

Notes for Talks and Discussions in Indonesia
A New Religious America: The Challenges of Religious Pluralism

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Diana L. Eck
Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies
Director of the Pluralism Project¹
Harvard University

I have not been to Indonesia since the early 1980s, so it is a great pleasure to return, to learn more about this country, a multireligious democracy facing many of the challenges that other nations, including my own, are facing today. My own academic work began with the study of the religious traditions of India and with years of study at Banaras Hindu University. What interests me about India is that it is a complex, multireligious society that poses, in a way, the questions of religious diversity and the challenges of pluralism that the whole world faces today. I did not imagine when I first studied in India in the 1960s and 1970s that I would, by the 1990s, be studying these same issues in my own country, in the United States. I did not imagine that many of my own students at Harvard University would be the children of new immigrants –Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh Americans.

Indonesia, of course, shares the challenges of religious pluralism that both India and America face. We are all multireligious democracies with strong religious majorities – Indonesia more than 80% Muslim, American more than 80% Christian, and India more than 80% Hindu. And our co-religionists are all minorities in one another's cultures. The question of how to shape a strong, vibrant society that respects and engages religious difference is the great question of our time and our world. India, Indonesia, and America, for better and worse, will all provide models for thinking about this question, and our grandchildren will reap the results.

My book, newly translated into Indonesian, is called *A New Religious America*. I want to speak about this book as a way to start our conversation. I will ask four questions:

1. What is “new” about religious America today?
2. What does America's Constitutional commitment to religious freedom mean today in this new context?
3. What does America's motto, “Out of Many, One” mean today in this new context?
4. What do we mean by Pluralism?

Throughout, I want to give you, as best I can, something of a portrait of Muslim communities in America. Muslims are America's largest new minority religious community –internally diverse, coming from all over the world, active in building educational institutions and mosques, beleaguered by both the violence of Muslim

¹ <http://www.pluralism.org>

extremist movements abroad and the relative ignorance of Islam at home. I will look forward to your observations and questions.

1. What is New About Religious America?

The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate highway. A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. A Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery with a hint of a Southeast Asian roofline is set in the farmlands south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In suburban Fremont, California, flags fly from the golden domes of a new Sikh *gurdwara* on Hillside Terrace, now renamed Gurdwara Terrace.

The religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past forty years, but most Americans have not yet begun to see the dimensions and scope of that change -- so gradual has it been, and yet so colossal. At first, the Hindu temple might be in a former convenience store in Sunnyvale, California or in a former church in Minneapolis. The mosque might be in a former U Haul office in Pawtucket Rhode Island, in a gymnasium in Oklahoma City, in a transformed bowling alley in Hartford, Connecticut. The Vietnamese Buddhist temple might be in a two-car garage in Claremont, California. The simple home looks like everything other house on the street --at least until Sundays, when hundreds of people gather in the driveway and the garage door goes up, revealing an elaborate altar with its images of the Buddha. For the most part, one could drive right by these centers and not notice anything new at all. By now, however, there are also the highly visible landmark temples and mosques that have changed the American religious landscape forever. Not all Americans have seen the Toledo mosque or the Nashville temple, but they will see places like them, if they keep their eyes open. They are the architectural signs of a new religious America, and they are everywhere. Even this summer, in 2005, we have seen a great many new beginning: the opening of America's largest mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, the opening of new Islamic Centers in Bowling Green, Kentucky and Monterey, California, the opening of a new Ismaili Jamatkhana in Plano, Texas, a suburb of Dallas.

This is not the image of religious America that people in many parts of the world hold today. The U.S. is identified largely with its Christian heritage, and in some cases a very conservative, politicized, and mission-minded right-wing Christianity at that. Or the U.S. is seen as a nation of Christians and Jews. Or, for some, America is seen as a largely secular nation. Indeed, even in the United States, many Americans to whom I speak are surprised to learn of the 1400 American mosques and Islamic centers, surprised to find that there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians and about as many Muslims as there are Jews, that is, between five and seven million. Even in America people are astonished to learn that Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world, with a Buddhist population spanning the whole range of the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to Korea, along with a multitude of native-born American Buddhists. They know that many of our internists, surgeons, and nurses are of Indian origin, but we have not stopped to consider that they too have a religious life, that they might pause in the morning for few minutes' prayer at an altar in the family room of their home, that they might bring fruits and flowers to the local Shiva-Vishnu Temple on the weekend. They

are well aware of Latino immigration from Mexico and Central and South America and of the large Spanish speaking population of our cities, and yet even today, many Americans may not readily recognize what a profound impact this is having on American Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, from hymnody to festivals.

All this began with the "new immigration," spurred by the 1965 immigration act, as people from all over the world came to America and became citizens. With them have come the religious traditions of the world --Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Zoroastrian, African and Afro-Caribbean. The Pluralism Project, which I began at Harvard University, has been documenting this new religious America for over a decade now. [See <http://www.pluralism.org>] We have asked three kinds of questions: What is the range of religious communities now present in America's cities and towns? How are these traditions changing in the American context? And how is America changing as we begin to take our new religious diversity seriously?

Historians will tell us that America has always been a land of many religions. There was a vast, textured pluralism already here in the life-ways of the Native Peoples -- even before the European settlers arrived. The wide diversity of Native religious practices continues today, from the Piscataway of Maryland to the Black feet of Montana. The people who came as immigrants across the Atlantic from Europe also had diverse religious traditions --Spanish and French Catholics, British Anglicans and Quakers, Sephardic Jews, and Dutch Reform Christians. Many of the West Africans brought to America with the slave trade were Muslims. The Chinese and Japanese who came to seek their fortune in the mines and fields of the West brought with them a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions. Eastern European Jews, and Irish and Italian Catholics also arrived in force in the nineteenth century. Both Christian and Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East. Punjabis from Northwest India came in the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of them were Sikhs who settled in the Central and Imperial Valleys of California, built America's first gurdwaras, and intermarried with Mexican women, creating a rich Sikh-Spanish sub-culture. The stories of all these peoples are an important part of America's immigration history.

The immigrants of the last four decades, however, have expanded the diversity of American religious life dramatically. Buddhists have come from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Korea; Hindus from India, East Africa, and Trinidad; Muslims from India, Pakistan and Bangla Desh, from Indonesia, the Middle East, and Nigeria; Sikhs and Jains have also come from India, and Zoroastrians from both India and Iran. Immigrants from Haiti and Cuba have brought Afro-Caribbean traditions, blending both African and Catholic symbols and images. New Jewish immigrants have come from Russia and the Ukraine, and the internal diversity of American Judaism is greater than ever before. The face of American Christianity has also changed with large Latino, Filipino, and Vietnamese Catholic communities, Chinese, Haitian, and Brazilian Pentecostal communities, Korean Presbyterians and Egyptian Copts. And some of these immigrants, to be sure, would also describe themselves as secular. Some have had quite enough of the dominance, even the oppression, of religion in their home countries; they

are relieved to be in a society that recognizes not only the freedom of religion, but the freedom *not* to be religious should they so choose. These new immigrants have made America's ethnic and racial composition more complex and varied, even as they have magnified the reality of America's religious diversity.

How did this happen, you might ask? On July 4, 1965, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed a new Immigration Act into law at the base of the Statue of Liberty. America's doors were opened to immigrants from all over the world. This had not always been the case. Since 1924, an extremely restrictive quota system had virtually cut off all immigration, and it is no secret that entry from Asia had always been extremely restrictive, beginning with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The scope of "Asian exclusion" expanded decade after decade to exclude Japanese, Koreans, and other "Asiatics" as well. Asian-born immigrants could not become citizens, argued the Supreme Court, in the case of Bhagat Singh Thind in the 1920s. Thind was a Sikh, a naturalized citizen, who had served with the American army in World War I. In 1923, he was stripped of his citizenship. The 1924 immigration law barred from immigration anyone ineligible for citizenship, and that meant all Asians.

The 1965 Immigration Act was linked in spirit to the Civil Rights Act passed just a year earlier in 1964. As Americans became critically aware of our nation's deep structures of racism, we also saw that race discrimination continued to shape immigration law, excluding people from what was then called the "Asia-Pacific triangle." Early in his term, President John F. Kennedy prepared legislation to "eliminate discrimination between peoples and nations on a basis that is unrelated to any contribution immigrants can make and is inconsistent with our traditions of welcome."² Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, observed, "As we are working to remove the vestiges of racism from our public life, we cannot maintain racism as the cornerstone of our immigration laws."

So began a new era of immigration, and a new, complex, and vivid chapter in America's religious life. America is still awakening to and struggling with the dimensions of this new reality. The 2000 census revealed that more than 10% of Americans today were born somewhere else. The largest percentage of new immigrants is from Asia and Latin America.

Very often when I speak to American audiences today, in 2005, I try to make clear that the so-called "Islamic world" is not somewhere else, in some other part of the world. No indeed, the United States is part of the Muslim world. Chicago with its seventy mosques, half a million Muslims, and its Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, is part of the Muslim world. Next weekend, America's Labor Day Weekend, in Chicago, the Islamic Society of North America will hold its annual convention. Some 30,000 Muslims will participate, making this one of America's largest annual conventions. The banner theme for the whole meeting is "Muslims in North America: Challenges and the Road Ahead." They will address the question, "Pluralism: Providential or Problematic. Other topics include Spousal Relations and Domestic Abuse, Countering Islamophobia and Defamation, Muslims and Public Policy, Women and Men in American Mosques, Muslim Responses to the Tsunami Disaster. Interfaith Relations, They will

² John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 107.

discuss the recent Fiqh Council of North America's *fatwa* against terrorism and the responsibility of American Muslim communities to understand and act upon "the twin scourges of religious extremism and terrorism." They will have an art exhibit, a book fair, and a basketball tournament. A convention like this is a public, open, statement of what I mean by a "New Religious America."

2. What does America's Constitutional commitment to religious freedom mean today in this new context?

The diversity of religious life as today found in the U.S. goes hand in hand with a constitutional commitment to religious freedom, freedom of conscience. There is no question that many of the founders of the American republic were Christians, but they were determined to create a form of government that would not be dominated by their own faith or any other. In Europe, the state had sponsored and established religious institutions. And in Europe, the wars of religion had raged for centuries. America's 18th century founders like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison argued against state support for religion, and did so out of religious conviction. They were not "secular," a term that would be an inaccurate anachronism. They were guided by deep religious sensibilities to insist on the "free exercise" of religion. In his 1785 "Memorial and Remonstrance," James Madison argued that the State is not a competent judge of religious truth and has no business interfering in matters of religion. He wrote, "Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess, and to observe the religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us." ³

For Madison and for many of the founders, the argument for the non-establishment of religion was theologically grounded. It was certainly not an argument between believers and unbelievers, or between religion and what we now call "secularism." Rather, both sides grounded their views in fundamentally religious affirmations: In standing for religious freedom we honor the very freedom ordained by God. It is little wonder that American Muslims, who affirm with the Qur'an that there should be no coercion in religion, should find this in harmony with the American founding fathers. The 1786 Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, which became a model for the Constitutional approach to the matter, insists "that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions" and resolves that "no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever. . . nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion."⁴

The principles of the separation of church and state and the protection of religious freedom that were enshrined in the Bill of Rights in 1791, the very first article of the "Bill of

³ James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance," *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, (Philadelphia: 1867), I:162 ff.

⁴ "An Act for establishing Religious Liberty," in *The Life of Thomas Jefferson in Three Volumes*, ed. Henry A. Randall (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1858), pp.31-48.

Rights," consisted of just sixteen powerful words: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Those who wrote these words could not have imagined the religious diversity of America today with our Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu citizens. Nonetheless, the sturdy principles of free-exercise of religion and the non-establishment of religion have stood the test of time as America's religious diversity has broadened. America's rich religious pluralism today is a direct result of our commitment to religious freedom. America's secular humanist traditions are also a product of the freedom of conscience built into the Constitutional foundations. Freedom of religion, is also freedom *from* religion of any sort.

Despite the "disestablishment" of various Protestant churches in the states of the new republic, Christianity continued to form the dominant ethos of both the public and private spheres of American life. In a sense, it became stronger precisely because the churches no longer had any support from public tax coffers; they had to compete with one another, just as businesses compete with one another. One of the consequences of America's approach to religious freedom was the proliferation of churches and the phenomenon of America's multitude of "denominations." When the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled around America in the 1820s, he discovered, to his surprise, that cutting the ties between church and state actually made religion stronger, rather than weaker. These voluntary communities needed to win the support of people's hearts and minds, without coercion. Amazingly, he wrote, America's revolution made religion stronger. Unlike France, where religion and freedom seemed to march in opposite directions, in the United States, religion and freedom seemed to march in the same direction. He wrote, "America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men's souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to men, since the country where it now has the widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest."⁵ He called religion the "first of political institutions," astutely discerning that even though the churches were not supported by the government and were not directly involved in politics as such, they were nonetheless extremely influential in the political sphere.

Today, as we know, this continues to be the case. The so-called Christian right is active politically, very vocal, and works to elect public officials who will advance its agenda. But so is the Christian left. So is the Christian peace movement. So are organized Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. So is the coalition called the Interfaith Alliance. So are ardently secular organizations like Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. While some Americans may still presume America is a "Christian nation," they will find many other voices in the public arena. America is also a nation in which Muslim Americans stand in the halls of Congress to offer public invocations, hold ballot-box barbecues to register Muslims to vote, and hold Muslim lobbying days on Capitol Hill in Washington. It is a country in which Buddhist Americans ordain new monks in temples flying the American flag, Hindu Americans run for local and state office and submit briefs to the Supreme Court, and Sikh Americans insist on their Constitutional right to wear the turban and retain their uncut hair in the workplace.

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), I:308, 303-4.

The challenge of a truly multireligious nation is very much before us today. This is a time of real testing for the twin principles of the non-establishment and free-exercise of religion. Majorities may win elections, but the Constitution is defended by the courts on behalf of individuals, members of minority communities, who will never win an election but whose rights to religious practice are at the heart of our covenants of citizenship. This summer, these issues have been very much on the agenda. Can a county in the state of Kentucky post the Biblical Ten Commandments in its County Courthouse? No, the courts ruled this summer. Must the U.S. Air Force take the initiative to make sure its Muslim cadets have time for their religious practice? Yes, the Department of Defense insisted this summer. Can a Muslim witness testify to the truth of his or her statements by placing a hand on the Holy Qur'an? Yes, says the American Civil Liberties Union in a North Carolina lawsuit. Can a Muslim woman sue a Florida company for denying her the right to wear her headscarf on the job? Yes, says the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She can sue for discrimination under the Florida Civil Rights Act.

The questions that emerge today from the encounter of people of so many religious and cultural traditions go to the very heart of who we see ourselves to be as a people. For us in America, they are not trivial questions, for they force us to ask in one way or another: Who do we mean when we invoke the first words of our Constitution, "We the people of the United States of America?" Who do we mean when we say "we?" This is a challenge of citizenship, to be sure, for it has to do with the imagined community of which we consider ourselves a part. This is a challenge that America shares with many other multireligious nations in today's world, including Indonesia. How do people articulate their "we" as a nation with all the religious diversity that complex nations have?

Engaging religious diversity is a civic and political question in many nations today. New and old multireligious nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Britain, France, and Germany have different constitutional bases on which to adjudicate issues of religious difference. Is one tradition dominant, perhaps even established, as is the Church of England in the U.K. or Islam in Malaysia? Is the state officially secular, with no established religion, perhaps militantly so, as in France, where headscarves, yarmulkes, turbans in the public sphere are seen to be an affront to the secular state? What about America, a state officially "secular" if we mean by that "having no established state religion," but also a nation that guarantees freedom of religious expression, a nation where a teacher who tried to send a child home from school for wearing a headscarf would be reprimanded or fired.

But there is another challenge, too. It has to do *not* with the legal arrangements of governments and constitutions, but with the theologies of our faiths. Religious diversity is also a challenge to our self-understanding as people of faith. People of every religious tradition live today with communities of faith other than their own, not only around the world, but across the street. So, how do people articulate their "we" as people of faith, recognizing the fact --and it is a fact-- that other neighbors and citizens do not share that faith? These are the questions of pluralism. They are civic questions that ask us to think deeply about our belonging as citizens. They are also religious questions that ask us to

think deeply about our faith in a world of many faiths. As I will make clear, “pluralism” does not mean that all faiths are the same or all are equally “true.” Pluralism is not about *erasing* our differences, but rather about *engaging* our differences in dialogue.

3. What does America’s motto, “Out of Many, One” mean today in this new context?

A motto is often easy to remember and hard to live by. The United States and Indonesia have, in one sense, similar mottoes that give expression to our complexity. For Indonesia, "Bhineka Tunggal Ika," "Unity in Diversity. For the United States, "E Pluribus Unum," "Out of Many One." In America, these words are printed on the loose change in our pockets and are so familiar to us, we scarcely stop to think what they mean. What is the measure of our manyness? What the meaning of our oneness? Like any good symbol, these words are capable of stretching in many directions. Their meanings have amplified from the time the motto was first adopted in 1782. It had a political meaning then --from many colonies, one republic, from many states, one nation. With the booming immigration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the motto took on a cultural dimension --from many peoples or nationalities, one people. My own Swedish ancestors were all part of the many, and so it is with most of us. How we became one is a story written out in the successive generations of our own families. My mother's sister Irene, of Swedish stock, married my Uncle Romeo, whose father had hopped on a boat in Lake Como, Italy, headed for Milano, and then New York, never to returned. Swedes and Italians, Russians and Poles, all became part of the *unum*.

The story of America's many peoples and the creation of one nation is an unfinished story in which the ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are continually being brought into being in each generation. Today, however, it is more complex than Protestant Swedes and Italian Catholics, for we are also Pakistan-born Muslims and India-born Hindus. Our *pluribus* is more striking than ever -- our races and faces, our jazz and qawwali music, our Haitian drums and Bengali tablas, our hiphop and bhangra dances, our Islamic minarets and Hindu temple towers, our Mormon temple spires and golden *gurdwara* domes.

Amidst all this plurality, the expression of our *unum*, our oneness, will require many new voices, each contributing in its own way --like the voices of Muslims who will stand up for the "self-evident truth" of human equality not only because it is written in the Declaration of Independence, but because it is also part of the teachings of the Qur'an and a principle of their faith as Muslims. Hearing new ways of giving expression to the idea of America is the challenge we face today.

In beginning to claim the differences of a common society, one word may signal a shift in consciousness and a recognition that a new society is in the making. For example, as Muslims become more numerous and visible in American society, public officials have begun to shift from speaking of "churches and synagogues" to "churches, synagogues, and mosques." In 1996, the U.S. Navy commissioned its first Muslim chaplain, Lt. Malak Ibn Noel, and in 1998 the U.S. Navy's first mosque was opened on

Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia, where Lieutenant Noel was stationed. When fifty sailors attend Friday prayers at this facility, they signal to all of us a new era of American religious life.

The annual observance of the Ramadan month of Muslim fasting now receives ample public notice in America and becomes the occasion for portraits of the Muslims next door in *The Dallas Morning News* or *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*. By the mid-1990s, public officials from the mayor of Columbus, Ohio, to the governor of Kansas, to the President of the U.S were issuing greetings on the observance of the month of Ramadan and the celebration of Eid al Fitr. In 1996, the White House hosted the first observance the celebration of Eid al Fitr at the end of the month of Ramadan, a practice that has continued. The fast-breaking meals called *iftar* at the close of each day have also become moments of civic recognition. In the late 1990s there were *iftar* observances by Muslim staff members on Capitol Hill, in the Pentagon, and in the State Department. Since 9/11, in particular, the term *iftar* has entered the public vocabulary, as Muslims reached out to the wider community, inviting mayors, school superintendents, professors and office co-workers to break the Ramadan fast with them and enjoy a meal together. At a 2003 gathering hosted by Representative John Conyers of Michigan along with four other Congressmen in the House Judiciary Committee Hearing Room, Representative Conyers remarked, "By partaking in this religious tradition, we hope to promote the toleration, understanding, and acceptance of all religions and religious cultures and to celebrate religious diversity, one of the many great principles that our country was founded upon."⁶

One thing *E Pluribus Unum* clearly does not mean is "From many religions, one religion." From the standpoint of America's many religious traditions, our "oneness" does not mean the blending of religions into a kind of religious melting pot. There may be conversions, as there certainly have been. Indeed, Euro-American and Latino Americans have become Muslims. Buddhist Koreans have become Christians. Protestants and Catholics have taken up Buddhist practice and identify themselves as Buddhists. There may also be intermarriages, as there have been, as young Muslims and Christians, Hindus and Jews marry one another. There will be interfaith services at times of national celebration or tragedy, with Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists offering prayer, each in their distinctive ways. But there will never be the oneness a single religion. Rather, it will be a oneness of commitment to common covenants of citizenship out of the manyness of our religious traditions, the diversity of religious ways and worlds.

Every religious tradition has its own ways of articulating the manyness of faiths in which it stands. On June 25, 1991, a Muslim *imam* stood in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives as the day began and offered a brief prayer, as the chaplain of the day. It was the first time in American history a Muslim had done so. The *imam* was Siraj Wahaj, an African American Muslim leader from Brooklyn, New York. He had turned a run-down urban corner dominated by drug dealers into a mosque, Masjid al Taqwa, the home of one of Brooklyn's most vibrant Muslim communities. The landmark Congressional prayer was scheduled as close as possible to the Muslim holy day, Eid al Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice,

⁶ Council on American Islamic Relations website, November 13, 2003.

when Muslims remember Abraham's faithfulness to God in preparing to sacrifice his son Ishmael. The prayer Siraj Wahaj offered included verses from the Qur'an that spoke to the very question of our *pluribus* and our *unum*. "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise belongs to Thee alone, O God, Lord and Creator of all the worlds. Praise belongs to Thee who shaped us and colored us in the wombs of our mothers, colored us black and white, brown, red, and yellow. Praise belongs to Thee who created us from males and females and made us into nations and tribes that we may know each other."⁷

The Qur'anic verse to which he alluded here is one often cited by Muslims to make the powerful point that human diversity of race, gender, tribe and nation is within the providence of God. After all, God could have made one single people, but as the Qur'an puts it, God made us into many nations and tribes, not that we might be divided, but that we may know one another.

The terms "exclusion," "assimilation," and "pluralism" suggest three different ways in which Americans have approached the widening cultural and religious diversity of the nation. 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 those considered "alien," whether Catholics or Jews, Asians or Arabs, Muslims or Hindus. The message, in brief, was --stay home, or go home. For assimilationist, the message to the diversity of peoples was to leave your differences behind as quickly as possible and assimilate to the dominant, majority culture and religion. It was the message of the melting pot. For the pluralist, however, the American promise was to come as you are, with all your differences, pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship. In other words, our unity is not premised on being the same. It is truly a unity of purpose out of the diversity of peoples.

For the exclusivist, the oneness of the *unum* requires the exclusion of those who are different. Diversity poses a threat to unity and must be excluded. For the assimilationist or inclusivist, the *unum* requires the many to shed their differences and become assimilated into the normative culture. Diversity will be absorbed by the unity, melted away in the great melting pot of America. As for the pluralist, the *unum* is shaped by the encounter and engagement of the many. All three ways of wrestling with unity and diversity have been part of the long argument over the many cultures, races, and religions that have come to comprise America. There have been, and still are, those who want to exclude from our nation the great diversity of peoples that immigration has brought. There have been, and still are, those who want all immigrants to assimilate to a dominant American culture through the "melting pot," shedding the distinctive edges of difference. And there have been, and still are, those who insist that all Americans have a right to be different, that diversity is the result of the freedom that has made the American project what it is. Pluralism comes with the territory of America's commitment to freedom.

What do we mean by Pluralism?

⁷ *American Muslim Council Report*, summer 1991.

In 1915, a Jewish immigrant, the sociologist Horace Kallen, wrote a much-discussed article in *The Nation*, taking issue with the melting-pot vision of America. He may well be the first to use the term “pluralism” to describe an alternative vision. The article was titled, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” and there he argued that the “melting pot” ideal is inherently anti-democratic. It collides with America’s foundational principles. After all, one of the freedoms cherished in America is the freedom to be oneself, without erasing the distinctive features of one’s own culture. Kallen saw America’s plurality and unity in the image of the symphony, not the melting pot. Sounding not unison, but in harmony, with all the distinctive tones of our many cultures, was the image for diversity he proposed. He described it as “cultural pluralism.”

In Kallen’s view, there are many things that immigrants to America can and do change --their style of dress, their politics, their religious affiliation, their economic status. But whatever else may change, “they cannot change their grandfathers.” Cultural pluralism preserves the inalienable right to the “ancestral endowment” of selfhood imparted by one’s parents and grandparents. Thus, he sees in American civilization, “a multiplicity in unity, an orchestration of mankind.” In the final paragraphs of his 1915 article, Kallen develops the orchestra image:

As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization, with this difference: a musical symphony is written before it is played; in the symphony of civilization the playing is the writing, so that there is nothing so fixed and inevitable about its progressions as in music, so that within the limits set by nature they may vary at will, and the range and variety of the harmonies may become wider and richer and more beautiful.⁸

It is an appealing image --the symphony of society, each group retaining its difference, each sounding together, with an ear to the music of the whole. Kallen seemed to be stretching to something more akin to jazz when he noted that, unlike a civilization, a symphony is written before it is played. In jazz, however, the playing is the writing. Because it is not all written out, it requires even more astute attention to the music of each instrument. Learning to hear the musical lines of our neighbors, their individual and magnificent interpretations of the themes of America's common covenants, is the test of cultural pluralism. But the challenge today is whether it will be jazz or simply noise, whether it will be a symphony or cacophony.

So, what then is pluralism? This is clearly a controversial topic in Indonesia today, especially since, at its meeting last month, the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) issued a *fatwa* denouncing pluralism, secularism, liberal forms of Islam, and interfaith prayer. While the *fatwa* seems to outlaw “pluralism,” it also seems to have an understanding of pluralism which views all religions as being the same,

⁸ Horace Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” *The Nation* 100, no. 2590 (Feb.15-25, 1915: 190-94; 217-20).

equally valid, and with relative truths. The Fatwa Commission chairman Ma'ruf Amin, was quoted in *The Jakarta Post* as saying, "Pluralism in that sense is *haram* (forbidden under Islamic law), because it justifies other religions." ⁹ Many respected Indonesian leaders have responded to the *fatwa*, including Azyumardi Azra, the Rector of the State Islamic University, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, the General Secretary of the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace. But in Indonesia, as in the U.S., the term "pluralism" is often misunderstood by its critics as the evaluation of all religions as the same. This is far from the meaning of pluralism most of its advocates have in mind. The language of pluralism is not the language of sameness, nor is it simply the language of difference, but the language of dialogue. Pluralism is about engagement, involvement, and participation. It is the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue, and debate. It is the language any democracy needs in order to survive. Let me make three points about pluralism that may clarify what we mean at the Pluralism Project.

First, I would argue, that "pluralism" is not just diversity or plurality. Pluralism goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality. While pluralism and diversity are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, a distinction must be made here. Diversity is an observable fact of the multicultural world of the United States, and of Indonesia. One can study this diversity, complain about it, or even celebrate it. But diversity or plurality alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement of people of diverse communities in the creation of a common society. Pluralism requires participation. Kallen's analogy of the symphony is still a good one. The instruments will be different, but the creative energy of the symphony requires the engaged participation of all the instruments, sounding together. The inherently unfinished creativity of the project of pluralism might also be suggested today by the musical analogy of jazz, with the spontaneity of sounding together, improvising on one's own, with an ear always tuned to the other players.

On a stretch of New Hampshire Avenue in Silver Spring, Maryland, the Vietnamese Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the Muslim Community Center, the Disciples of Christ Church, the Cambodian Buddhist Temple, and the Gujarati Hindu Temple lined up one after another vividly dramatize the new plurality. The makings of pluralism are surely here, but without any real engagement with one another, any attunement to life and energies of one another, this might be prove to be just a striking example of diversity, not pluralism. In the world into which live today, mere diversity with no attempt to engage in real relationships with those who are different and with no attempt to create harmonious societies will be increasingly problematic.

Second, I would propose that pluralism is not simply tolerance. Pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other. Although tolerance

⁹ *The Jakarta Post*, July 29, 2005, "MUI Issues 11 Fatwa." "Pluralism in that sense is *haram* (forbidden under Islamic law), because it justifies other religions," Maruf said, adding that people should be allowed to claim that their religion is the true one and that other faiths are wrong. However, he stressed that the council accepted the fact that Indonesia was home to different religions and that their followers could live side by side. "Plurality in the sense that people believe in different religions is allowed," Ma'ruf explained. "As such, we have to respect each other and coexist peacefully."

is no doubt a step forward from intolerance, it does not require us to know anything about one another. Tolerance can create a climate of restraint, but not a climate of understanding. Tolerance alone does little to bridge the chasms of stereotype and fear that may, in fact, dominate the mutual image of the other on a street like New Hampshire Avenue. It is far too fragile a foundation for a society that is becoming as religiously complex as ours.

Today, with the free exercise of so many religious traditions in our nation and in our neighborhoods, a truly pluralist society will need to move beyond tolerance toward constructive understanding. Americans, on the whole, have a high degree of religious identification, according to every poll taken, and yet a very low level of religious literacy. Beginning to root out the stereotype and prejudice that form the faultlines of fracture is critical for a society that has absorbed so much difference, with so little understanding of our differences. We need schools with vigorous programs to teach about the world's religions in the context of social studies or history. We need well-trained religious leaders, able not only to deepen the faith of their own community but also literate religiously, able to prevent their co-religionists from misrepresenting and defaming other religious communities. Tolerance does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the half-truths and the fear that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world into which we live today, our ignorance will be increasingly costly.

Third, and most important for those who fear pluralism, I would insist that pluralism is not simply relativism. Pluralism is the encounter of commitments --real religious commitments and real secular commitments. Pluralism is premised on difference, not sameness. Through a cynical intellectual sleight of hand, some critics have linked pluralism with valueless relativism, in which all perspectives are equally true. Pluralism, they would contend, undermines commitment to one's own particular faith with its own particular language, watering down particularity in the interests of universality. On the contrary, I would argue that pluralism is the engagement, not the abdication, of differences and particularities. While the encounter with people of other faiths in a pluralist society may lead one to a more relativist view of one's own faith, pluralism is not premised on relativism, but on the significance and the engagement of real differences. The Muslim or Christian who adheres strongly to the superiority of their own faith can, and must, engage with others.

Even the MUI seemed to indicate that Muslims, of course, accept that fact that "people believe in different religions." As Ma'ruf put it, "As such, we have to respect each other and coexist peacefully." But one would have to add that coexistence in a vibrant society cannot mean simply living side by side and ignoring one another. It requires real engagement, cooperation, and work. The engagement of our deepest commitments, our deepest differences, in the creation of a common society is the very heart of pluralism.

In the late 1950s, the American Catholic thinker John Courtney Murray described pluralism as the vigorous engagement of people of different religious beliefs around the "common table" of discussion and debate. He wrote, "By pluralism here I mean the coexistence within the one political community of groups who hold divergent and

incompatible views with regard to religious questions. . . . Pluralism therefore implies disagreement and dissension within a community. There is no small political problem here. If society is to be at all a rational process, some set of principles must motivate the general participation of all religious groups, despite their dissensions, in the oneness of the community. On the other hand, these common principles must not hinder the maintenance by each group of its own different identity.”¹⁰

The engagement of difference in a pluralistic society is not modeled, as Murray contends, on the structure of warfare, but on the structure of dialogue. Vigorous engagement, even argument, around the common table is vital to the very heart of a democratic society. In another key, it is also vital to health of religious faith, appropriated not by habit or heritage alone, but within the context of dialogue with the commitments of those of other faiths. Such dialogue is not aimed at achieving agreement, but achieving relationship. Commitments are not left at the door. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. In the world into which we live today, this is a language we will need to learn.

Finally, the process of pluralism is never completed and settled, but is the ongoing work of each generation. In America, we might go further to say that part of the “engagement” of pluralism is participation in the “idea of America.” After all, America is a nation formed not by a race or a single people, but by the ideals articulated in the succession of founding documents, beginning with the Declaration of Independence. To say, “We hold these truths to be self-evident. . .” is not to hold these truths in the safe deposit box of the past, but to keep them alive through argument and dialogue in the present. As Murray puts it, “the American consensus needs to be constantly argued.”¹¹

In 1988, to commemorate the bicentennial of the American Constitution, the Williamsburg Charter Foundation drafted “The Williamsburg Charter,” a reaffirmation of the principles of religious liberty found in the Bill of Rights. It was signed by representatives from government and law, education and business, as well as by representatives of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities. The Preamble of the Charter ends with these words: “The Charter sets forth a renewed national compact, in the sense of a solemn mutual agreement between parties, on how we view the place of religion in American life and how we should contend with each other’s deepest differences in the public sphere. It is a call to a vision of public life that well allow conflict to lead to consensus, religious commitment to reinforce political civility. In this way, diversity is not a point of weakness but a source of strength.”¹²

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So, how are we doing in the engaged participation that is essential for a pluralist democracy? In November of 1998, President Clinton sent a letter to the Sikh communities of America on the occasion of the 529th birthday of the teacher who launched the Sikh movement in the 16th century, Guru Nanak. The President wrote, “We

¹⁰ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed & Ward) 1960, p. x.

¹¹ *We Hold These Truths*, p. 11.

¹² The Williamsburg Charter (Williamsburg, Virginia, The Williamsburg Charter Foundation, 1988).

are grateful for the teachings of Guru Nanak, which celebrate the equality of all in the eyes of God, a message that strengthens our efforts to build one America. Religious pluralism in our nation is bringing us together in new and powerful ways." ¹³ I am certainly among those who would agree with him, for I believe that our society becomes stronger as religious freedom is exercised and recognized, as the Sikhs articulate the principles of equality and freedom in their own voice, as Muslims like Siraj Wahaj articulate the God-given challenge to rise above race, tribe, and nation to know each other.

There are many Americans, however, for whom religious pluralism is not a vision that brings us together, but one that tears us apart. As we know, difference can all too easily become a license for discrimination and even violence. By now in 2004, the post-1965 immigrants have had first-hand experience of both the opportunities of America and the discrimination and prejudice that can be rooted in difference. The rising visibility of minority religious communities in the United States has also meant their rising vulnerability. Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists have been the targets of discrimination and hate crimes, especially since September 11, 2001. Although Muslim groups condemned terrorist violence immediately, there was an unprecedented wave of individual attacks on Muslims and Muslim communities. In the days following September 11, a furious man smashed his car through the plate glass door of the mosque in Cleveland. A crowd approached the Bridgeview mosque in Chicago shouting anti-Arab slogans. As Muslims gathered at their mosque in Sterling, Virginia to take a chartered bus to a blood drive, they found a message inscribed on the building in big black letters: "Die Pigs" and "Muslims Burn Forever!" In Alexandria, Virginia someone hurled bricks wrapped with hate-messages through the windows of an Islamic bookstore, shattering the glass. A firebomb landed in the mosque in Denton, Texas on the outskirts of Dallas, and rifle-fire pierced the stained glass dome of the mosque in Perrysburg, a suburb of Toledo, Ohio. All of these, just examples of the incidents that took place.

On the whole, however, the work of the Pluralism Project concluded that these incidents of backlash unleashed by the terrorist attacks ultimately revealed something more complex, and more heartening, about American society. The response evoked by each ugly incident made clear that the multireligious and multicultural fabric of the U.S. was already too strong to rend by random violence. Despite new fears of "sleeper cells" of Muslim terrorists and "assimilated terrorists" lounging by the condominium pool, Americans would not condone indiscriminate violence against neighbors of any faith or culture. The Pakistani bookstore owner in Alexandria, Virginia, stunned by the shattered glass and its message of hatred, soon discovered hundreds of supportive neighbors he did not know who sent him bouquets of flowers and cards expressing their sorrow at what had happened. In Toledo, Chereffe Kadri, the woman president of the Islamic community, reflected on the September 11 rifle fire. "That small hole in the dome created such a huge outpouring of support for our Islamic community," she said. "A Christian radio station contacted me wanting to do something. "They called out on the airwaves for people to come together at our center to hold hands, to ring our mosque, to pray for our protection. We expected 300 people, and thought

¹³*San Diego Union-Tribune*, Lifestyle, p. E5, November 13, 1998.

that would be enough to circle the mosque, but 2000 people showed up to hold hands around the mosque. I was amazed!” In Mesa, Arizona, where one man shot and killed a turbaned Sikh, hundreds of people left flowers at the gas station where he had died and thousands of people who had never met him or any other Sikh came to the civic center for a public memorial service. By early in 2002, his family had received more than ten thousand letters and messages of condolence. Statistically, one would have to say that benevolence outweighed the backlash.

Most important, over these decades, and especially since 9/11, we have seen American Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindu becoming active participants in civil rights issues and in electoral politics, local and national. They, like American Jews of an earlier generation, have also formed watchdog groups to monitor and record assaults on the rights and dignity of their members and to advocate for their members in public affairs. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the American Muslim Alliance, the Sikh Coalition, and the Hindu American Foundation--all are actively engaged in the issues and controversies of the public square. Participation is key. Shabir Mansuri, who has been active in getting accurate educational materials into the school curriculum, put it this way, “As students and young professionals in the sixties and seventies, we talked about how we would eventually return to India or Pakistan. That’s gone now. We’re Americans and we’re going to be buried here, so we should work within the system and participate in the process.”

There is no denying the deep and legitimate concerns over civil rights abuses, the deep and legitimate concerns about America’s treatment of prisoners, the deep and legitimate divisions over America’s military response to 9/11. These are issues for Muslim Americans and non-Muslim Americans alike. The role of Muslim Americans in expressing their concerns directly to the government places them in a long and rich American tradition of protest and dissent. This summer’s annual report by CAIR on *The Status of Muslim Civil Rights* in the United States begins with a review of the year 2004 in these striking words:

Last year marked the highest number of Muslim civil rights cases ever recorded by CAIR's annual report on the status of Muslim civil rights in the United States. Reports of harassment, violence and discriminatory treatment increased nearly 70 percent over 2002 (the year after the 9/11 terror attacks). This represents a three-fold increase since the reporting year preceding the terrorist attacks.¹⁴

We must take seriously the range, the persistence, and indeed the growth of these incidents. And we must also take seriously the fact that they are reported, documented, and publicized by American Muslims determined to claim their full and equal treatment as Americans.

In the four years since September 11, 2001, Americans have realized ever more profoundly that our new multireligious reality is here to stay. Never again will our “we”

¹⁴ <http://www.cair-net.org/asp/execsum2004.asp>.

be as relatively homogeneous and comfortable as it was even a few decades ago. With the growth of global communications, Americans have also realized that our religious communities are not isolated, but are part of worldwide networks of co-religionists. The human dimensions of globalization are as profound, and as complicated, as its economic effects. Global interdependence is a reality of religious life in the twenty-first century. There are minority Christian communities in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia and there are minority Muslim communities in Columbus, Ohio and Dallas, Texas. We are all involved in one another's future. Awakening to this new geo-religious reality, we are all challenged to a world of understanding and relationships from which there is no retreat.