

## The Right to Be Different

*Summary: In the early 20th century, Horace Kallen argued that the image of the “melting pot” did not and should not epitomize the American immigrant experience. Instead, Kallen advocated for cultural pluralism, in which different groups could retain cultural heritage and respect the ties and commitments of others. This vision has been tested throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly by groups that wish to remain radically separate from the American majority, such as the Amish.*

Since the first appearance of the language of the “melting pot,” some critics have rejected the term. To these critics, freedom meant, most fundamentally, the freedom to be oneself, with all one’s differences and particularities. In the wake of the most intensive decades of massive immigration to America that brought an unprecedented diversity of people to American shores, there were those who argued that the distinctive ways of immigrant communities did not need to be melted down or stripped away for them to become Americans.

At the forefront of these thinkers was Horace Kallen, an American Jewish scholar who published a provocative essay in a 1915 edition of *The Nation* called “Democracy versus the Melting Pot.” Here he argued that the very idea of America as a melting pot contradicts the premise of American democracy: the inalienable right to be different, to follow the lights of one’s own conscience. In contrast to the melting pot, Kallen eventually coined the term “cultural pluralism” to describe what America is and should be. By 1924, he had refined his thinking into a book entitled *Culture and Democracy in the United States*.

Kallen argued that the “melting pot” often meant assimilation into Anglo-Saxon American identity. But as he looked at the Scandinavians in Minnesota, the Germans in Wisconsin, and the Irish in Boston, he did not see evidence of a melting pot. He saw a distinctive process of Americanization that, at the same time, preserved cultural uniqueness. He observed that, after a period of economic assimilation into American life, many immigrants began to identify once again with their distinctive cultural heritage. It was now not a disadvantage, but an asset to identify with that culture. The fact that Scandinavians in Minnesota created a Scandinavian Society or Germans supported the translation of German classics was not evidence of fragmentation but of a very American kind of freedom. “Americanization has liberated nationality,” Kallen wrote. Rather than a melting pot, America can be a “nation of nationalities.”

Kallen argues that although immigrant groups must be loyal to certain democratic principles, within those constraints, there is no reason that immigrant peoples should not be able to maintain their identities, cultural expressions, religious beliefs, and even languages. In his 1916 essay, “The Meaning of Americanism,” he wrote: “Democracy involves, not the elimination of differences, but the perfection and conservation of differences. It aims, through Union, not at uniformity, but at variety, at a one out of many, as the dollars say in Latin, and a many in one. It involves a give and take between radically different types, and a mutual respect and mutual cooperation based on mutual understanding.” This is, indeed, his vision of cultural pluralism: the consensus of different cultures to recognize and respect one another, to communicate with one another, to work together if possible, and to agree to peacefully disagree if not. Kallen wrote primarily of America’s ethnic groups, but his views apply equally to the religious communities so often the bearers of ethnic or cultural identities.

Kallen describes cultural pluralism as a “symphony.” America, he argued, should not try to become homogenous, singing in unison. Rather, it should be “a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind.” As in a symphony, each instrument sounds on its own, in harmony but not in imitation of the others. The instruments together, sounding in harmony and not in unison is, in Kallen’s view, the true expression of the American ideal. “But the question is,” he poses, “do the dominant classes in America want such a society?”

It became clear in Kallen’s time that many Americans did not want such a society. Black-white segregation was still the rule, and even Kallen did not address the issue in his early discussion of cultural pluralism. The anti-foreign born, nativist sentiment of America increased, especially after World War I, with many pointing to embattled Europe as prognostic of what could happen if difference flourished unchecked. By 1924, immigration from Asia and from Eastern and Southern Europe was effectively closed. Theories of racial superiority thrived. Insecurity, fear, and the desire for religious certainties gave rise to Christian fundamentalism and gave new life to the Ku Klux Klan. During the 1920s, Jews and Catholics were the primary targets of its agitation.

Despite this spate of nativism, the “right to be different” has persisted in America as a strong, even inevitable, concomitant of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. In a democratic pluralist society, the right of groups and individuals to their own conscience is balanced by a strong commitment to a common civic and political culture—to play in the orchestra, so to speak. Every religious

community has experienced the tensions between maintaining the cherished particularities of its own religious and cultural “music” and learning to play in the orchestra of a more complex nation of peoples. Catholics, for example, have developed and maintained a strong parochial school system in order to foster faith among young American Catholics. Orthodox Christianity has also cultivated rather than converged national and cultural traditions as immigrants from Greece, Russia, Serbia, Albania and Bulgaria did not unite under a common roof in America but maintained strong lines of distinction in their churches, each ecclesiastically linked to their several home Patriarchates. While Reform Judaism has become increasingly “American” in its timbre, Orthodox Judaism has kept its own distance from mainstream American culture, as has the Lubavitcher movement.

In the early decades of the 20th century African Americans developed their own black nationalist movements. Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa movement of the 1920s kindled a new spirit of African identity among black Americans. The recovery of African American Islam also began in this period with Noble Drew Ali, whose Moorish Science Temple, launched in Newark in 1913, encouraged urban blacks to claim their Islamic roots. W.D. Fard and his successor Elijah Muhammad gave rise to the Nation of Islam in Detroit in the 1930s, claiming a separate black Muslim identity as a “nation” within the U.S.

For some such groups, commitment to a distinctive religion or culture created a sharper tension with the participatory engagement of pluralism. They were faced with a question: Is American pluralism strong enough to provide space even for those who wish to maintain their own separate identities? This has been a crucial and continuing question for Native peoples and African Americans and has been raised anew for groups like the Amish, the Hutterites, and the Lubavitchers.

The Amish, for example, have tried consciously to resist any assimilation, seeking to preserve their German-speaking culture and maintain a lifestyle in which pacifist Christian values dictate clear gender roles, strict parent-child relations, and a strong ethic of simple living. Some of the landmark religious freedom cases decided by the Supreme Court have concerned them. In 1972, the Amish’s right to withdraw their children from formal education in the public schools after the eighth grade was upheld, despite the state of Wisconsin’s requirement that formal schooling be continued into high school (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*). For religious reasons, the Amish would rather remain apart from the symphony Kallen describes, or perhaps sound their note from a distance.

For Horace Kallen and those taking up the banner of cultural pluralism, the right to be different and to sound one's own distinctive note comes with the responsibility to participate in the symphony. Indeed, participation is the very premise of *participatory* democracy. But while civil participation has its legal obligations, cultural participation cannot, of course, be constitutionally required. What makes the orchestra work is the energy and engagement of all its diverse players, whose commitment to making music springs from a participatory spirit of good will toward the whole.