I am in the process of co-writing a book on Religion and Political Identity in the United States with my colleague Andrew Murphy (Rutgers University). In this monograph we examine the interconnections between religious identity(ies) and American identity(ies) in light of the enormous demographic and cultural transformations that have taken place in American society over the past decades.

Identity politics is, of course, a well-traveled scholarly road, but the term’s most common usage in the literature tends not to focus on religion (rather, on race, gender, sexuality, and the like). This lack of attention to religion represents a remarkable gap given the role the religion has played and continues to play in shaping the political landscape in the United States. Our intent is to consider how religious beliefs and practices intersect with these other markers of identity so that we can better assess the present and future of religion and politics in the United States.

Next summer, I plan on working on two different chapters in this book – each of which explores the dynamic between different religious groups and the pursuit of – or determination to hold on to – political power and the capacity to define the boundaries of identity of not just the constituents of a given religious community, but also the nation more broadly. One of the chapters explores the changing status of two institutions that have long defined religious and political communities in the United States: the Catholic Church and the Black Church in America. For different reasons, the authority enjoyed by the religious leaders of these two institutions has been significantly diminished over the last twenty-five years.

In the Spring of 2012 I will be writing the part of this chapter that focuses on the Catholic Church, focusing especially on the changing demographics of American Catholics, the sex abuse scandal and the rise of Catholic lay organizations, and the dramatic efforts of American Bishops to reassert cultural and political authority by forcefully interjecting themselves in electoral politics. In the Summer of 2012, I will be working on the portion of this chapter that explores the Black Church. My focus will be on the evolving definition of the Black Church, the decline of the authoritative voice of the religious leaders of the Civil rights era, the influence and appeal of the gospel of wealth in the United States and the related shift from the focus on the “black community” towards a theological and political emphasis on individual responsibility.

As I conduct this research next summer, I will be working with Amanda Beggs (Junior, Politics major) who will be working on her own independent (and interdependent) research project on the theological strands of the Black Church: Black liberation theology and the prosperity gospel. Among the questions Amanda will be pursuing are if the legacy of the Civil Rights movement and the tradition of liberation theology has waned and the prosperity gospel tradition within the Black Church has now become the predominant strand – and if so how and why -- and what it suggests about the manner in which the Black Church helps define the racial and religious identity of African Americans at this moment in the history of the United States.
The second chapter I will be working on explores the similarities and differences between two “religious minorities” in the United States as they have traveled a path from religious and political outsiders to insiders: American Jews and the Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Both groups share the same narrative -- a chosen people search for and perhaps finding a promised land in the United States (and this Exodus narrative is also the overarching sacred story of the United States.) Both face ostracism from the predominant Christian American citizenry. Both are viewed with deep suspicion and thus turn inward. Both created – out of necessity and inclination – close knit and somewhat insular communities. Both then assimilate into the broader culture – and in so doing both influence the broader culture and are influenced by the broader culture. Both have a disproportionate presence in public service and politics. Of course, there are many differences (including, for example a religious community that grew by virtue of immigration as opposed to a religious community that grew by virtue of missionary work and a high birth rate) but the commonalities are quite striking and I think have much to teach us about the constitution of religious and political identity.

As I conduct this research next summer, I will be working with Victoria Gray (Sophomore, Politics). Tori has an abiding interest in the relationship between theology and religious identity and she is particularly keen on studying the evolution of the relationship between American Jews and mainline Christianity and again the relationship between the LDS church and evangelical Christians.