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Pluralism and the New Religious America

Emily Teitelbaum

Introduction

A variety of worlds surround us day to day. These worlds are environments that one lives in, a habitat: a place. A world is an environment operating with language and behavioral patterns. The worlds we live in are different for many people and thus we need to understand this about others in order to understand their lives and the behaviors and actions that manufacture such an existence. It is good to have multiple worlds. If someone lives in an exclusive and privileged world, looking only through a single pair of lenses, then one is not allowing themselves to sights and views of other worlds. This is the challenge for most people: we need to get away from viewing life and worlds with a single lens. There are scientific worlds, religious worlds, environmental worlds, and artistic worlds. There are so many worlds that if someone just sticks to one, it will become all one sees, all one hears about, and all one gets to know and experience in life.

According to the scholar of comparative religion William Paden, a religious world is one that structures existence around sacred things. For example, there are religious worlds that have rigid laws, some that have no laws or boundaries, and some that are hierarchical. Some worlds revolve around worship while others focus on meditation and reflection. As one can see there is a vast array of religious worlds in which people live. Often it is not of our choice, as to the ones that we live in. But as one faces religious pluralism, one can see just how many religious worlds there are, and so one does and can develop a degree of choice. One should also allow him or her self to experience and appreciate other religious worlds, to see what they are all about and what they have to offer. This allows one to learn about and see other worlds and not focus one's attention through just a single lens. As Paden points out in his book *Religious Worlds*, we need to study comparative religion in a manner which neither ignores resemblances nor simplistically collapses them into superficial sameness; which neither ignores differences nor magnifies them out of proportion to the human, cross-cultural communalities of structure and function that run through them. Every religious expression is different from others but also has something in common with them (Paden, ix).

We must realize that we all come from different starting points, historical backgrounds, and customs. But we must also realize the innate similarities that occur within each religion as well. One should also note that holy (sacred) objects are world specific in that they are sacred only to the insider or the believer of that religious world. For example, Jesus' cross may only be sacred to Christians, while Jews, Buddhists, and others give it no meaning at all. Paden also writes about how the very existence of other worlds can be quite threatening to people. Dealing with other religious worlds, with different premises, can often be threatening because of these differences and because they explicitly or implicitly call into question the absoluteness of our own assumptions, commitments, and truths (beliefs). Paden shows that often when people come across "otherness" or "foreignness" there is a self-defense mechanism that kicks in, that can create or inflict exclusivist mannerisms such as shutting out all "others," or inclusivist ways in which they would accept them only as a part of "their" way. There is a pluralist way which is to accept them and try to understand this "other" to create a better, more peaceful world to live in.

Language and how one conceptualizes different religions is the key to this process of understanding. It is important to learn how people view other religions as well as how they practice and preach their own religion and beliefs. This gives us a chance to study other religions as well as to engage in interfaith dialogue, which is the coming together of religions for the purpose of expanding and transforming one's mind with the knowledge of other religions, as well as one's own. Interfaith dialogue also becomes a pathway to peace, harmony, and justice in this world. It is also a chance to explore how worlds change when formerly separate religious worlds now co-exist, even within the shared world of "central Ohio."

A key to this project is to show that a lack of understanding and knowledge of different religions, on anyone's part, can only lead to harm and violence. To have such understanding is the vital part for transformation, dialogue, and peace to occur. There have been a plethora of current events that have shown intolerance, insensitivity, and discrimination between and against all of the diverse religious groups that we have in this world. One example is with the terrible fighting and war going on between the Palestinians (mostly Muslims) and Israelis (mostly Jews) that has been going on for years now. However, there has also been a huge amount of hope for religious pluralism prevailing in American life through many actions of courage, respect, love, and compassion that people of all religious sects bring when coming together under an

understanding of their common law and location. People have become more interested in learning and being more open to other religions. There also have been interfaith and peace associations created all throughout the country, to better promote peace, understanding, and justice among people.

People have begun to respect each other's views and traditions. Not only that, many are now willing and are interested in getting to know about other religions and their different beliefs and practices. As a woman being interviewed said just within the past few years, "The time of not getting to know each other is over" (Eck 2001, xvi). Another example of what the lack of understanding of other religions can lead to is in this quote: "Perhaps the most honest conclusion was that the mistrust between Jews and Muslims was amplified by the lack of knowledge of each other on both sides" (Eck, xx). The lack of knowledge of other religions can only seem to result in the intolerance and discrimination and mistrust of those religions. This mistrust and insensitivity has to do most with not getting to know other religions and religious people on a more personal level. This is the crucial part where first-hand experience comes in. If people, trying to study or learn more about other religions, do not go out and visit other places of worship then they miss out on key parts of those religions. It is one thing to learn about a religion by reading books or looking on the internet, but it is an extremely different experience to go to the actual place of worship and be transformed in one's culture and practices, while still holding ground to one's own personal beliefs. This also allows one to experience shared humanity, and to share basic human concerns such as food, love, friendship, work, and other such things. Attending events and interviewing people of different religions allows one to get a personal and real feel of the beliefs and traditions of that religion. As Lama Surya Das, an American Buddhist "Dharma-farmer," once said about the Buddha's approach to the teaching of Noble Truths, one should not believe everything that the scriptures, or the Buddha, or one's elders say just because it is all written down. One must go and "check it out for yourselves" (Eck, 2001, 155). In order for myself to be able to gain complete knowledge of other religions and religious pluralism, I have to go to these places and talk to members, for only then will I be able to fully grasp, understand, and articulate to others this important idea of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue.

Religious pluralism, as Diana Eck beautifully notes, is a kaleidoscope. A kaleidoscope is an instrument that creates enormously beautiful lights that combine to make wonderful images. This is a lot like religious pluralism in that

there are many different religions, scattered amongst the United States, and when they come together to unite under common laws and interests, it can create an amazing product and image, through interfaith dialogue. These pieces (religions) keep their basic structure and values yet can still come together, as one nation, and live together and respect one another in peace and harmony, to create the beautiful masterpiece of religious pluralism. However, as we will see, this is not always a majority view with fellow Americans.

Exclusivism

“God is too big to fit into just one religion.” This statement is from an obvious pluralist stance. However, most people do not see God or religion in this manner and instead are said to have an exclusivist or inclusivist point of view. Diana Eck writes in her book *Encountering God* that the challenge today in America is pluralism and our encounter as Americans with real differences between people. An exclusivist view is held by a person who believes that his or her own community, traditions, and encounter with God are the one and the only Truth in the world. Exclusivists exclude all other people and their faiths and view God as “listening” to only their faith and no others. Christian exclusivists use “in no other name” from Peter in Acts 4:12 to provide evidence that only those who follow Jesus Christ will be saved. They see Christ as THE way, THE truth, and THE life to follow. Jewish exclusivists often use the idea of how the Israelis were the Chosen People from God who had a covenant with Him through Abraham. Muslim exclusivists affirm the finality of One, God’s revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. A Buddhist teacher who preached exclusivism said that only the name of the Lotus Sutra was salvific and that faith in this scripture only, and nothing else, would lead to one’s salvation.

Exclusivism has often been the tool of racism and ethnocentrism. Exclusivism often becomes ethnic or religious chauvinism and egotism, which comes from people’s feelings of fear of anything that is “different.” Exclusivists do not and will not participate in dialogue with people of other religious faiths. They will not listen openly to others’ testimonies of their own faith and practices. Exclusivism deals with not only the way one holds their own convictions and faith, but how one regards the convictions, faith, and practices of a person of a different religious background: our neighbors.

Inclusivism

Inclusivism is what most Christians seem to practice in America. This is an attitude that says, “the invitation is open and the tent of Christ is wide enough for all” (Eck 1993, 186). Inclusivist Christians view non-Christians to be genu-

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ine seekers of truth, but they believe that truth is found fully and only in Christ. Inclusivists do not see people of other religious faiths as evil or unwise, but that their faith is incomplete since they have not had the true fulfillment of Christ yet, and when they find this path, they will be fully saved and know the Truth. Although inclusivists are more open than exclusivists they are open only on their own terms, based on their Truth. As Diana Eck asks in her book *Encountering God*, "Is our God listening?" Inclusivists would reply that prayers of all people (Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and others) of all faiths, even to a false God, are accepted by the only true God, which is the inclusivists' God, "our" God.

Inclusivism seems to be a bit more complicated than exclusivism. To some extent, all religious people are inclusivists in that they use their own particular religious language such as God, Jesus, Buddha, Abraham, or Vishnu. One inclusivist Hindu's statement is "truth is one, but the wise call it by many names" (Eck 1993, 180). A Christian inclusivist sees that the suffering of Christ was not done just for Christians, but for all people of different faiths. While inclusivists do not exclude or condemn others and are not usually chauvinistic about their religion, as exclusivists often are, they do still use their own language and conception of God and their Truth as a way of understanding the "other" or a way to bring the "other" in to their beliefs and salvation.

Many inclusivist Christians proclaim that their Hindu friends are baptized as "anonymous Christians" and that Muslims are saved by the mediation and grace of Christ. Although they are not necessarily demeaning or bringing hatred towards these people, these Christian inclusivists are dodging the differences between the religions and reducing everything to their "own" terms. Often inclusivists see themselves as helping these religious people by telling them that they will still be saved, while totally disregarding the fact that perhaps these people already see themselves as saved or do not want, see, or need Christ to be a part of their lives. Inclusivists forget to view these religions as having their own real traditions and faith. Inclusivist language is a huge problem in that it uses only ONE language (of one's own religious tradition) to make definitive claims about the whole of reality and truths in this world. Inclusivists often assume that their worldview is the decisive truth that explains the whole. The language that inclusivists use is seen as their norm. This only makes others feel insignificant and disrespected.

Pluralism

Pluralism, to me, is the most hopeful and the most accepting of the three

theoretical models. Pluralism sees no such thing as “our” God for we cannot limit God to the God that we know and the image that we have created of Him or Her. Truth is neither exclusive nor inclusive of any tradition or community. All of our traditions and our understandings of Truth and “God” are not obstacles for us to overcome but an opportunity for commitment in dialogue with one another. An often critical view of pluralism is that people will lose their faith in their own religion if they give in to the idea of religious pluralism. However, this is completely false in that the key to pluralism is keeping one’s own commitments to one’s faith but still being open to the commitment of mutual discovery, understanding, and transformation, from learning about other religious traditions. By learning and understanding other religions, one in turn grasps deeper insight into one’s own religious faith and understanding.

For Christian pluralists, it is often their confidence in Jesus and his openness to all people, regardless of their religious status, that helps them and pushes them to inquire more about people of other religious faiths. It is God’s transcendence that motivates Christian pluralists to study the diverse world of religious faiths. “It is God’s transcendence which drives us to inquire more deeply into the insights of those Buddhists who do not speak of God at all” (Eck 1993, 186). At the same time, however, the idea of using “transcendence” as their focus for pluralism is perhaps an inclusivist strategy on their part. One does not and must not “include” the Buddhists on the Christian’s own terms but instead the Christian needs to understand the Buddhist on his or her own terms, and vice versa. The encounter with one another will test and broaden one’s own understanding of the other religion, as well as one’s own religion. The goal of pluralism is to find places in each religious faith that can provide open spaces for welcoming and meeting one another in mutual respect, and for curiosity to develop. Through interreligious dialogue, new ways will emerge in which we can all speak and listen to one another. The goal of pluralism, through this interreligious dialogue, is not just mutual understanding of one another’s religions but actually mutual self-understanding of one’s own religion, as well as mutual transformation. This dialogue is driven by a quest to reach “common ground” with one another.

Pluralism involves active participation from all peoples of each faith. It requires a true, devoted, engagement and interest in diversity and the desire to learn about other faiths and traditions. Pluralism calls for and invites openness and commitment from others. The key factor in allowing pluralism to prevail in America is to note that simple tolerance is not sufficient. Pluralism is about

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a seeking to understand others and having a deep interest in learning about other religions as we start to live together as neighbors. We cannot just live side by side anymore, never truly knowing about the other people and their traditions and faith. If one is just tolerant of another human being, one is not required to understand the person and seek out more about them. Tolerance of another human being is too minimal of an expectation of humanity; one needs to seek out with full interest in coming to an understanding of this other human being.

Another key factor of pluralism that Eck points out is that pluralism does not in fact encourage relativism, even though many people who view pluralism as a negative notion think otherwise. Relativism is the letting go of one's own convictions and beliefs in order to peacefully agree with others. This is not Pluralism. Pluralism is about staying committed to one's own beliefs while not being afraid of encountering those outside one's own faith, and being open to the learning and understanding of other religions. Diana Eck is actually an excellent example of how this can be accomplished. Eck is a Christian, a Methodist, who has kept to her own faith throughout her life yet also keeps a very open mind to help bring religions together in America, through dialogue and understanding of each other and our own traditions.

Pluralism is not about fusing all religions together, as Eck explains, but it is instead about recognizing the uniqueness and the strength of each religion and appreciating and accepting the differences between each. It is NOT syncretism, which is the creation of a new religion by the fusion of all the diverse elements of each religion. Pluralism is focused and based on respect for diversity and the differences between religions that comes with that. The aim is not to "create a world-wide temple of all faiths. It is rather to find ways to be distinctively ourselves and yet be in relation to one another" (Eck 1993, 190-91). The most important part of pluralism is interreligious dialogue. Pluralism is dependent on this seeking to understand one another through dialogue and conversations. It is not about coming to any kind of agreement with one another, but really mostly about understanding of one another's religious faith and traditions. Disagreements are inevitable, since America is such a diverse place made up of a variety of different views and opinions. But it is important to note that disagreements do not have to lead to conflict or segregation. Rather, dialogue can bring a deeper sense of humility and respect for one another's differing views of the Truth, and some higher being, and their underlying faiths of their own religions.

There are often many barriers that are set up in religion and religious thought that holds humans back from social and moral advancement. All people need to do, though, is go out and learn and understand one another better, then religious pluralism as well as cultural pluralism can prevail. It is important to see that perhaps the teachings of Jesus, Mohammad, Abraham, Buddha, and Vishnu are not the only ways to Truth, but to see that they all are ways to reaching this Truth. This is why when dialogue is brought on between people, no suggestion of superiority may be expressed. That would not bring genuine and equal dialogue between one another and would instead promote tension and violence among religions. Not even through scripture or biblical passages, nor through other material evidence, can one religion claim to be more superior or absolute than any other religion. All religions must realize that they all contribute to both the good and the bad of this world. All have parts of the absolute Truth within them, but in order to see that, we cannot pretend to see or relay what God or some higher being sees. We must realize that no one knows the full, eternal, Truth. Therefore we must realize that we all help to contribute to moral and ethical parts of the absolute Truth, though no ONE religion has the full Truth of the world and universe. Interreligious dialogue is important not only for learning about others, but for learning about ourselves as well. It helps to see a broader sense of Truth and well-being of humanity.

Pluralists recognize that many people have their own commitments. But the difference between pluralists and exclusivist or inclusivists is that they are not afraid to encounter one another and learn and understand one another, through any differences and similarities that they may have. We need to create this ability to be open; we need to create the space and means to allow for interreligious dialogue. Another criticism of pluralism is that pluralists are open to anything and everything that comes their way. However, it is important to note that religious pluralism is not a form of radical openness to everything in this world; it is radical openness to Truth and God (or some higher being or faith) that seeks to enlarge one's own view and understanding of these notions through dialogue. For pluralism to fully prevail in this society we must realize that it is important to be one's own distinctive and unique self while still finding ways to be in relation and understanding of one another as well. The most important notion to understand about pluralism is that we all must find common ground through interreligious dialogue. We do not need to agree, but instead to be able to produce true, real, ever-lasting relationships with one another. We need to form friendships based on mutual understanding, not

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upon agreement, and we must have constant communication to continue these transformative and eye-opening relationships with one another. Without dialogue, isolation and segregation persist and violence will occur because there are no bridges made between people, no real relationships among people are formed.

Through dialogue comes mutual understanding and mutual transformation. Dialogue is understanding ourselves, and our faith, more clearly and thus being able to understand another person and his or her faith clearer as well. Dialogue is not debate between two positions or views but instead a truth-seeking encounter, a process of understanding ourselves better as well as one another, through mutual transformation. Some might say that this shows weakness of one's faith, but when one truly thinks about it, what kind of faith has refused to be tested by real encounters with other people? What faith has never been challenged by another human being, declaring his or her own faith as being better or having the absolute Truth? In order to fully know oneself and to be fully devoted to one's own faith, it is important to learn about other faiths, learn about other claims of holding the absolute Truth. Dialogue between people is taking interest in what orients others in the world, what do they question, what do they believe in, and what do they feel are their most cherished and prized values? The final aim of dialogue is to form a cooperative, supportive, accommodating, and respectful transformation of our global and local diverse cultures. As Native American Chief Calf of Blackfeet delicately and clearly put it in response to one man who spent his whole life on only one path, "there are many paths and how can you know the best path unless you have walked them all?"... I am one hundred years old and I know that sometimes many paths go to the same place" (quoted in Eck 1993, 178).

It is important to see, as Buddhism stresses, that we are all interdependent in this world. Buddhism describes the complexity and relatedness of our world in that we as a whole suffer the consequences of the part and so we as a whole must address solutions together. We are all affected by everyone and everything around us. Thus, we should not talk "about" others in an objective sense, but in a real dialogue we will and should talk "with" you. Both the interreligious dialogue that goes on as well as the interreligious conflict of the world today makes one extremely aware of our constant and close interactions with one another. As Martin Luther King spoke at the time of Montgomery Bus Boycott, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method" (quoted in Eck 1993, 212). Many Christians have participated in

Gandhi's traditions and process of interpretation as Gandhi and his followers have participated in many Christian traditions as well.

Gandhi is a great example of potential meanings of pluralism because of his commitment to his own Hindu traditions in life as well as his openness of dialogue with others. He went from mutual understanding to mutual transformation of himself and others, as seen through this statement of Gandhi's, "Truth, or God, cannot be the exclusive possession of any one people, but is the very transcendence of ourselves that calls us into relationship with others" (quoted in Eck 1993, 206). Gandhi expressed and contributed to pluralism in all aspects of his life. "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be shut. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. Mine is not the religion of the prison house" (quoted in Eck, 210). Another great quotation from Gandhi shows that another important factor of pluralism is to study world religions, both inside and outside of the classroom: "...If we are to respect others religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world religions is a sacred duty" (quoted in Eck, 219). All people should learn of the diverse religions of this world. This could be the first step to the further inquiry and understanding of others and their different faiths.

Through dialogue comes truth and honesty, which allows for ignorance and prejudices to disappear. Subjects of this dialogue begin with the questions that arise from our common context as human beings of this world as we live together, such as education, government, AIDS, family and children, and violence and people's responses to such violence. Dialogue can help to find out people's meanings of justice, humanities, as well as their relation to any higher beings or absolute Truth. Dialogue also consists of understanding how we make just and moral decisions and asking such informative questions as: Who is the Buddha? Why do the Jews think of themselves as the chosen people? What exactly does taking the body and blood of Christ mean? We are the keepers of both our own images and of other's images and so we should make a pact to only have such images if we first know and understand the facts and details of that other religious image that we are trying to portray. We must understand too that we do not all have the same criteria or come with the same backgrounds, and so we cannot begin by insisting on agreeing on things or coming up with any common criteria. We need to see that dialogue is not a debate between people but a search and common interest for gaining a wider understanding of the Truth. We cannot come to address the problems of the

world without first tackling the basic intolerance, the fear, and the misunderstanding that come to separate us from one another.

Another important aspect of pluralism is to realize that we are all majorities and minorities somewhere in this world. Being a part of a majority brings presumptions, insensitivities, and power, while being a member of a minority brings feelings of vulnerability and lack of power. To truly understand one another we need to come together to fight against discrimination and violence towards people of different religious backgrounds. For example Jews should not be the first and only people to speak out against violence against Jews. Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and so on should also be opposed to such violence and should voice their opinion, since we are all interdependent of each other in this world. "Being able to feel the hurt of one another and to speak out on behalf of one another is one of the great spiritual challenges of an interdependent world" (Eck 1993, 20).

We need to see the relatedness of each other and to have ongoing trust and mutual criticism of each other to be acceptable aspects of dialogue because they are valuable parts of this interreligious exchange. It also can involve apologies and reparation. We need to imagine our world and community as "we," living together as a community of communities and seeing that all life is interrelated. We need a revolution of theological attitudes to see the importance of such commitment to the understanding of each other and the interdependence of all of our lives. Our own commitments to our faith can enable us and motivate us to join with one another to solve the problems of our interdependent and inter-reliant world. As Martin Luther King once said, "A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies" (quoted in Eck 1993, 229).

There have been several excellent programs and organizations that have been created to further the progress and hope of religious pluralism through interreligious dialogue. The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) is the oldest known group that was created for these purposes. The International Association for Religious Freedom began in 1900 in Boston. In 1936, in Britain, the World Congress of Faiths was launched to bring people of various religions together and make dialogue. In 1968 the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) worked explicitly on peace and disarmament issues as a non-governmental organization of the United Nations. In 1988 the

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North American Interfaith Network (NAIN) was created to coordinate and facilitate an interfaith movement that still continues to grow today. Also, right here in Columbus we have the Interfaith Association of Central Ohio. It is a non-profit organization created to provide dialogue, education, and various activities to bring different people together to better understand many different religions.

As our country becomes even more diverse, as more immigrants are pouring onto American land hoping for a better life full of freedom and prosperity, it is an even more important time to join together, through dialogue, to become better informed in understanding our neighbors today.

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