Sonoma State University generously granted me a sabbatical for Fall 2012, which I am grateful to report was a success. My timetable was a bit ambitious, as I had projected to complete my book, *The Religion of Democracy: The American Reformation and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (forthcoming from Penguin Press), before spring semester began, but I made a tremendous amount of progress and my editor was pleased enough to be lenient with the deadline. I am just now in the last stages of finishing the front and back matter for the book.

During the fall I spent every day at my desk. I finished a chapter on William James (1842-1910), the philosopher whose work first got me started on this project well over a decade ago. My question then was “what kind of religion was James so keen to justify for the modern age?” He was never a Christian, and of the many works of scholarship about him no one had seemed to understand what religion meant for him. Answering that question took me back to the eighteenth century and across the nineteenth, so when I got to this chapter I got to the heart of the book, the chapter on which the most archival research had been expended. I was able to show how he took the basic terms of “practical Christianity,” the key term from the previous chapter, and turned them into pragmatism, or “practical idealism.” The turn from liberal Christianity to post-Christian religious liberalism is one of the most essential turns in modern history, and it is one that has been covered nowhere before.

The next chapter I wrote on my sabbatical is on Thomas Davidson (1840-1900), an independent intellectual who emigrated to the U.S. from Scotland and who was immensely famous and influential in his lifetime but has never received significant scholarly treatment before. In this chapter I introduce a new key term, the “liberal paradox,” in which the liberal commitment to open-mindedness clashes with the liberal commitment to knowledge acquisition, raising questions of elitism and infighting in their communities of discourse. As Davidson moved through successive attempts to realize the liberal ideal of “freedom and fellowship,” highlighted by his summer school in the Adirondack mountains of New York, he became aware of the impact of second-wave industrialism on immigrants, who made up his final educational endeavor and highest achievement, the Breadwinners College of the Lower East Side.

The last chapter I wrote on sabbatical is the penultimate chapter in the book. The central figure there is William Mackintire Salter (1853-1931), a brother-in-law of William James and an important early leader in the Society for Ethical Culture, a religion of ethics that exemplifies practical idealism. His involvement with the Haymarket Affair, labor relations, free love, and Native American rights shows how the liberal commitment to individual freedom and self-determination—moral agency—drove not only the earlier liberals’ commitment to limited government but also the modern liberal demand that government curb the power of corporations to exploit workers.

It was absolutely essential for the complexity of these arguments to be able to stay at it day after day without fielding all the external stimuli that the semester brings; it took me all of spring semester to finish the last chapter. I also could feel the difference in my teaching when I returned, not only because I taught “the American Creed” course I mentioned in my sabbatical application, but also because the tools I developed to become a more effective writer I could immediately pass along to my students. Of course my expectations for their
work are very different from my expectations for my own, but writing is writing, and it is difficult, and it is the most important skill I teach because it will distinguish students who learn it from their competitors who have not become capable crafters of language and ideas. Seeing my students catch the enthusiasm for the challenge of writing is among the sweetest fruits of this sabbatical gift.