

# From Diversity To Pluralism

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All of America's diversity, old and new, does not add up to pluralism. "Pluralism" and "diversity" are sometimes used as if they were synonyms, but diversity is just plurality, plain and simple — splendid, colorful, perhaps threatening. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that plurality. On the same street in Silver Spring, Maryland the Vietnamese Catholic church, the Cambodian Buddhist temple, the Ukrainian Orthodox church, the Muslim Community Center, the Disciples of Christ church and the Mangal Mandir Hindu temple are all located in the same neighborhood. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship with one another it may not be an instance of pluralism.

Pluralism is only one of the possible responses to this diversity. Some people may feel threatened by diversity, or even hostile to it. Throughout American history there have been groups that have expressed prejudice and intolerance toward newcomers of other religions and cultures. Other people may look forward to the day when all these differences fade into the landscape of a predominantly Christian culture. Clearly the pluralism that would engage people of different faiths and cultures in the creation of a common society is not a "given," but an achievement.

From the historical perspective, the terms "exclusion," "assimilation," and "pluralism" suggest three different ways in which Americans have approached this widening cultural and religious diversity. For exclusionists, the answer to the tumultuous influx of cultural and religious diversity that seemed to threaten the very core civilization of America was to close the door, especially against the entry of the "alien," whether Asians, Catholics, or Jews. For assimilationists, like those who envisioned America as a "melting pot," the invitation to new immigrants was to come, but leave your differences and angularities behind as quickly as possible. Come and be like us, come and conform to a predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture. For the pluralists, like Horace Kallen in the early twentieth century, the American promise was to come as you are, with all your differences and angularities, pledged only to the common civic demands of American citizenship. Come and be yourself, contributing in your distinctive way to the "orchestra" of American civilization.

In today's discussion of America's religious and cultural diversity, there are echoes of these voices of the past. America's new religious diversity has produced faultlines, those cracks that indicate deep fractures and divisions. Stereotypes and prejudice have old and new forms as they are experienced by immigrant Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim communities. There are encounters, sometimes hostile encounters, over "zoning" and "traffic" as new religious communities move into the neighborhood. They are often legitimate concerns, but they are also ways of expressing fear and uncertainty about newcomers in the community. Unfortunately, there have also been incidents of vandalism and arson directed against the religious centers of newcomers.

But America's religious diversity has also produced a new period of bridge-building, as diverse religious communities build unprecedented relationships with one another. A church and a mosque buy property together and build side by side in the San Francisco area. Councils of churches and synagogues gradually include mosques and temples, becoming interfaith councils. Today, they are beginning to constitute a new interreligious infrastructure in America's cities and

towns. There are interfaith dialogues, interfaith coalitions to fight hunger and homelessness, and interfaith Thanksgiving services. In school boards, there are real encounters, often heated, over issues of the proper role of religion in the public schools.

Today, as in every era, Americans are appropriating anew the meaning of “We, the people of the United States of America. . . .” What does it mean to say “we” in a multireligious America? How do “we” relate to one another, when that “we” includes Buddhist Americans, like the Hawaiian born Buddhist astronaut who died on the Challenger, Muslim Americans, like the mayor of a small town in Texas, and Sikh Americans, like the research scientist in Fairfax, Virginia. What, then, is pluralism?

First, pluralism is not the sheer fact of plurality or diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity. One can be an observer of diversity. One can “celebrate diversity,” as the cliché goes. Or one can be critical of it or threatened by it. But real pluralism requires participation, engagement. Diversity can and often has meant isolation and the creation of virtual ghettos of religion and sub-culture with little traffic between them. The dynamic of pluralism, however, is one of meeting, exchange, and two-way traffic. Kallen’s analogy of the orchestra, sounding together, may be a good one. But as Kallen was well aware, it is always an unfinished symphony. The music, perhaps more like jazz, depends upon having an ear always attuned to the genius of the other players.

Second, pluralism is more than the mere tolerance of differences; it requires some knowledge of our differences. There is no question that tolerance is important, but tolerance by itself may be a deceptive virtue. Sometimes an attitude of tolerance may stand in the way of engagement. Tolerance does not require people to know anything at all about one another. As a result, tolerance can let us harbor all the stereotypes and half-truths that we want to believe about our neighbors. Tolerance does little to remove our ignorance of one another. Tolerance is definitely important, but it is probably too thin a foundation for a society as religiously diverse and complex as that of America.

Third, pluralism is not simply relativism, but makes room for real and different religious commitments. Some people are wary of the language of pluralism, insisting that it effectively waters down one’s own religious beliefs by acknowledging that others believe differently. Some mistakenly think that a pluralist perspective assumes that there is no real difference among various religious traditions and their values. On the contrary, the encounter of a pluralist society is the encounter of real commitments and real differences. Pluralism does not require relinquishing the distinctiveness of one’s own tradition of faith to reach the “lowest common denominator.” In the public square of a pluralist society, commitments are not left at the door. Rather, pluralism invites people of every faith or of none to be themselves, with all their particularities, and yet to be engaged in creating a civil society, through the critical and self-critical encounter with one another. Pluralism is a process of creating a society by acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences.

Fourth, pluralism in America is clearly based on the common ground rules of the First Amendment to the Constitution: “no establishment” of religion and the “free exercise” of religion. The vigorous encounter of a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement

on matters of conscience and faith, but achieving a vigorous context of discussion and relationship. E Pluribus Unum, “out of many, one,” envisions one people, a common sense of a civic “we,” but not one religion, one faith, one conscience. Unum does not mean uniformity. Perhaps the most valuable thing people of many faiths have in common is their commitment to a society based on the give and take of the civil dialogue at a common table.

Fifth, pluralism requires the nurturing of constructive dialogue, revealing both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree with one another. The process of public discussion will inevitably reveal both areas of agreement and of disagreement. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table -- with one’s commitments. Discovering where the metaphorical “tables” are in American society and encouraging a climate of dialogue is foundational for pluralism.

Where are those public spaces, those “tables” where people of various religious traditions and none meet in American society? They are certainly in neighborhoods and community organizations, schools and colleges, legislatures and courts, zoning boards and planning commissions, interfaith councils and interfaith coalitions, chaplaincies and hospitals. In every one of these areas of public life, Americans are now facing new questions, new challenges, and new tensions in appropriating a more complex sense of who “we” now are.

—*Diana L. Eck*

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## **Study Questions for “From Diversity to Pluralism”**

1. How would you define pluralism, in your own words?
2. How is pluralism different from simply tolerating those of different religious backgrounds?
3. What are the public spaces, the “tables” where people of different backgrounds meet in your society?