

A New Religious America: Managing Religious Diversity in a Democracy: Challenges and Prospects for the 21st Century

Keynote Address delivered By Professor Dr. Diana L. Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies, Harvard University, USA, at MAAS International Conference on Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from August 20-21 2002.

It is a great pleasure and honor to be here at this gathering this morning to address the question of Religious Diversity and Religious Tolerance in a Democratic Society. There could be no more important question in our world today than the question of how we negotiate our religious differences in a world in which all of us now live together in greater proximity than ever before.

As we think about the movements that have reshaped the world in which we live in the past half-century, even in the past decade, there are many key words that come to mind. There is the term "globalization" which has many meanings, both positive and negative. Globalization has made all of us more acutely aware of the ways in which our currencies, our economies, our political fortunes, our attempts at waging war and our attempts at building peace are all inter-linked. "Interdependence" is another key term, and is a concomitant of globalization. It is not possible to "go it alone" in the kind of world in which we live, for there is no such thing as "alone." As religious communities and as nations our futures are inextricably linked.

Along with the globalization of world systems has come the movement of people as refugees and as economic and political migrants. The demography of our world has changed, and our way of looking at a world of religious, cultural, and ethnic difference must now begin to catch up with those changes. One of my colleagues at Harvard has described the post-cold war world as one that will be marked by rigid adherence to civilizational identities, and ultimately a "clash of civilizations." Some people believe that his dire predictions of a clash of Islam and the West has been borne out in the events of September 11 and their global aftermath. Some may make a persuasive case for this view, but to my mind it is missing the critical analysis of the changing demography of our world. It is missing the critical analysis of the global currents of culture and religion that have come with this new geo-religious reality.

Just where, we must ask, are the so-called Confucian, Islamic, and Hindu worlds that will be the forces with which the so-called West must reckon? They are everywhere, today. It is precisely the interpenetration and proximity of great civilizations and cultures that will be the hallmark of the twenty-first century. The map of the world in which we live cannot be color coded as to its Christian, Muslim, Hindu identity, but each part of the world is marbled with the colors and textures of the whole. People of different religious traditions live together all over the world -as majorities in one place, as minorities in another.

This is a fact you have long known in your distinctive ways in Malaysia. It is a fact we are grappling with in new ways in the United States. America has become, over the past forty years, a truly multi-religious society. The new demography of America has come largely since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act, which eliminated many of the discriminatory quotas that had characterized American immigration policy for decades. New immigrants have come to American shores from all over the world and have become citizens. They have brought with them not only their luggage and economic aspirations, but their Qur'ans and Bhagavad Gitas, their images of Krishna and Murugan, their incense to light before the Bodhisattvas on their Buddhist altars. It is important to recognize just how much

these past forty years have changed America. The 2000 census reveals that eleven percent of us are now foreign-born, with the majority coming from Asia and Latin America.

So, speaking as an American today in 2002, I would like to make clear to all of you that the "Islamic world" is not somewhere else other than America. No indeed, the United States is part of the Muslim world. Chicago with its seventy mosques and half a million Muslims is part of the Muslim world. Washington D.C. where the Islamic Society of North America will gather ten thousand strong for their annual convention in just ten days time is part of the Muslim world. That fact is important for America; and it is important for the rest of the Muslim world in which American Muslims now participate. This morning I was able to open my email here in Kuala Lumpur and read an invitation from the Islamic Center of Long Island in New York. It was for a "Religious Solidarity Day" of reflections, remembrance, prayer and unity to be held at the mosque at the one-year anniversary of the attacks of September 11. Dr. Faroque Khan wrote:

As spokesperson for Islamic Center of Long Island in New York I often get asked questions like: 1) Where are the moderate Muslim voices? 2) Are you with us or against us? 3) What have you done for America since "9/11"? 4) Does your Mosque fund terrorists overseas? Well, if you like answers to these and other similar questions, meet first hand the victims of 911, hear from the mother of a 23 year old who gave his life rescuing others at WTC. Learn about the impact of Patriot act and secret detentions and most importantly see first hand how a vibrant Muslim community in NY worked hand in hand with Christian/Jewish and other groups after 911 to make NY a better place for all, we invite you to a very special memorial program at ICLI on Sunday Sept 8th from 10 am to 1 p.m. as per the attached program.

Three things interest us about this announcement: First, the obvious involvement of the Muslim community in Long Island civic life. Second, the ability of this community to provide space for what will surely be some sharp criticism of the "Patriot Act" and the "secret detentions" following 9/11, a critical dissent that is a sure sign of a participatory community. Third, the involvement of the community in interfaith outreach, especially in relation to Christian and Jewish neighbors. All this bespeaks a confident, participatory Muslim community, even in the most difficult of times.

And what about Buddhism? I have often said that Los Angeles, with its multitude of Buddhist communities spanning the whole of Asia, is the most complex Buddhist city in the world. Its Chinese temples, its Korean and Japanese temples, its Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao temples, its Tibetan communities --all these partakes of the cultures and religious ways of all of Asia. But the Buddhism of Los Angeles also includes the entire spectrum of "new Buddhists," the native born Americans who, by the millions, practice meditation and have built hundreds of meditation centers with Tibetan, Zen, Korean Zen, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Thai teaching lineages.

And Hinduism? Cities like Pittsburgh, Nashville, Atlanta, and Houston have splendid Hindu temples and have seen the magnificence of temple consecration rites most of these new immigrants had never witnessed in India. They are part of whatever one might mean by the "Hindu world," as are the multitudes of Hindus here in Malaysia and they are facing the challenging task of passing on some form of the Hindu tradition to their children and grandchildren, the second and third generation. In the fall of 2000 at the time of the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, a Hindu opened a joint session of the U.S. Congress with the daily invocation. He was a priest from the new Siva-Vishnu Temple in Cleveland, Ohio. And there are also Sikhs who have built gurdwaras from New Jersey to California and have taken

seriously the promise of religious freedom, litigating for their right to wear a turban on a hard-hat job or on the Los Angeles police force. And there are Jains who have trained their children in a curriculum of non-violence and insist that school cafeterias have clearly marked vegetarian options; Jains who offered prayers for peace in the Ohio state legislature in the days following the catastrophes of September 11.

In America, we are still in the process of understanding the new religious reality that is ours. Our newfound complexity links us as Americans to virtually every part of the world through the traditions and experiences of our newest citizens. This complexity requires that we appropriate anew the fundamental freedoms assured by our Constitution: the free-exercise of religion and, along with it, the non-establishment of religion. To be sure, religious diversity is a concomitant of religious freedom. And religious diversity requires a very strong civic tolerance for people who may differ from one another in profound ways. Beyond tolerance, I would argue, freedom of religion requires the energetic engagement of people of different faiths in creating a common society, for the foundation of democracy is participation.

Pilgrimage to Pluralism

I speak to you today about the United States, not because America has the answers, but because America has struggled with these issues of religious difference, religious tolerance, and democracy from the very beginning. The Pilgrims and Puritans who sailed the seas from Europe to establish communities in a new world wanted to be free to practice their religious faith. At first, they were not thinking about a wider ethic of religious freedom when they clung to the shores of the Atlantic and created new communities. They were thinking about survival. History reminds us that they did not, for the most part, consider the Native peoples they encountered in America as people of another religious way of life, but as heathen who had no religion at all. And history reminds us that as the decades brought more and more settlers from America to Europe, our Christian ancestors did not, in fact, create widely tolerant communities. The Puritans envisioned a society, a Biblical Commonwealth, decisively shaped by their own form of Christianity. They were concerned primarily with religious freedom for themselves and did not see religious freedom as a foundation for common life with people who differed from them. In seventeenth century Puritan Boston, for example, Solomon Franco, a Sephardic Jewish merchant, was "warned out" of town. An anti-Catholic law was enacted stating "that no Jesuit or ecclesiasticall person ordained by the authoritie of the pope shall henceforth come within our jurisdiction. . . ." The Puritan establishment of Boston put four Quakers to death on the gallows on Boston Common. Dissenters like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchison had to flee the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of their non-conformist religious beliefs, settling in what is now Rhode Island.

During the long argument that produced a nation out of thirteen colonies, there were those who wanted to establish a state religion in the new world and those who urged tolerance and freedom for all religions. The principle of religious freedom eventually won the day and was written into the Bill of Rights: that there shall be no establishment of any given religion, no sect of Christianity, not even Christianity itself, and that there shall be no infringement of the free exercise of religion. The most critical lesson was this: The freedom we seek for ourselves, we must also cherish for everyone, even those with whom we disagree. It is significant that the founders and framers of the Constitution were, to be sure, people of faith. The likes of Jefferson and Madison actually argued their case for a secular Constitution on religious grounds. Our freedom is grounded in the God-given freedom of the mind to think and to choose. Standing for religious freedom --even freedom from any form of religion-- is

grounded in the very freedom ordained by God. A state that would enforce uniformity of religion is against the very principles of God's sovereignty and ultimacy. God did not propagate truth by coercion, so why should we?

Such a vision of religious freedom was not part of the heritage of most European newcomers to America. In England and France there had been state established and supported religion. And there had been a ghastly legacy of bloody wars in the name of religion. The new American democracy turned away from that legacy toward the separation of church and state, and the free-exercise of religion.

Interestingly, religion in the new country became stronger precisely because the churches no longer had support from public tax coffers; they had to compete with one another in the free market of Christian ideas in order to thrive, and one of the consequences of this unprecedented approach to religious freedom was the proliferation of churches. When the Frenchman Alexis de Toqueville traveled around America in the 1820s, he discovered, to his surprise, that severing the ties between church and state seemed to make religion stronger, rather than weaker. Unlike France, where the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom seemed to march in opposite directions, in America they seemed "intimately united" and "reigned in common over the same country." Churches needed to win the support of parishioners in order to survive, and the spirit of voluntarism inspired a lively and intense competition in religion and the creation of a multitude of "denominations" that have become a distinctive feature of American religion. Toqueville wrote, "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America; and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth." He called religion the "first of political institutions," astutely discerning that while 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.

The history of making this unprecedented vision of religious tolerance and religious freedom into a firm foundation for a complex society is actually a very rocky one. If you want to know just how rocky this pilgrimage to pluralism has been, look at our nineteenth-century history. Ask the Catholics and Jews, whose history in the U.S. has included bitter periods of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. Ask how the Chinese were received, who built makeshift temples on the west coast and in the Rocky mountains in the 1850s and 1860s, or ask how it went for the Sikhs who were called "ragheads," and who built their first places of worship in California in the 1910s. Ask the Japanese Buddhists who were imprisoned in America's own concentration camps during World War II. Ask the Native peoples of America, who did not win the clear right to practice their religious life-ways until the passage of the Native American Religious Freedom Act in 1968. Ask the Muslim and Sikh Americans who have felt the sting of a backlash in the months following 9/11. But through all this, the principle of the non-establishment and free-exercise of religion been a constant corrective to the excesses of intolerance.

The United States motto, E Pluribus Unum, "Out of Many, One," has been easy to put on our coins, but difficult to implement in our society. How are our diversity and our oneness related? There have been many voices in this debate, but let me give you a sense of three approaches, three ways of handling "difference." First, there have been exclusivist voices: the oneness of the unum, of the nation, requires the exclusion of those who are different. The manyness of difference poses a threat to oneness. Second, there are strong assimilationist or

inclusivist voices, which insists that the nation's oneness requires the many to shed their differences and become assimilated into the normative culture. Third, there are pluralist voices who see the nation's oneness as shaped by the encounter of the many, the engagement of the many. We hear all three voices in our history, and we can discern all three in today's arguments over the new immigration and American multiculturalism.

Exclusivism: Go Home!

On August 13, 1993, the Cultural Affairs Officer of the Police Department called Pirun Sen, one of the leaders of the small Cambodian Buddhist community that had recently settled in Portland, Maine. "I am sorry to bother you so early in the morning. . . Vandals broke into the temple house last night. I think when they discovered all of the Buddhist things in it they decided to mess it up a bit. Can you meet me in twenty minutes?" With a heavy heart, Pirun Sen rushed to the temple and met the police at the small gray house they had dedicated as the Watt Samaki Buddhist Center. The windows of the blue sedan parked in the yard were smashed; the door had been hacked open with an axe; the contents of the Buddha hall were strewn around the yard. When he ventured inside, Pirun Sen saw the worst devastation of all: the words "Dirty Asian, Chink, Go Home" written across the wall. He closed his eyes, frightened and sickened by what he saw.

This is exclusivism, demanding that difference be destroyed, that those who are different go home. Wherever home may be, it's not here. When vandals broke into the newly constructed Hindu-Jain Temple in Pittsburgh and smashed the white marble images of the Hindu deities, they wrote the word "Leave!" across the main altar. That is the simple message of exclusivism: what is foreign should leave. Today's immigrants confront both the graffiti and the violence of xenophobia and hatred in the many rude and raw ways that force us to take a look at our long history of dealing with difference by excluding it. "Why don't you go back to where you came from!" shouted a North Carolina grade-school student at a Muslim classmate, wearing her headscarf, in the weeks following September 11. The little girl turned to him and said, calmly, "I came from Connecticut."

The narrative of exclusion has long been part of the American story. With the new intensity of mid-nineteenth century immigration, "Leave!" was the cry of what came to be called Nativist movements --those who claimed the old Protestant Anglo-Saxon core population as "native" and looked on newcomers, especially Catholics and Jews, with suspicion. The Nativist accusation was that it was difficult to be a good American and a good Catholic at the same time because the very freedom of mind and speech on which democracy depends was, in their view, usurped by the Church and the Papacy. This characterization took a long time to die. Not really until John F. Kennedy addressed the question specifically during his 1960 campaign, and not really until he was elected President, did it begin to dissipate.

Jews also experienced the exclusions of America, especially social exclusion. In 1877, Joseph Seligman, a successful Jewish banker and a friend of the late Abraham Lincoln, was not permitted to register as a guest at the Grand Union Hotel in Sarasota Springs, New York, a form of exclusion that would be repeated thousands of times for over one hundred years. In these decades of the late nineteenth century, Jews were accused of not assimilating to American culture and keeping themselves separate and aloof, but were simultaneously refused admission to schools and universities, clubs, hotels and resorts.

The exclusionist agenda had many targets, but Asians were the group most directly and specifically named and attacked. "Asian exclusion" became embodied in a series of

immigration acts, defining in increasingly restrictive terms which immigrants could enter the U.S. and which groups could qualify for citizenship. We know that a sense of "identity" is often shaped by the categorization of the "other," and in terms of American national identity in the nineteenth century, the clearest "other" apart from the African American population was Asian.

The Chinese exclusion act was passed in 1882. In arguing in favor of the act, John Franklin Miller, a senator from California, insisted that the Chinese culture is wholly "other" -- unchanging, wholly immutable. The anti-Chinese movement was not cast in explicitly religious terms, but deep cultural and civilizational terms. The two civilizations of East and West, he argued, have now met on the west coast of America. They are "radically antagonistic, and as impossible of amalgamation as are the two great races who have produced them. Like the mixing of oil and water, neither will absorb the other." In sum, he argues, since the Chinese will never adapt to American culture, they must be kept out.

Today the sheer prejudice of groups like the Asiatic Exclusion League seems astonishing. Today, American citizens of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese origin are elected to public offices, conduct our greatest symphonies, and lead our universities. Voices of exclusion remain and sometimes become visible in the graffiti of intolerance, but as we assess prospects for the future, exclusion cannot be viable. The exclusion of "difference" however defined is not consonant with a democracy based on freedom of conscience and religion.

Assimilation: The Melting Pot of Difference

A second attitude toward difference in America is summed up in the word "assimilation." The most vivid image here is the melting pot, the crucible where differences dissolve into the common pot, adding their flavors, but losing their form. Newcomers shed difference in order to blend in. This is what we might call an "inclusivist" point of view: people are welcomed to come --and be like "us."

This is the "melting pot" image of America. It was a Jewish writer, Israel Zangwill, who first popularized the "melting pot" image of America in his play entitled "The Melting Pot,," which opened in 1908 at the crest of America's most massive era of immigration. The play's hero, David, an immigrant from Russia, puts it this way as he surveys the immigrants at Ellis Island: "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand good folk, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like those, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to --these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians --into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American!"

Here, becoming American in this view means shedding difference. One of the sites of early twentieth century assimilation was American industry, and Henry Ford's plant in Detroit had a "Ford English School Melting Pot." A cartoon of the period displayed its ethos in vivid visual form. Immigrants in their national costumes were depicted on the "wheel of change." As the wheel turned, all the costumed Europeans in national dress were dipped into the melting pot and rose again as new Americans, wearing house-dresses and business suits, and carrying American flags. In today's terms, such assimilation would mean that the Sikhs building a gurdwara in Southern California should get rid of the golden domes of India in favor of the predominant architectural style of southern California. Muslims women should forego distinctive Islamic dress, and the Muslim policeman in Newark should shave his beard to fit in with the rest of the clean-shaven police force.

As an approach to this widening diversity, the assimilationist assumes that immigrants will come and blend in, contributing to the cultural mix, but ultimately relinquishing the most distinctive aspects of their home culture to take on American culture. Of course, moving from one part of the world to another as an immigrant inevitably involves some forms of assimilation. In fact, everyone is changed in the "melting pot" of assimilation.

But religious differences do not melt so easily. And the melting pot has never been an adequate image to describe some of the deepest dimensions of America's encounter with difference. The unum of the one cannot and does not, in fact, mean uniformity and sameness.

Pluralism: The Symphony of Difference

There have also been strong pluralist voices in thinking about difference, and some of the most visionary have come from minority groups. Early in the debate over Chinese exclusion, the Black abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass called America "composite nation" destined to become "the most perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family that the world has ever seen." To fulfill this vision, he insisted that the U.S. draw upon the distinctive gifts and energies of people from every nation, including the Chinese. And as for religion, "We should welcome men of every shade of religious opinion, as among the best means of checking the arrogance and intolerance which are the almost inevitable concomitants of general conformity. Religious liberty always flourishes best amid the clash and competition of rival religious creeds."

All will be "molded" into Americans not by uniformity, but by observing the same law, supporting the same government, enjoying the same liberty, and vibrating with the same national enthusiasm. Douglass did not use the term "pluralism," but his vision of a "composite nation" strikes me as a pluralist vision in which differences, including religious differences, become the building blocks of a new community.

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 in it 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 its unity in the image of the symphony, not the melting pot. America is a symphony orchestra, sounding not unison, but in harmony, with all the distinctive tones of our many cultures. He described this 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. One has a right to be different, not just in dress and public presentation, but in religion and creed, united only by participation in the common covenants of citizenship. American civilization is "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. But the question is, do the dominant classes in America want such a society?

I find this an appealing image --the symphony of society, each retaining its difference, each sounding together, with an ear to the music of the whole. We know, of course, that disharmony and even cacophony is part of the noise of diversity. How do we create a society together out of all this diversity? There is, after all, something we "play" together: a Constitution, a Bill of Rights, and a way of living with our deepest differences that is premised on these common covenants. Learning how to do that requires our patience with the disharmonies of practice and the dissonance of dissenters.

The symphony image needs some modification, however, as Kallen himself seemed to realize. A symphony is usually written in its entirety before it is played, and no society or nation has such a script. The work of cultural pluralism requires revisiting and reclaiming the energy and vision of democracy in every generation and with every new arrival. Perhaps we need to stretch our imagination to something more akin to jazz, for in jazz "the playing is the writing." And because it is not all written out, it requires even more astute attention to the music of each instrument, it requires collaboration and invention among the players. 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. Our challenge today is whether it will be jazz or simply noise, whether it will be a symphony or cacophony, whether we can continue to play together through dissonant moments.

As the United States becomes more and more religiously, culturally, and racially diverse, we have no choice but to practice the scales of pluralism. When I think of American diversity, I often think of New Hampshire Avenue in the outskirts of Washington, D.C., where a Cambodian Buddhist monastery, a Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a Muslim community center, a Disciples of Christ Church, a Synagogue and a Gujarati Hindu temple sit virtually side by side in the same neighborhood. This is diversity, to be sure. But it will require the efforts and the practice of everyone to create a truly pluralist society in which people from all these backgrounds consider themselves neighbors in a common enterprise. Pluralism is not a given, but requires our practice, our creative work, not alone, but together.

The diversity of New Hampshire Avenue is not simply a curiosity for a Sunday drive. What it represents has profound implications for every aspect of American public life. What is happening to America as all of us begin to renegotiate the "we" of "we the people?" That "we" in the United States is increasingly complex, not only culturally and racially, but also religiously. What will this mean for American electoral politics, for the continuing interpretation of "church-state" issues by the Supreme Court, for American public education and the controversies of school boards, for hospitals and health care programs with an increasingly

diverse patient population, and for colleges and universities with an increasingly multireligious student body?

Today, throughout the world, old multireligious societies are in danger of fragmenting under the pressures of politicizing religious movements. New multireligious societies in Europe and North America are questioning whether pluralism has perhaps gone too far. Complex identities are being simplified and minted into smaller and smaller coins and religious markers of identity are often presumed to be the most divisive of all differences. It is a dangerous time for religiously plural societies, and yet it is a time in which boldly practicing the scales of pluralism is more important than ever.

After September 11

On the morning of September 11, 2001 when hijacked planes exploded into the towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a new era began for us all, in every part of the world. The meaning of that new era is not yet clear, but let me recount something of my observations from the point of view of an American scholar of religion. First, it is important to know that within hours of the attack a group of national Muslim organizations had joined together in a joint statement condemning the violence as both Muslims and Americans. Months later many Americans were still asking why Muslims had not raised their voices, but the truth is they did, and repeatedly, but they were not heard and reported widely enough. Second, within hours of the attack an unprecedented rash of xenophobic incidents began - from low level harassment, ethnic slurs, broken windows, and threatening calls, to arson, beatings, and murders. Third, while the roster of hate crimes was growing, so were prodigious efforts at local and national outreach across religious boundaries -- interfaith services and interfaith education programs.

One thing became certain: the challenge of relations between and among people of different religious and cultural traditions, both in the United States and around the world moved closer to the top of the agenda and became more urgent than ever before.

We must be frank about the fraying of the American social fabric. Our wake-up call was not only the violence and destruction of the hijacked planes. We also found reciprocal violence in our midst: the firebombing of a mosque in Denton, Texas; the storming of a mosque by an angry crowd in Bridgeview, Illinois; the shooting at worshippers approaching a mosque in Seattle. An angry man drove his car through the plate-glass door of the new mosque in Cleveland, Ohio. In Alexandria, Virginia someone hurled bricks wrapped with hate-messages through the windows of an Islamic bookstore, shattering the glass. Rifle-fire pierced the stained glass dome of the mosque in Parrisburg, a suburb of Toledo. The rash of scatter-shot incidents included Hindu temples attacked in suburban Chicago and in Matawan, New Jersey, a Gujarati-owned convenience fire-bombed in Somerset, Massachusetts, and an Iraqi pizzeria burned down in Plymouth, home of the Pilgrims.

Sikhs were also attacked, their turbans making them ready targets of those who, in their ignorance, saw them as cousins of Osama bin Laden. The watchdog group called the Sikh Media-watch and Resources Taskforce (SMART) received reports of over two hundred incidents: a Sikh attacked with a baseball bat in Queens, shot with a paint-ball gun in New Jersey, beaten unconscious in Seattle, and assaulted at a stop light in San Diego. In Mesa, Arizona, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was shot and killed as he was planting flowers around his Chevron station and convenience store. The history of prejudice and stereotype

demonstrates that religious insignia and institutions often become key markers of "difference," the most visible targets for bigotry and violence.

The documentary register of acts of violence is, of course, much easier to assemble than the register of new initiatives of cooperation and understanding. Yet assembling the evidence of new patterns of interreligious encounter and relationship is also important in discerning how the "we" is being reconfigured in multireligious America and in assessing our prospects for the future.

In the months since September 11, it is important to realize that the instances of interfaith outreach have outweighed the incidents of hate-crimes a thousand to one. The immediate xenophobic backlash revealed the ragged edges of America's complicated encounter with difference. But it also revealed something more foundational and finally, I believe, more heartening about American society. As a civil society "we the people" will not condone indiscriminate violence against neighbors of any faith or culture. And so it was, across America, in the wake of September 11. While one misguided would be patriot shot and killed Balbir Singh Sodhi, thousands poured out to the gas station he had owned and to the civic arena where his memorial service took place to say, with one voice, "This is not who we are!." By January 2002, the family of this Sikh man had received more than 10,000 letters and messages of support.

Similarly, in Denton, Texas a circle of interfaith leaders assembled immediately at the mosque for prayer and protection. The Palestinian 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 dozens of bouquets of flowers and hundreds of cards expressing their sorrow at what had happened. In Toledo, as Cherrefe Kadri, the woman who is the president of the Islamic community told it, "That small hole in the dome created such a huge outpouring of support for our Islamic community. A Christian radio station contacted me wanting to do something," she said. "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 that would be enough to circle the mosque, but 2000 people showed up to hold hands around the mosque. I was amazed!" Last week in Seattle, the Idriss Mosque that had experienced rifle-fire and harassment immediately after September 11 held a barbecue to thank the hundreds of neighbors who had organized a round-the-clock vigil to protect the mosque.

Not surprisingly, the interfaith networks and councils that had grown in America during the 1990s sprung into action with immediate civic leadership, and cities that had never had an interfaith civic council formed one. Virtually all of the community services in cities and towns across America involved leaders from a wide spectrum of religious communities. At the National Cathedral in Washington, Muzammil Siddiqi, leader of the Islamic Society of North America, was among those offering prayers. The Episcopal Bishop Jane Holmes Dixon said, "Those of us who are gathered here -Muslim, Jew, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu-- say to this nation and to the world that love is stronger than hate." At an interfaith service in the Bay Area, the Governor of California, Gray Davis, put it clearly: "Our enemies have failed to divide us. We are one people. We are Americans. We don't care if you were born in the Mission District or the Middle East."

These efforts continue. Let me offer a few more local examples from the section of our Pluralism Project website (<http://www.pluralism.org>) called "In the News":

- In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Association for Interfaith Relations hosted four panels of Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist participants in response to September 11. At Wayne State University in Detroit, women students organized a "Scarves for Solidarity" movement to wear headscarves in support of Muslim women students.
- On May 18, 2002, a four hundred citizens of Pittsburgh joined in a Celebrating Diversity walk, with Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist leaders.
- On June 6, 2002, an interfaith group in Kansas City brought people from the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh faiths together for a prayer gathering to remember September 11.
- On June 8, 2002, Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Columbus, Ohio announced plans to build a Habitat for Humanity house together this coming fall.
- On July 22, 2002, members of a Jewish congregation participated in Muslim prayers for the first time, hosted by Islamic Community in Southern Florida in a joint "Festival for Peace."

Education and outreach, fundamental to building relationships in a pluralist society, has been another positive prognostic of this period. As American bombers were leaving an airforce base in Missouri to fly non-stop to Afghanistan, mosques all over America were holding open-houses, inviting neighbors in to learn more about Islam, even in the face of a wave of Islamophobia. The Islamic Society of Boston in Cambridge published an open letter to their neighbors, saying: "We utterly condemn the use of terror to further any political or religious cause. As Muslims, we abhor the killing of innocent civilians. Our holy book, the Qur'an, teaches: 'If anyone kills an innocent person, it is as if he has killed all of humanity. And if anyone saves a life, it is as if he has saved all of humanity' (Ch. 5, verse 32). The letter announced a community open house to be held the following Sunday. It closed, "God willing, we can lend one another strength to find hope in these uncertain times." More than seven hundred people came to the open house, many of them visiting a mosque for the first time.

The story was the same across the country. In Austin, Texas, for example, hundreds showed up for the Sunday afternoon open house. A woman interviewed by the Austin American-Statesman put the matter plainly and succinctly for all of us when she said, "The time of not getting to know each other is over."

I take her words as a concise statement of America's task ahead: "The time of not getting to know each other is over." Getting to know each other is often not easy. As a leader of one of our Muslim organizations put it, "Never have I felt so harassed, and never have I felt so embraced." Harassed, yes, because he was stopped the first time he tried to board a plane. Embraced because when he finally got a flight to Washington DC it was to meet with other Muslim leaders and President Bush at the White House.

In this process of getting to know each other, the outreach of America's Muslim communities, even in this difficult time, was very important. The word iftar entered the common American lexicon for the first time as Muslim communities across the country invited friends and colleagues to share the fast-breaking meal with them at the end of each day of Ramadan. The mayor of Columbus, Ohio attended an iftar in one of the Islamic centers. Professors, classmates, and administrators in universities, including my own, were invited to evening prayers and an iftar meal by the Islamic Society. There was an iftar at the State Department for government employees, and for the first time in history, the White House hosted an iftar banquet for Muslims.

Pluralism Defined

Let me close, then, with a few words about pluralism. Pluralism is not an ideology, but rather the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences.

First, I would argue, that "pluralism" is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality. Religious diversity is an observable fact of American life today --from Flushing, New York where Sikhs and Jews worship across the street from one another, to San Diego, California where the Islamic Center and the Lutheran Church are next door neighbors. The makings of pluralism are surely here, but without any real engagement with one another, this might prove to be just a striking example of diversity. One can study this diversity, complain about there being too much diversity, or even celebrate diversity. But the diversity alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is not a given, but must be created. Pluralism requires participation, and attunement to life and energies of one another. In the world into which we now move, sheer diversity without this real engagement will be increasingly difficult and dangerous.

Second, I would propose that pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other, like the step taken by Milwaukee's Christians and Muslims when they signed that covenant pledging themselves to the process of mutual understanding. Although tolerance is no doubt a step forward from intolerance, it does not require new neighbors to know anything about one another. Tolerance comes from a position of strength. I can tolerate many minorities if I am in power, but if I myself am a member of a small minority, what does tolerance mean?

Today, with the free exercise of such a panoply of religious traditions in our nation and in our neighborhoods, a truly pluralist society will need to move beyond tolerance toward constructive understanding. Beginning to root out the stereotype and prejudice that form the fault-lines of fracture is critical for a multi-religious society. Tolerance can create a climate of restraint, but not a climate of understanding. Tolerance is far too fragile a foundation for a religiously complex society, and in the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

Third, I would insist that pluralism is not simply relativism. It does not displace or eliminate deep religious commitments, or secular commitments for that matter. It is, rather, the encounter of commitments. Some critics have persisted in linking pluralism with a kind of valueless relativism, in which all cats are gray, all perspectives equally viable and, as a result, equally unconvincing. 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. I consider this view a distortion of the process of pluralism. 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 less myopic view of one's own faith, pluralism is not premised on a reductive relativism, but on the significance and the engagement of real differences. . The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. In the world in which we live today, the language of dialogue is a language we will need to learn

In the late 1950s, the Catholic thinker John Courtney Murray described America's civic 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."

Murray sees the engagement of difference in a pluralistic society as modeled, not 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.

I would also contend that it is vital to health of religious faith, so that we appropriate our faith not by habit or heritage alone, but make it our own within the context of dialogue and engagement with people of other faiths. Such dialogue is not aimed at achieving agreement, but achieving relationship. Whether in the public school, the city council, or the interfaith council, commitments are not left at the door. The "common table" of civic life grows and its shape is re-figured with each new group of participants, each new seat added.

Today, the United States has joined multi-religious countries throughout the world in struggling to appropriate a positive, constructive, and creative pluralism. The challenge and the unparalleled opportunity we all face is to build societies, indeed nations, of many peoples with many cherished religious and cultural traditions. Beyond this, the challenge we all face is to build a world-wide culture of pluralism in which our differences become the source of our vibrancy and strength. We may not succeed, and we may find the world ever more deeply divided by our differences. But if we can succeed, this legacy of nations like the United States and Malaysia will be the greatest form of lasting leadership we can offer the world.