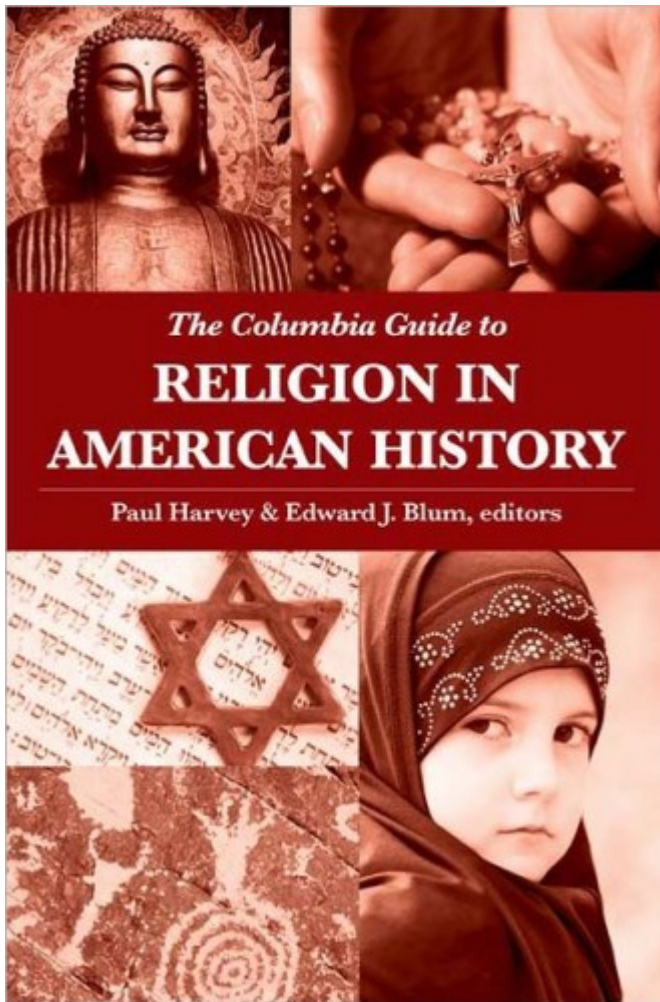


*The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, edited by Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum

reviewed by [Matthew Avery Sutton](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



## The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History

Edited by Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum  
Columbia University Press

There are probably few reference books that vacationers will drag down to the beach this summer. And though I make a living in academia, there aren't many

works of reference that I want to read from cover to cover. I love history because I love stories, storytelling and engrossing narratives—not because I’m taken with the facts, figures and dates that populate reference books. But once I agreed to review *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History* I had no choice but to crack the spine. I am glad I did.

The guide, edited by Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum—the former a highly respected and accomplished historian of American religion, the latter one of the rising stars in the profession—provides an excellent overview of many of the most important trends, topics and issues in American religious history.

Harvey and Blum open the book with a comprehensive introduction in which they explain how the field of American religious history, like most historical fields, has both grown substantially and become more fragmented in recent decades. There is no longer an overarching narrative that holds American religious history together. This has “left many readers and scholars searching for reliable narratives as well as resource texts,” Harvey and Blum write, and with this volume they aim to fill that need.

The editors suggest some major themes that characterize religion in the United States, including tolerance, intolerance, diversity and pluralism; the tension between religious freedom and repression; issues of race, ethnicity and gender; the relationship between elite religious leaders and laypeople; religion and politics; and national versus regional expressions of faith. These themes provide the foundation on which the rest of the book is built.

The authors of the 20 essays collected here approach their specific topics as well as the themes identified by Harvey and Blum from a variety of angles. As the editors explain, “We have made no attempt to impose artificial uniformity on a field that features fruitfully contending approaches. Rather we have let the differences be.” The book brings together the work of senior scholars, such as Mark Noll of Notre Dame, whose work has defined the contours of American religious history for decades, with the scholarship of recent recipients of Ph.D.s who are pushing the field forward in new ways, such as Brown assistant professor Linford Fisher.

Some of the essays address specific topics, such as theology or civil religion, and others discuss denominations or movements. Some are historiographical, focusing on the ways in which scholars have addressed a given issue over time. Blum’s essay

“Religion, Race, and African American Life,” for example, illustrates in clear and compelling fashion the complex history that gave rise to different interpretations of African-American religions. Other essays, such as Jane Smith’s perceptive “Islam in America,” provide a narrative overview of their subjects.

The disciplinary training of the contributors also results in some clear differences. Those who work primarily in history departments spend less time explaining the theoretical roots at the base of their essays, while those in religious studies, such as Jason Bivins in his essay “Religion and Politics,” tend to challenge basic assumptions about what religion is and what it is not.

Each essay is followed by a bibliography that highlights both classics on the topic and some of the newest work. The editors have also included a glossary and a large, comprehensive bibliography compiled by Randall Stephens. What sets this book apart from other reference guides, however, is that it also includes a filmography, a discography and a guide to online resources for further study in American religious history.

Harvey and Blum have done a great service in creating this readable, accessible overview of so many important topics. I may have to carry a reference book to the beach this summer.