

NEH Application Cover Sheet (FZ-256582)

Public Scholar Program

PROJECT DIRECTOR

Dr. Stephen Prothero

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Field of expertise: History of Religion

INSTITUTION

Boston University

Boston, MA 02215

APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *"Seeker Nation: How an Editor and His Authors Made America More Spiritual and Less Religious"*

Grant period: From 2017-09-01 to 2018-08-31

Project field(s): History of Religion; Cultural History; U.S. History

Description of project: Book-length study of Harper religion editor Eugene Exman and his authors focusing on their personal and professional contributions to today's the "spiritual but not religious" sensibility. In this project, which is based on a massive archive recently discovered in Exman's home, I hope to shed new light on how liberal Protestants responded to the "religious depression" of the 1930s, how they contributed to the postwar revival of the 1940s and 1950s, and how they bent the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s toward alternative spiritualities (including in Asia). Chapters focus on the back stories and the afterlives in American culture of such books as Bill Wilson's "Alcoholics Anonymous," Dorothy Day's "The Long Loneliness," Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Stride Toward Freedom," and Huston Smith's "The Religions of Man."

REFERENCE LETTERS

Thomas Tweed

Harold and Martha Welch Endowed Chair in American Studies

Notre Dame

ttweed@nd.edu

Julie Byrne

Monsignor Thomas J. Hartman Chair in Catholic Religious Studies

Hofstra University

Julie.E.Byrne@hofstra.edu

NEH Supplemental Information for Individuals

This form should be used by applicants to the NEH Fellowships, Fellowships for Advanced Social Science Research on Japan, Awards for Faculty, and Summer Stipends Programs.

Field of Project: Religion: History of Religion

Field of Project #2: History: Cultural History

Field of Project #3: History: U.S. History

Project Director Field of Study: Religion: History of Religion

The mailing address provided on the SF 424-Individual is for your ☐ work ☒ home

Institutional Affiliation

Are you affiliated with an institution? (If yes, provide information below.) ☒ Yes ☐ No

Institution Name: Boston University

Street 1: Department of Religion

Street 2: 145 Bay State Road

City: Boston

County: Suffolk

State: MA: Massachusetts

Province:

Country: USA: UNITED STATES

Zip / Postal Code: 02215

DUNS Number: (b) (4)

Employer/Taxpayer Identification Number (EIN/TIN): 148403439

Status: ☒ Senior Scholar ☐ Junior Scholar

Reference Letters

Reference 1

First Name:

Last Name:

Email:

Title:

Department Name:

Institution:

Reference 2

First Name:

Last Name:

Email:

Title:

Department Name:

Institution:

Nominating Official (Summer Stipends Applicants Only)

Are you exempt from nomination? If not, provide information below. ☐ Yes ☐ No

First Name:

Last Name:

Email:

Title:

Institution:

SEEKER NATION:
HOW AN EDITOR AND HIS AUTHORS MADE AMERICA MORE SPIRITUAL AND LESS RELIGIOUS
by Stephen Prothero

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

Two years ago an elderly neighbor invited me to her Cape Cod home to look at her library. There I learned that her father, Eugene Exman (1900-1975), had been Harper's religion editor for five decades—from 1928 until 1965. In his living room, there were books by civil rights icons (Martin Luther King Jr.), social scientists (H. Richard Niebuhr), ethicists (Reinhold Niebuhr), activists (Dorothy Day), pastors (Harry Emerson Fosdick), philosophers (Teilhard de Chardin), mystics (Howard Thurman), and novelists (Aldous Huxley), all published by Harper and many lovingly inscribed to their editor Eugene Exman. The collection also included works by Tillich, Barth, Buber, Heschel, and other theologians, all published, wrote Exman, "to make theological ideas relevant to laymen."

As a historian of U.S. religions, I was fascinated by the book collection—a 20-foot-long testimony to religious life in mid-20th-century America. But what thrilled me was the ephemera, including a note handwritten by Coretta Scott King tucked inside *Stride Toward Freedom* thanking Exman for "your contribution to the cause of justice, peace and brotherhood." "Are there any other papers?" I asked. Two years later, I found myself in possession of a massive accumulation of the professional and personal effects of the most consequential religion book editor in 20th century America.

When Exman joined Harper, he boldly reimagined its religion list, redirecting its gaze from theology to mysticism and from religion to spirituality. Rather than publishing Baptist sermons for Baptists or Methodist hymns for Methodists, he signed writers who could appeal to wide audiences, always in a non-sectarian voice and with an eye on religion in action. His division's credo was to "add to the wealth of religious literature irrespective of creedal origin, and aid in the cause of religion without proselytizing for any particular sect." Mindful of that mission, he edited hundreds of bestsellers in his half century in publishing. In the process, he popularized the credo of Harvard psychologist William James that the essence of religion lies in individual spiritual experience.

But Exman was more than an influential editor. He was also a self-described "seeker" who personally embodied the shift (or was it a jolt?) in twentieth-century American religion from relatively narrow denominational concerns to more expansive "seeker spiritualities." As a board member at Manhattan's Riverside Church, a close friend of its benefactor John D. Rockefeller Jr., and the confidant of its pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Exman was as mainline as a mainline Protestant could get. But like so many liberal Protestants of his time, his religious interests expanded rapidly, obliterating distinctions between the sacred and the secular, and Protestantism and other religions. Like Fosdick, his books accented spiritual experience and political action. They also incorporated the experiences of non-Christians. Religion, Fosdick wrote in an Exman-edited bestseller, "includes Christ and Buddha, Lao-tse and Mary Baker Eddy."

As a seventeen-year-old, Exman had an uncanny experience he would later refer to as "a divine invasion"—"a foretaste of the ecstasy the soul may enjoy after the death of the body." In adulthood, he took up the "hobby of collecting and cataloging saints" who might explain to him the mysteries of "that whose depth has no end." As a favor to his friend Bill Wilson, Exman

edited in 1938 early chapters of the “Big Book” of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which he called “the best modern testimony I know of the power of religion to save sinners.” In 1942, outside Los Angeles and amidst the horrors of World War II, he co-founded Trabuco College, a short-lived “un-denominational” experiment in communal living aimed at integrating prayer, meditation, and modern science. In 1950, he traveled to Africa to meet Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Schweitzer, who became his close friend. In 1951 in Rye, New York, he co-founded Wainwright House as an interfaith retreat center for U.N. members. In 1958, two years before Timothy Leary “turned on” to psychedelics at Harvard he participated (alongside a Broadway actress, a novelist, and a Jesuit priest) in a study aimed at uncovering the spiritual benefits of LSD. In 1961 (seven years before the Beatles) he went to India to sit at the feet of a Hindu guru.

A packrat according to his son-in-law, Exman saved far more than his extensive correspondence, which includes letters from Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Kennedy as well as Schweitzer and Huxley, Day and Thurman. He also saved annual datebooks, copies of his talks, notes of seminars and retreats, interview transcripts, photographs, dream journals, accounts of his LSD trip, notes of travels in Africa and Asia, edited manuscripts, and draft chapters of an uncompleted autobiography. To a historian of American religions, this is a treasure trove, and to have discovered it in a house I drive by nearly every day seems almost providential. But this archive is not just close at hand. It is almost tailor made for *me*.

My book *God Is Not One* (2010) was published by HarperOne, the successor to the publishing division Exman reinvented. In this book, I criticized the popular notion that all religions are different paths up the same mountain. Exman, who affirmed “the essential harmony of all religions,” was a key midwife for this view. He introduced many of its popularizers to one another, curated and interrogated their ideas, and shaped their manuscripts, including Huston Smith’s *The Religions of Man* (1958), into bestselling books.

In this project I analyze the personal and professional lives of “Exman and his circle.” I hope to shed new light on how liberal Protestants responded to the “religious depression” of the 1930s, how they contributed to the postwar revival of the 1940s and 1950s, and how they bent the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s toward alternative spiritualities (including in Asia).

My main goal, however, is to provide a genealogy of sorts for today’s “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR) demographic, which now accounts for roughly one out of five Americans. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow has observed, since the 1950s many Americans have gravitated from “dwelling” to “seeking.” This “seeker spirituality” is plain among Protestants, Catholics and Jews who populate meditation retreats and yoga classes, questing after experiences they cannot find at home. But it is most evident among the SBNR, who like Exman emphasize seeking over finding, experiences over doctrines, and happiness in this world over salvation in the next.

This alchemy—turning the straw of religion into the gold of spirituality—is nothing new, of course. Long before Lexington and Concord, New England Puritans were obsessed with the “second birth” that marked God’s elect. During the Industrial Revolution, Emerson and Thoreau met God not in church and scripture but in nature and the human heart. As historian Catherine Albanese has observed, throughout the course of U.S. history “metaphysicals” have coexisted alongside churchgoers. Still, there is something new afoot in a country where roughly a quarter are “nones” and *New Yorker* cartoons are set as often in yoga studios as in board rooms.

In this book, I hope to explain how this seeker nation came to pass. In the past, many scholars (myself included) plotted a course in U.S. religious history “from Protestantism to pluralism.”

My research suggests that this “pluralistic turn” was more an *outgrowth* of liberal Protestantism than a *rejection* of it. While virtually all of Exman’s authors were cosmopolitans open to experiencing the divine wherever it might appear, many were also liberal Protestants who, like Exman himself, were lifelong churchgoers. (In other words, they were spiritual *and* religious.) Over time, however, it became increasingly difficult for many to affirm both spirituality and religion. When a time for choosing came, many rejected (in the name of authentic “spirituality”) what they saw as the empty rituals of their synagogues and the hoary creeds of their churches.

Exman’s life lends force to the view that what many scholars have seen as the decline of mainline Protestantism can also be viewed as the diffusion into American culture of Protestant norms and organizational forms. What my graduate school mentor William Hutchison once described as “the modernist impulse in American Protestantism” did not die, it seems. It just traveled inward and eastward before injecting itself into American society, where it continues to live and breathe among seekers and sojourners who, in increasing numbers, define themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

WORK PLAN

I have read with care about a third of this vast archive. I have interviewed Exman’s son, son-in-law and some of his co-workers. This month I will deliver a conference paper on Exman and his closest Harper colleague, Margueritte Bro. My plan is to work through the rest of the archive during the first 2-3 months of the full-time, year-long award I am requesting. I will then travel to archives in Chicago (1 week) and California (3 weeks). The remaining 8-9 months I will spend producing a first draft of the book, which I currently imagine will use six Exman-edited bestsellers as framing devices to illustrate how he and his circle (of editors, publishers, writers, and friends) profoundly shaped modern American religion—by helping to bring into being today’s SBNR sensibility, and by bending “secularism” in a liberal Protestant direction. Each chapter will tell the back story of a book, including how it was acquired and evaluated in-house, followed by its afterlife in American history, religious and otherwise. The goal is a book on “Exman and his circle” that will uncover their collective contributions to a “seeker nation” that is somehow both more spiritual and more secular.

Introduction (see above)

Chapter 1: Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *As I See Religion* (1931)

In this bestseller, which draws deeply on William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Fosdick shifts his sights (and those of his readers) away from the stuff of pastors like himself (rituals, creeds, and theologies) toward what we now refer to as spirituality. In addition to his editor, Exman was Fosdick’s close friend and a longtime board member of his Riverside Church.

Chapter 2: Bill Wilson’s “Big Book” of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (1939)

Exman did not actually publish this book, but he read and commented on its first three chapters and suggested that his friend Bill Wilson publish the book himself. This “Big Book” went on to become the Bible for the AA movement, which Exman described as “the most exciting modern movement in religion.”

Chapter 3: Dorothy Day’s *The Long Loneliness* (1952)

Like many of his friends, Exman was critical of “organized” Catholicism, but his emphasis on individual religious experience drew him to medieval Catholic mystics (whom he republished) and, in this case, a Catholic social activist. Exman’s in-house reader for this bestselling

autobiography referred to the author as “religiously psychotic” and decried her “psychopathic mortification,” but to his credit Exman decided to publish what is now stands alongside Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain* as a classic of 20th-century American Catholicism.

Chapter 4: *The World of Albert Schweitzer: A Book of Photographs* (1955)

Exman met Schweitzer in 1950 in West Africa, where he became a convert Schweitzer’s principle of “Reverence for Life.” Exman, who also shared Schweitzer’s love of music, spoke and wrote regularly on his friend, including in the introduction to this bestselling book documenting Schweitzer’s work as a doctor among the poorest of the poor.

Chapter 5: Martin Luther King’s *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958)

Here the gaze expands beyond white Christianity to the black church. Exman traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, during the bus boycott and personally urged King to write his first book. He overcame opponents inside Harper opposed to his expansion of their list of “Negro” writing. This bestseller augmented King’s place in the civil rights movement and turned Exman into a lifelong supporter of civil rights.

Chapter 6: Huston Smith’s *The Religions of Man* (1958)

This book began with Smith’s visit to Trabuco College (co-founded by Exman in southern California) where he met Exman’s friend and author Gerald Heard and, through him, the British novelist Aldous Huxley. With sales of roughly 3 million copies, *The Religions of Man* had a massive influence on the field of Religious Studies, where it spread the Vedantist Hindu view that the world’s religions essentially the same—“different paths up the same mountain.”

COMPETENCIES, SKILLS AND ACCESS

I have written seven books and edited or co-edited three others. During the first half of my academic career, I wrote books for university presses on Asian religions in the United States. With *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), I started writing trade books for general audiences. My most widely read book is: *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (HarperOne, 2007), which landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list, thanks to a cover story in *Time* and an appearance with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

I have written for many newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, *Salon*, and *Politico*. I have been interviewed on dozens of NPR programs and on television on CNN, NBC, MSNBC, FOX, PBS, and *The Colbert Report*. I was the chief editorial consultant and one of the main on-air experts for “God in America” (2010), a six-hour WGBH-TV series on religion in American history. That work led to an invitation to serve as a Goldman Sachs Senior Fellow at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, where I organized two symposia on religion in U.S. history, advised curators on how to improve their collections in religion, and helped the NMAH director land a \$5 million grant from the Lilly Foundation for its first religion curator.

FINAL PRODUCT AND DISSEMINATION

This book project is under contract with HarperOne, with a due date in 2018 and a publication date in 2019. This trade publisher is known for expert marketing and publicity, so this book should be widely promoted on television, radio, and in social media.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES (by Exman or edited by him)

- Day, Dorothy. *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*. New York: Harper, 1952.
- Exman, Eugene. Various magazine articles and unpublished lectures.
- Fosdick, Harry Emerson. *As I See Religion*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932.
- Heard, Gerald. *Pain, Sex and Time: A New Outlook on Evolution and the Future of Man*. New York: Harper, 1939.
- Huxley, Aldous. *The Perennial Philosophy*. New York: Harper, 1945.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. New York: Harper, 1958.
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- Smith, Huston. *The Religions of Man*. New York: Harper, 1958.
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SECONDARY SOURCES

- Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
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- Hedstrom, Matthew. *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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- Lofton, Kathryn. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.
- Schmidt, Leigh E. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.
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- Taves, Ann. *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Taves, Ann. *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

RESUME

CURRENT AND PAST POSITIONS

Boston University, Dept. of Religion: Chair (2016-present; 2003-2008); Full Professor (2004-present); Associate Professor (2000-2004); Assistant Professor (1996-2000).
Georgia State University, Dept. of Philosophy (Religious Studies Program): Assistant Professor, 1990-1995.

EDUCATION

Harvard University: PhD, Study of Religion, June 1990; MA, Study of Religion, June 1986.
PhD Dissertation: "Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and the Construction of 'Protestant Buddhism.'"
Yale College: BA, *summa cum laude*, with distinction in American Studies, June 1982.

AWARDS AND HONORS

Goldman Sachs Senior Fellow, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, August 2012-May 2013. As a consultant, I also organized and moderated two NMAH symposia: "Religion in American History" (December 4-5, 2013) and "Religion in Early American History" (March 19-20, 2015).
Elected Member, American Society for the Study of Religion, elected in 2012.
Literary Lights of 2012, Associates of the Boston Public Library (awarded with Amy Chua, Mary Higgins Clark, Michael Korda, Siddhartha Mukherjee, and Isabel Wilkerson).
Quill Book Award in Religion/Spirituality for 2007 (for *Religious Literacy*). This book was also Listed among best non-fiction books of 2007 (*Washington Post*); best books of 2007 (Amazon.com); best books of 2007 (*Publishers Weekly*); top ten religion books of 2007 (*Booklist*); and editor's choice for 2007 (*New York Times Book Review*).
Kahn Award for best book by a Boston University faculty member (for *American Jesus*) 2004. This book was also named one of the best religion books of 2003 (*Publishers Weekly*).
Best First Book in the History of Religions, American Academy of Religion (for *The White Buddhist*), 1997.
Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities, supporting graduate work, 1984-1990.

PUBLICATIONS

How Liberals Win the Culture Wars (Even When They Lose Elections): The Battles that Define America from the Election of 1800 to Gay Marriage (New York: HarperOne, 2016).
The American Bible: How Our Words Unite, Divide, and Define a Nation (New York: HarperOne, 2012).
God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—And Why Their Differences Matter (New York: HarperOne, 2010). Also published in Australia/New Zealand by Penguin Australia and Black Inc. (as *God is Not One*); in Germany by Diederichs (as *Die neun Weltreligionen: Was sie eint, was sie trennt*); in the Netherlands by Prometheus (as *God is Niet Een: Overzicht van de Grootste Godsdiensten*); in Brazil (as *As Grandes Religioes do Mundo*); in France (as *Dieu N'est Pas Unique*). Translations also forthcoming in Russian (Eksmo) and in Chinese (Beijine MultiMillion Electronic Graphics % Info Ltd.).
Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't. New York: HarperOne, 2007. Also published in Japanese (as 宗教リテラシーアメリカを理解する上で知っておきたい宗教的教養).

A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America. Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Edited volume.

American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003. Also published in Korea (2016).

The Encyclopedia of American Religious History. Second edition, revised. New York: Facts on File, Inc. 2002. Co-author with Edward Queen II.

Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Co-edited with Thomas A. Tweed.

The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott. Religion in North America Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Also published in the Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series. Delhi, India: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997.

The Encyclopedia of American Religious History. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1996. Co-author with Gardiner Shattuck and Edward Queen II.

Invited lectures at: Harvard (Noble Lectures), Chautauqua Institution, National Museum of American History, University of California (Santa Barbara), Boston College, MIT, Wake Forest, Washington National Cathedral, White House, Bates, Colgate, Georgia Tech, National Security Agency, Hofstra, Colby, Library of Congress, Stanford, and many other colleges and universities.

Peer-reviewed articles in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Journal of Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, *Harvard Theological Review*.

OTHER REVELANT PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Technical Advisor, Inclusive America Project, a nonpartisan initiative devoted to improving interfaith interactions in U.S. civil society (moderated by David Gergen and Madeleine Albright), 2013, 2016.

Arthur Vinings Davis Fellow, Aspen Institute, 2016.

CNN blogger: academic expert at CNN's "Belief Blog," where I wrote hundreds of articles and opinion pieces focused on religion angles on the news, 2010-2013. Finalist for "Best Religion Commentary," Religion Newswriters Association (2011 and 2012).

Chief Editorial Consultant and on-air expert: "God in America," six-hour WGBH-TV series on religion in United States history (2010).

Mentor, Young Scholars in American Religion Program, Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis, 2003-2004.

Visiting Capps Professor: Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life, Department of Religion, University of California, Santa Barbara, spring semester, 2003.

Consultant for various awards, including the MacArthur Fellowship, the Grawemeyer Religion Award, the Heinz Awards, and ACLS and NEH fellowships (including the Public Scholar Program).

Television and radio appearances: "The Colbert Report" (for *God is Not One*), March 29, 2011 and June 14, 2010; "The Oprah Winfrey Show" (for *Religious Literacy*), April 6, 2007; "The Daily Show with John Stewart" (for *Religious Literacy*) March 20, 2007. Other television appearances on CNN, FOX, MSNBC, ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS. Hundreds of radio appearances on various NPR radio shows and other commercial radio stations.



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January 31, 2017

Dear Sir or Madam,

This letter will confirm that HarperOne has entered into a contract with Stephen Prothero for a book-length project on Harper editor Eugene Exman and his circle of authors who so profoundly shaped the religious landscape in the twentieth century. I am serving as the editor of this book.

Sincerely,

Michael G. Maudlin
Senior Vice President and Executive Editor
HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
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415.477.4450

12 February 2017

I have known Steve Prothero since 1987. Since then we have had many occasions to be in the same public forum, from the National Humanities Center consultation on religion in America in 1998 to the consultation with the Smithsonian's Museum of American History in 2013. I also have read all of his books. I feel confident in my judgments about him and his work. And this is what I think: because of his rare combination of historical erudition and lively writing, Steve has emerged as the most prolific and popularly influential scholar of U.S. religious history of his generation. And his new project, "Seeker Nation," is especially exciting because it promises to give him a chance to make a scholarly contribution that also will enjoy a wide readership. Let me say a bit about why I admire his work, and why this new project seems like a perfect fit.

Steve's work has ranged widely, and his books since 2003 (*American Jesus, Religious Literacy, God Is Not One, The American Bible, How Liberals Win the Cultural Wars*) have reached wide audiences, especially his *New York Times* best-selling volume on religious literacy in the U.S. But, as with this proposed new book, Steve also can write rich scholarly studies and volumes that appeal to both scholars and general readers. His first monograph won an award as best first book from the American Academy of Religion. It was a provocative study of Henry Steel Olcott, one of America's first Buddhist converts. That study of Olcott, who was cremated, led him to his second project, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America*. Along the way, Prothero co-edited (with two other junior scholars) an encyclopedia of American religious history, and co-edited a documentary history of America's encounter with Asian religions, which *Choice* named one of the best academic books that year.

Readers of Prothero's trade books, scholarly volumes, popular blogs, and newspaper editorials—as well as those who have seen him on television—will note that he communicates vividly and clearly. He writes as well as anyone in the field, and he doesn't know how to offer a timid claim or limp thesis. He provokes. And it these two patterns—vivid prose and provocative theses—that, I think, positions him well as he takes on his new project. The emerging argument of the new book, a cultural biography of one of the most influential editors of the middle decades of the twentieth century, promises to challenge what we thought we knew about U.S. religion, especially Protestantism, during the editorship of Exman from 1928 to 1965. The 100 boxes of exceptional sources he has found allow him an angle of vision that no one else has had. It is hard to think of a major religious figure in that period who did not have communication with Exman or, in some cases, significant editorial guidance from him—from Martin Luther King and Reinhold Niebuhr to Dorothy Day and Aldous Huxley. Even Bill Wilson, the author of *Alcohol Anonymous*' "Big Book," was indebted to that Harper editor, Protestant churchgoer, and spiritual seeker. Just getting access to these sources, the letters and ephemera, are an incredible opportunity for any scholar, but Prothero is remarkably well positioned to take advantage of that good fortune, since he understands both U.S. Christian traditions and Asian religions. By an interesting coincidence, his *God Is Not*

One, a survey of the world religions, was a self-conscious attempt to offer an updated account of Huston Smith's *Religions of Man*, and Smith's correspondence appears in this new archival find too.

Prothero is perfectly suited for this project. In fact, I can't think of any scholar who could do a better job with the materials that he has found or craft a more lively or persuasive argument about liberal Protestants and American culture in the twentieth century. And as he takes on the topic there is not much relevant scholarship to consider. There has been some attention to seekers in US culture but only one chapter (by Matthew Hedstrom) deals with this important Harper editor. So it also will be an original contribution to the scholarly literature.

And, with time off, he can do the research necessary to go through all those extraordinary sources, and craft the narrative. He is a very good bet: he does what he promises, and he does it well. He also makes deadlines. I hope you will award him the fellowship, so he can make this important contribution to the public understanding of America's religious past—and present.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas A. Tweed". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Thomas" and last name "Tweed" clearly legible.

Thomas A. Tweed
W. Harold and Martha Welch Professor of American Studies
Professor of History

February 24, 2017

Dear NEH Selection Committee,

I am pleased to write this letter recommending at the utmost level **Dr. Stephen Prothero**'s application for the NEH Public Scholar Program. Steve's innovative, exacting, and stirring scholarly work—successfully written for broad audiences—has made him the country's foremost public intellectual on American religion. His books have made an impact on the field of U.S. religious history and popular consciousness alike. "American Jesus," "religious literacy" and "God is not one" are not only snippets of his *Daily Show*-touted titles, but also phrases his colleagues use as short-hand for vanguard concepts among each other and their students. His book project on FSG publisher Eugene Exman as a harbinger and waymaker of religion in America as we know it today will similarly change the history books and fascinate readers of all backgrounds.

Considering current U.S. demographics, it's hard to overstate the size and speed of shift from belonging in religious institutions to unaffiliation and "seeking." In just two decades, the "seekers" or "spiritual-but-not-religious" folk have grown from a minority curiosity to the third-largest "faith group" in the U.S. I was so excited when Steve told me the nearly unbelievable story of discovering the Exman archives, not only because it is a once-in-a-lifetime find for Steve and our field, but also because in Steve's hands this will turn into a big book pinpointing the origins of the current "seeker" phenomenon. His unique intellectual path, career trajectory, and writing gifts mean that the Exman story will be told, deservedly, not as the biography of an elite publisher, but instead as a prism onto a whole culture. I might call it a cultural history of American selves, our "souls," our "spirits." This is the project for which Steve applies for the Public Scholars Program. I would be hard pressed to imagine a better candidate for a more promising project.

I have known Steve for twelve years, first in the Young Scholars in American Religion program (Center for Religion & American Culture, IUPUI) and then as a colleague in the subfield of US religion. Starting with our Indianapolis seminars, I have spent countless hours talking to him, virtually and in person. He is just the best of the best in terms of vision, acuity, and what I would call a sense of public mission about knowledge of religion. He has repeatedly discovered new topics or new angles and (seemingly effortlessly) translated them into approachable prose, whether in books or on CNN or in USA Today. Steve's interventions at various moments of U.S. "religion and media" issues repeatedly guide and reset the public conversation. This Exman book is, in a way, the ultimate "religion and media" topic right now.

Steve is madly focused and productive and will finish the manuscript in any time frame he promises to do so.

I know Steve would be deeply honored to be selected for the Public Scholars Program. And I trust that his important, high-profile, and likely bestselling book on Eugene Exman would redound the honor upon the NEH in full.

Please let me know if I can be of any further service in your process.

All my best,



Julie

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