Following the arrival of hundreds of Sikhs in Bellingham, Wash., in 1906, a minister opined (in a sermon reprinted around the region) that “at the present rate at which they are coming, we can no more Christianize them than we can put out hell by throwing snowballs into it.” America’s offer of asylum and refuge to the “tempest-tossed and persecuted of the earth,” he added, “does not imply that we should invite those people here in such hordes that we shall be swamped, inundated, despiritualized, and un-Americanized.”

These sentiments, and the violence that sometimes accompanied them, Peter Manseau reminds us, are part of America’s religious heritage. That said, Manseau claims as well...
that the willingness of Americans to reject old ways and embrace new ones “created over
time a nation unique in its ability to absorb and be built by those of different beliefs;
people who believed there were many gods, or none at all.”

In “One Nation, Under Gods,” Manseau, a Smithsonian fellow who holds a doctorate
from Georgetown University, examines the tension between the one and the many in a
wide-ranging series of anecdotes (some of them long forgotten) drawn from 500 years of
American history. They include the role of Jewish merchants on the island of St.
Eustatius in the American Revolution; the controversial sale of Thomas Jefferson’s
library, which, according to critics, was filled with blasphemous books, to the U.S.
government; the prophecies of Handsome Lake, a hereditary chief of the Seneca Indians;
the influence of “eastern religion” on Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau;
and the slave narrative, composed in Arabic, by Omar Ibn Said, that quoted extensively
from the Quran.

The fundamental propositions advanced in “One Nation, Under Gods” — non-Christian
faiths have often been met with hostility in America but have managed to survive and
thrive, with each of them enriched and “ennobled through moments of interaction and
transformation” in communities “built on the myth of religious uniformity” — are neither
new nor novel. Examples of religious discrimination, including the exclusion of Chinese
and Japanese immigrants to the United States, are, alas, all too familiar to students of
American history. On the other hand, historians have amassed ample evidence that “E
pluribus unum” is more than just an aspirational motto. And they’ve provided support for
the claim that for many Americans the “salad bowl” has replaced “the melting pot” as the
operative metaphor of group identity.

Nor does Manseau, who often flogs bigots and romanticizes religious “outsiders,”
adequately assess their impact. The theology of the Puritans, he writes, was “black and
white”; the faith of Indians was complex. Tituba, the slave who played a pivotal role in the
Salem witchcraft trials, “took control not only of her trial but of the entire community.”
Although the evidence is thin, Manseau maintains that the political principles of the
Iroquois Confederacy “remained part of the Revolutionary generation’s democratic DNA”
— and Handsome Lake’s visions influenced the Mormon doctrines of Joseph Smith.

Hinduism, Manseau suggests, “represented an alternative cultural framework to
suffragettes” that, “if implemented in its ideal form, would provide women with more
rights than they enjoyed in nineteenth-century America.” And John Starr Cooke, “a Zelig figure of the alternative spiritual yearnings” of the 1950s and ’60s, including the Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park and the attempt of anti-Vietnam War activists to “levitate” the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., “had remade the nation in his image.”

As Manseau points out, America often provides a niche for people “with faiths and practices” that are, at first, far outside the religious mainstream. He stretches, however, to claim that Americans, who have never elected an avowed atheist or polytheist to Congress, have willingly absorbed those who believe in many gods, or none at all. And, for good and ill, it is not always true that in America, “even the most far-out beliefs will eventually find their way in.”

The United States is a religiously diverse nation. Especially in comparison with other nations, and with our own past experiences, it is a rather tolerant one. Manseau is right to conclude by celebrating the resistance of members of less well-established faiths to attempts by those in power to impose creeds and consequences upon them. He would, it seems likely, agree that men and women from “dominant” faiths who strived to expand religious freedom deserve a shout-out as well.

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One Nation, Under Gods

A New American History

By Peter Manseau

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