From Diversity to Pluralism

Summary: *Pluralism is a response to diversity that consists in learning about meaningful differences between different cultures and identities; engaging with different cultures and identities in sites where open dialogue is possible; preserving distinct religious commitments; and looking to the First Amendment as the foundation of American pluralism. For Christians as members of the dominant American religion, pluralism requires intentional effort to look beyond their own experiences; for all citizens, pluralism is possible in schools, courts, hospitals, and neighborhoods.*

All of America's diversity, old and new, does not add up to pluralism. "Pluralism" and "diversity" are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity. For example, on the same street in Silver Spring, Maryland are a Vietnamese Catholic church, a Cambodian Buddhist temple, a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a Muslim Community Center, a Hispanic First Church of God, and a Hindu temple. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship among the different groups it may not be an instance of pluralism.

Pluralism is only one of the possible responses to this new diversity. Some people may feel threatened by diversity, or even hostile to it. Others may look forward to the day when all differences fade into the landscape of a predominantly Christian culture. For those who welcome the new diversity, creating a workable pluralism will mean engaging people of different faiths and cultures in the creation of a common society. Pluralism is not a foregone conclusion, but an achievement.

From a historical perspective, the terms "exclusion," "assimilation," and "pluralism" suggest three different ways Americans have approached this widening cultural and religious diversity. The exclusionist answer to the tumultuous influx of cultural and religious diversity that seemed to threaten the very core of American civilization was to close the door, particularly to "aliens"—whether Asians, Catholics, or Jews. Assimilationists, like those who envisioned America as a "melting pot," invited new immigrants to come, but to leave their differences and particularities behind as quickly as possible. The message was: come and be like us, come and conform to a predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture. For pluralists, like Horace Kallen in the early 20th century, the American promise to immigrants was: come as you are, with all your differences and particularities, pledging only to the common civic demands of American citizenship. Come and be yourself, contributing in your distinctive way to the "orchestra" of American civilization.

Today's discussion of America's religious and cultural diversity echoes these voices of the past. America's new religious diversity has produced fault lines, the cracks that indicate deep fractures and divisions. As experienced by immigrant Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or Muslim communities, stereotypes and prejudice have taken both old and new forms. There are encounters—at times hostile—over zoning and traffic, as new religious communities move into the neighborhood. Though often legitimate concerns, these also express fear and uncertainty about newcomers in the community. Unfortunately, incidents of vandalism, arson, and even physical violence have also sometimes been directed against these new religious centers and the communities that call them home. The Council on American-Islamic Relations, for instance, reported a 17% increase in anti-Muslim bias incidents between 2016 and 2017. Islamophobia is one form of religious bias coupled with racism and xenophobia. This was the case in 2010 when a Florida pastor made international news by threatening to burn a Qur'an to mark the 10th anniversary of 9/11, an action he carried out in 2011 and 2012.

But America's religious diversity has also produced a new period of bridge-building, as diverse religious communities foster unprecedented relationships with one another. In Omaha, Nebraska Christians, Jews, and Muslims are building a "tri-faith" campus that will include a church, a synagogue, a mosque, and an interfaith community center. Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras have gradually joined councils of churches, synagogues, and mosques. The interfaith infrastructure of America's cities and towns is strengthened with dialogue, congregational partnerships, coalitions to fight hunger and homelessness, and interfaith Thanksgiving services. On school boards, there are productive encounters over religion's proper role 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 "we" mean 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 a small town Texas mayor, and Sikh Americans, like a research scientist in Fairfax, Virginia? What exactly is pluralism?

First, pluralism is not the sheer fact of diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity. One can be an observer of diversity. One can "celebrate diversity," as the cliché goes. One can be critical of it or threatened by it. But real pluralism requires participation and engagement. Diversity can and often has meant isolation—the creation of virtual ghettos of religions and sub-cultures 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, the symphony remains unfinished. The music of America's cultures, 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 knowledge of them. Tolerance, while certainly important, may be a deceptive virtue by itself, perhaps even standing in the way of engagement. Tolerance does not require people to know anything about one another, and so can let us harbor all the stereotypes and half-truths we want to believe about our neighbors. Tolerance is certainly important, but it does little to remove our ignorance of one another. It is too thin a foundation for a society as religiously diverse and complex as America's.

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 a pluralist perspective assumes that there are no differences among various religious traditions and their values. However, in reality, the encounter of a pluralist society is one of genuine 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, but invited in. People of every faith or of none can be themselves, with all their particularities, while engaging in the creation of a civil society. Pluralism is the process of creating a society through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, 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 on achieving something far more valuable: the relationship of ongoing debate and discussion. *E Pluribus Unum*, "out of many, one," envisions one people, a common sense of a civic "we," but not one religion, one faith, or one conscience; *unum* does not mean uniformity. Perhaps the most valuable common bond people of many faiths have is their mutual commitment to a society based on the give and take of civil dialogue at a common table.

Fifth, pluralism requires the nurturing of constructive dialogue to reveal both common understandings and real differences. Not everyone at the "table" will agree with one another; the process of public dialogue will inevitably reveal areas of disagreement as well. Pluralism involves the commitment to be at the table—with one's beliefs. Discovering where these "tables" are in American society and encouraging a climate conducive to dialogue is critically important for the flourishing of a civil society.

So where are those public spaces, those "tables" where people of various traditions and beliefs meet in American society? In neighborhoods and community organizations, schools and colleges, legislatures and courts, zoning boards and planning commissions, interfaith councils and 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" are now.

One of the institutions where a new orientation toward pluralism has been most visible, and for some most controversial, is the Christian church. No doubt, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen the resurgence of a strong exclusivist Christianity in some churches, often coupled with a nationalistic impulse that attacks other traditions as "un-American."

But there has also been a concurrent re-examination of the relation of Christianity to other religions that has been strong, positive, and biblically-based. The Roman Catholic Church and most of the major Protestant denominations have given new emphasis to interfaith dialogue as essential to the relation of Christians to people of other faiths. Documents like the Catholic *Nostra Aetate,* the Presbyterian "Interfaith Relations Denominational Principles and Policies," and the United Methodist "Guidelines for Interreligious Partnerships" provide a new sense of direction for Christians seeking to be good neighbors in a multi-religious society. Meanwhile, the National Council of Churches' Interfaith Relations initiative works with member churches, Protestant and Orthodox, as well as with Catholic partners to support interfaith understanding and action.

Outside of churches, other communities and spaces such as schools, courts, hospitals, and neighborhoods have worked to accommodate diversity and facilitate pluralism. The bounds of engagement between religions and other institutions, and between different religious traditions in the United States, are constantly renegotiated.