vantage point allows. As one geographer has suggested, "it is not possible to look at a scene in general; our eyes keep searching for points of rest." Narrators can claim neither omnipresence nor omniscience. At the same time, however, this view of historical knowledge allows us to avoid epistemological absolutism while reclaiming one root meaning of the verb *narrate:* it is related to *gnarus,* knowing. Narrative, in this view, is one mode of representing what we know. Narrative sightings from particular sites tell the reader not only about the narrator and the site, although they do that too, but also what can be seen from there.[13]

Citing: The Narrative Surveys

The placement of the narrator and the narrative determines what can be seen, what stands in shadow, and what disappears from view. By almost any standard, the sightings recorded in the narrative surveys of American religion since Robert Baird's *Religion in America* (1844)—those that have attempted to tell "the whole story"—have allowed readers to see a great deal. Yet much stands in shadow and much disappears from view. To develop this critique it will be helpful to consider the surveys, which are listed in the bibliography, in a bit more detail. I cannot review nearly 150 years of survey writing here. Rather, I offer an analysis of some of the patterns I see in terms of the authors' choices of motif, plot, setting, and characters. This approach can help us gain more clarity about the stories that have been told and, by highlighting the importance of the narrators' choices of ordering elements, can provide a starting point for the construction of different stories. Appealing to epistemological criteria, I suggest that the main problem with most surveys of U.S. religion is a lack of inclusiveness. To put this point differently, narrators and narratives have been positioned in ways that obscure important dimensions of America's religious past.[14]

The position of the narrative—that is, the setting of the story—obscures as much as it illumines. Several recent survey writers have given some attention to the significance of geographical setting. *America's Religions* (1990) by Peter Williams includes a nine-page chapter on reli-

gion in the South, and he briefly considers other regions elsewhere in the book. Edwin Gaustad, who has been especially sensitive to geography, also covers people, texts, and events from multiple regions in his textbook. Catherine Albanese's survey, *America: Religions and Religion* (1992), the most satisfying of the recent works in many ways, calls attention to the significance of regional variation in a case study of religion in southern Appalachia. But Winthrop Hudson and John Corrigan's popular *Religion in America* (1965; 1992) is more typical. The fifth edition does note in passing the significance of region, quoting Albanese's textbook, but most of the action takes place in the northeastern states by natives of New England and the Mid-Atlantic region. "The West" appears in the index, but it refers the reader to a two-page treatment of the "frontier" of 1800. The same index refers the reader interested in New England to nineteen different locations in the text. When the western states do appear in the narrative they, like American Indians, do so mostly as the objects of eastern missionizing or civilizing.[15]

With few exceptions, survey writers have not explored fully the significance of local particularities or regional discontinuities. This omission, recent research suggests, distorts the past. Californians, for instance, never have been as Protestant, or even as conventionally religious, as residents in the northeastern states. The contours of religion in the Southwest, the Rocky Mountain region, and Florida also have diverged from those of the East and Midwest in important ways. Indeed, a historian might compose a narrative of U.S. religious history that moved regionally rather than chronologically or thematically; or, at least, a narrator might situate events and characters—and, so, assertions about them—geographically.[16]

With a few notable exceptions, especially the works by Robert T. Handy and Mark A. Noll which include Canada, survey writers also fail to place the story within wider geographical contexts. Jon Butler has argued that American religious historians ought to locate U.S. developments in a transatlantic context. David Wills and Albert Raboteau, broadening the narrator's vision further, have suggested that U.S. religious history makes sense only in the context of the Atlantic world, understood as stretching back to the western coast of Africa. As early as 1932, historians such as Herbert E. Bolton had advocated that historians of "America" situate their stories in the hemisphere. This sort of comparative context can be illuminating. I cannot argue this point fully here, but interhemispheric comparisons of religious history not only reveal the expected particularities of time and place but also bring into

focus themes that have transnational significance for the "New World," including colonialism and postcolonialism, slavery and race, natural landscape and civilized frontier, civil religion, and European-native contacts. A similar case can be made for the significance of the Pacific Rim and the potential usefulness of transnational themes for making sense of that geographical area. So far, however, few textbooks on U.S. religion highlight geographical variation within the nation's borders after the colonial period or emphasize the wider context of the history of the hemisphere, the Atlantic world, or the Pacific Rim.[17]

Narrators map social as well as geographical space, and this distinction allows us to see another way in which the settings of the standard surveys have been too restricted. Narrators often have situated the characters' actions in certain public spaces and elite sites. The church pulpit, the revival altar, the reform society, the denominational headquarters—and to a lesser extent the courtroom and voting booth—have been the backgrounds against which religious actors have worked out their history in the United States. To some extent, this historiographical pattern is understandable, but other social spaces—and the artifacts that have filled them and the rituals that have sacralized them—have been underemphasized or overlooked. Religions are cultural processes whereby individuals and groups map, construct, and inhabit worlds of meaning. They involve power as well. Mapping a symbolic landscape and constructing a symbolic dwelling involve negotiations for meaning and power in natural environments and at social sites. Understood in this way, the possible social settings of narratives expand. Stories about religion, then, might be situated at cemeteries and hospitals, fairgrounds and malls, parades and festivals, elementary schools and nursing homes, museums and choir lofts, and kitchens and bedrooms. These social sites are not private as opposed to public since those boundaries dissolve as all of these spaces interpenetrate. What happens in pulpits, boardrooms, and election booths shapes and is shaped by what happens in streets, parlors, and bedrooms. In the same way, the distinction between natural and social space blurs. Mountains and rivers—components of the so-called natural landscape—are culturally constructed and socially contested spaces, as attention to any of the disputes about native peoples' rights to their sacred land shows.[18]

The settings of narratives are important because they allow sightings of some of the people who inhabit the social and geographical landscape. They determine which characters will appear in view. To give only the most obvious example, stories told from the pews rather than

the pulpit or in adherents' homes rather than denominational headquarters foreground different individuals and groups. Despite contrary impulses in the last few decades, the protagonists who people the comprehensive narratives of American religion continue to be mature, white, Anglo-Saxon, elite males. How would the story shift if narrators focused on Africans instead of Europeans, women instead of men, children instead of adults, or the working class instead of economic elites?

In the same way, it can be instructive to consider how the story would change if we shifted our attention from mainline Protestants. Almost all surveys composed since Sydney Ahlstrom's magisterial *Religious History of the American People* (1972) have acknowledged religious diversity. Survey writers have come a long way from Baird's classification of American religions into two groups, "Evangelicals" and "Non-Evangelicals." Ahlstrom might have been "possessed" by Puritans, as Sidney Mead claimed in his famous review, but Ahlstrom, and most authors who have followed him, have scripted scenes for the "others" to play. Perhaps the surveys by Albanese and Mary F. Bednarowski are most notable in this regard. If we overlook the introduction, Protestants do not appear in Albanese's text until the fourth chapter. So Catholics and Jews, as well as members of new religious movements and Asian religions, now find a place in the story.[19]

Nevertheless, the central characters of the surveys continue to be mainline Protestants. In many ways, the focus on Protestantism, and its control of "highbrow" culture and public power, is both understandable and appropriate. There has been a Protestant establishment in America into the 1960s and even beyond. Mainline Protestant denominations and personal networks have exerted disproportionate public influence. The influence and national numerical dominance have seemed so great that most scholars have felt compelled to focus on the story of Protestant victories in contests for public power. In his survey, George Marsden expresses a common view: "The story of American religion, if it is to hang together as a narrative, must focus on the role played by certain groups of mainstream Protestants who were for a long time the insiders with disproportional influence in shaping American culture." I disagree. That story is important because Protestants have had great power; but, as I argue later, it often has been presented as the only story. Concomitantly, other stories, with other motifs and plots, have not been told.[20]

The choice of a foundational motif for a historical narrative is as important as the selection of the story's setting, in part because narrators

stitch the plot from that thread. Historians have drawn on a variety of motifs to tell the tale of U.S. religion, including two that Ann Braude and Roger Finke challenge in their chapters in this book—declension and secularization. Others have ordered their stories around the themes of irony and democracy. I suggest that four themes have been especially influential among survey writers since Robert Baird in the 1840s: the organic, frontier, contest, and identity/difference motifs. Although the span of their greatest influence does not divide neatly into precise eras and each continues to have interpretive power, these themes held sway in roughly successive periods.

In an age dominated by evolutionary models and organic metaphors, several nineteenth-century chroniclers of American religion turned to images from nature. For instance, in his *History of American Christianity* (1897), Leonard Woolsey Bacon traced how the "germs" of Christianity were "planted" in different "seed plots" along the Atlantic seaboard, and "diverse growths were made." Bacon, a Congregational minister, believed that the "growth" of churches sprang, in part, "through wonders of spiritual influence." Whether or not narrators appealed to divine providence in their interpretations, the prevailing image they drew on was biological and horticultural. Such narratives appeal to images of the growth of humans or plants, and the plots that use this motif concern the growth or transplantation of religious groups, mostly Protestant, in the American environment.[21]

As Americans—at least those who were not displaced from their native lands—pondered the closing of the "frontier" in the 1890s, U.S. historians like Frederick Jackson Turner appealed to that image to shape narratives about the past. Their guiding image was geographical, and in the narrowest sense the "environment" to which religious groups adapted was the emerging and closing of the frontier. Although this theme continues to find its way into surveys of American religion, it had its greatest influence in the accounts by Peter G. Mode in the 1920s and William Warren Sweet in the 1930s. As with historians who appealed to organic metaphors, the frontier was understood in broad terms, cultural as well as geographical. The plots that emerged recounted not just the gaining and losing of land and resources but also the attitudes and behaviors associated with that environment, including the influence of individualist and democratic impulses on the fate of American denominations.[22]

Since the end of World War I, as some Americans turned their attention to international conflict and class struggle, the contest motif has

structured narratives. This approach is clear in the work of Progressive Era historians such as Henry K. Rowe, who wrote *The History of Religion in the United States* in 1924. Although his perspective was quite different in some ways, George Marsden wove the contest theme into the plot of *Religion and American Culture* (1990). Ahlstrom also appealed to this motif indirectly as he emphasized the cultural power of Protestantism, especially Puritanism. The basic image in this motif can be understood in political terms using the analogy of an election or a war, or it might be understood in economic terms using the language of class struggle and market economy. The plots that have been composed using this contest motif have varied, but most have cast religion in the United States in terms of a history of struggles for political, economic, or cultural control. Stories using this theme could highlight other actors—the economically displaced or the politically marginalized—but this choice of motif (as with the organic and frontier themes) has tended to lead to a focus on mainline Protestants.[23]

A fourth motif has been used in some form since the first surveys but, like the contest theme, has been especially prominent since the 1970s. It concerns identity and difference. This theme, or really a cluster of related ones, concerns the relations among entities in a field or, more narrowly, the unity and diversity of American religion. Convinced that earlier narratives overemphasized unity, narrators have tried to make a place for diversity while acknowledging that there has been some commonality too. The plots that draw on this motif tend to trace how America became so religiously diverse. The narratives differ in terms of how much diversity narrators find at the start of the story, but all weave their way toward, or back from, the "pluralistic" contemporary setting.

Authors have played with variations on this motif. It can be viewed abstractly in the mathematical terms of set theory as the relations among various sets. For me, the image lurking beneath the surface of some texts is that of a Venn diagram, representing the relations of overlapping sets in terms of identity and difference. Some narrators appeal directly or indirectly to other abstract spatial images, especially that of a center and a periphery. Sometimes narrators who also draw on the contest motif and focus on public power envision the field of American religion with a center constituted by the groups exerting the most public power and a periphery dotted with marginalized groups. The historian plots the peripheral groups in concentric circles, at varying distances from the center of public power. In turn, he or she classifies the characters as "insiders" or "outsiders."[24]

Narrators also employ this identity/difference motif by alluding to other metaphors—textile, musical, or aquatic. Julia Corbett, in her *Religion in America* (1990), refers to "America's religious fabric" to narrate diversity. She announces her plot in the introduction: "the rich fabric of American religious pluralism has been woven slowly." She makes clear as well that the pieces of cloth that constitute the larger fabric of diversity are sewn together with unifying threads, the separation of church and state and civil religion. In the introduction to her textbook, Albanese, who draws on the identity/difference motif, describes the relations between the "manyness" and "oneness" of American religion in musical terms. She compares American religious diversity to "the short notes of musical staccato, a series of sounds, touching each other but not necessarily blending." But those who listen to the symphony of American religious history hear another, unifying, musical theme sounded. That theme is expressed in civil religion, Public Protestantism, and "the larger cultural religion of the United States."[25]

One of the most popular formulations of the identity/difference motif appeals to the analogy of rivers. In this analogy, an American religious "mainstream" flows through the cultural landscape, its surface rippled by various swirling "currents" and by other "streams" merging and forking. This image dominates the narratives by Corbett and Marsden and appears in others. In some ways, this aquatic motif has been used since the first scholarly surveys. What has changed for most contemporary narrators is the width and character of the body of water. More recently, as Corbett emphasizes, many agree that Roman Catholicism and Judaism now flow in the mainstream.[26]

Still, in practice if not in principle, the identity/difference motif in most of its varied forms has tended to foreground white mainline Protestants and to shape plots that trace the rise and decline of Protestant cultural influence. In those surveys other quasi characters—for instance, Catholics or Mormons—must construct meaning and negotiate power in relation to Protestants. Whether narrators imagine Anglo-Protestantism as a center around which the peripheral groups situate themselves or as the mainstream from which the other bodies of water diverge, the point is the same.

These four influential motifs have led to plots that illumine some characters and events as they obscure others. My point here is not that these motifs and plots offer no insight into the religious past. They do. Our goal in this volume is not to displace these standard motifs and plots. For example, the contest motif—and the identity/difference