Within in the American culture, spirituality gives life to new debates and new ideas on a constant and continuous basis. From global events that challenge the assumptions of the American mind to comments made by our political candidates, spirituality is not a force to be ignored. It is a force which shapes and guides the lives and decisions of a vast array of Americans, and it has set the course for our country.

In grade school we are taught that our country was founded on religious freedom, the right to hold and practice whatever religious belief and practice we choose. It is an ideological view of the pilgrims. What we do not learn until much later in life is that the pilgrims did indeed land upon these shores for religious freedom, but only for their religion. While we as Americans appear to honor our religious freedom, and even brag about it quite a bit, much of our culture is still founded on the limited religion of the pilgrims.

How does religious freedom and spirituality mix? What is spirituality? Are religion and spirituality one and the same, two sides to one coin? Or do they exist as distinct entities? Over the course of this semester, we delved deep into the spiritual landscape of America, which required us to define spirituality. As we discovered in our second to last class, this is not an easy process. For some, spirituality is directly linked to their religious beliefs, for others spirituality is a connection to the divine. Lastly, there are those that do not require a divine in the definition of spirituality.

Throughout the semester, and especially after attending the “Spirituality on Campus” conference, I considered, and still consider, spirituality to be the driving force of the betterment of self. Spirituality, as I have defined, includes an exploration of our inner landscape, an intention to reach our potential as human beings, and a quest to find a purpose and meaning to
our life. Each of these characteristics of spirituality can be reached through an established religious practice, giving spirituality and religion the ability to walk hand-in-hand. However, it is just as likely that an individual is unable to locate an established religion that allows them to explore the characteristics of spirituality as I have defined them. In these instances, one may be a spiritual individual and yet not affiliated with a religious institution.

How has spirituality, this drive for the betterment of self, come to exist within the American landscape? Spirituality arrived not with the pilgrims, but with the Native Americans. The drive to reach the human potential and a quest for meaning and purpose are evident in the teachings of the religious and spiritual practices of the Native American tribes. Unfortunately for the Native Americans, this view of spirit and the purpose of life on this earth contrasted greatly with the beliefs of the white settlers. This contrast and the desire to conquer and control, assimilate and dominate, began a long history of intolerance within the spiritual framework of America.

While coming to America to practice their beliefs without persecution, the pilgrims and future settlers were just as intolerant of differing views as those they had left behind. However, each generation of settlers brought with them new ideas and beliefs, and a pluralistic society was born. From Catholic to Protestant, Universalist to Humanist, deist to polytheist, America soon found itself saturated with religious diversity. Our founding fathers recognized the struggle of the pilgrims and their persecution, they recognized America’s growing diversity, and they wished to create a place where diversity and difference could thrive, where no one was persecuted for their beliefs, thoughts, and opinions, albeit with a very limited scope of who was allowed these rights. With a religious diversity among even our founding fathers, I am sure
that each wished, for very personal reasons, to maintain the ability to practice their beliefs within their new society.

The decision made by America’s founding fathers allowed the United States to age without an official state religion. While many would argue that Christianity, especially Protestantism, is America’s unofficial state religion, this lack of state religion has allowed the citizens of the United States to come into contact with, and explore, any number of spiritual paths. In fact, it is our drive for individual freedom that has allowed spirituality to flourish in America.

As we began to explore the frontier of nature and the West, Americans soon began to explore their internal frontier. At this point, spiritual exploration broke away from established religious practices and institutions, and movements such as the Transcendentalists began. With an emphasis on personal spirituality, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and their associates explored nature, eastern philosophy, and even science to build their own spiritual outlook. Spirituality, rather than religious institutions, informed their outlook, attitudes, and their actions. The Transcendentalists introduced to America, and made legitimate in the narrow American viewpoint, the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Bah’ai.

Today, the resurgence of spiritual exploration is in no small way indebted to the Transcendentalists. While Americans today feel they are introducing new concepts and practices, the practices of this new spiritual movement were all a part of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s counterculture spiritual force. Getting back to nature, exploring the religions of the east, and finding one’s own spiritual path are nothing new to the citizens of the United States.
Today our spiritual movement is often driven not by authors but celebrities. Celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey provide us with inspirational books, magazines, and talk shows, appealing to our desire to “live our best lives”. Other celebrities appeal to our sense of charity and good will in driving us to donate our time and money to foundations which seek to end world hunger, rebuild communities in New Orleans, or wipe out AIDS. Our political candidates navigate through a maze of possible offenses, being not too liberal for the fundamentalists and yet not too conservative for the secular.

And yet, even with this freedom to search for our own personal meaning, America is only religiously free on the surface. Muslim-Americans struggle daily with an inability to properly perform their prayers, often feeling the need to hide this practice from view of the public in fear of the intolerant reactions it may raise. Other citizens, those who do not follow an accepted mainstream religion, must worry about discrimination, harassment, and violence. These citizens must struggle with a society built on Christian privilege in order to minister to their sick, wed their friends and family, or bury their dead. As a consequence of openly practicing their spiritual beliefs, these individuals must fear the loss of friends, family, jobs, or even children.

Throughout this semester we have explored how the American search for and belief in individual freedom has allowed a nation to develop that is spiritually diverse, spiritually experimental, and one of the most religious nations in the world. The history of the spiritual movement in America is unknown too many of our citizens. This, and the lack of an understanding of what it truly means to be a religiously free society, has contributed to a
country that allows freedom from religion while still maintaining Christian privilege. It seems an oxymoron, but that is the spirituality of America.