

Out of Incorporation, Pluralism **By Lucia Hulsether¹**

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Twenty years ago Diana Eck interpreted the United States national motto, *e pluribus unum*, as a slogan for American religious pluralism. Eck claimed that these words, engraved in the country's currency, capture the potential for "world's most religiously diverse nation" to hone difference as a civic strength, rather than as a threat or source of division. "*E pluribus unum*," she insisted, should not be read as a mandate for homogeneity. It aspires neither to exclude nor to assimilate expressions of difference. At its best this motto, and the nation it describes, locates "unum" not in religious sameness but in "oneness of a commitment to the common covenants of our citizenship out of the manyness of religious worlds."² "For the pluralist," Eck declared, "the American promise [is] to come as you are, with all of your differences, *pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship.*"

It is difficult to disagree with such high-minded rhetoric. Calls to religious pluralism—and invocations of its proud legacy—are ready-made rebuttals to calls for theocracy, religious violence, and racism. And yet such disagreements are many. Organizations established to promote pluralism—such as the Pluralism Project and the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)—have become lightning rods for interventions against the classically liberal ideals that they espouse.³ Pluralism, as articulated by these critics, is not the uncontroversial democratic telos that it initially may seem to be. They ask questions like the following: What are the "common demands of citizenship," and why does pluralism require adherence to them? Who gets to be a citizen? What naturalization procedure is required? In what political and economic system must citizens participate? What kind of subjectivity must "citizens" perform? On whose histories is this citizenship built? To what futures does it aspire?

The answers to such questions seem fairly clear in Eck's rendering of pluralism. Citizenship is measured against American citizenship; the progression of pluralism is charted through American history; the actualization of pluralism is witnessed in American electoral politics and, increasingly, American-style global capitalism.⁴ If pluralism retains "manyness" within its ultimate civic "oneness," the possibility for gaining entry rights into the "oneness"

¹ I am grateful to Jason Smith and Emily Owens for their lucid and generous feedback on this essay.

² Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Became the Most Religiously Diverse Nation on Earth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001): 31.

³ For a volume that compiles some of these critiques, see Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, ed. *After Pluralism: Rethinking Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). For an account of how a stress on liberal pluralism has reproduced imperial logics in the historiography of U.S. religion, see Rosemary R. Hicks, "Between Lived and the Law: Power, Empire, and Expansion in Studies of North American Religions," *Religion* 42, no. 3 (2012): 409–424.

⁴ For examples of the connection between American nationalism, citizenship, and the idea of American religious pluralism we need only consider key texts published on the topic. Two examples are Diana Eck's *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Became the Most Religiously Diverse Nation on Earth* and Eboo Patel's *On Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*. See sections below for elaboration of these points.

begins to sound increasingly conditional and circumscribed. With this concern at hand, a phalanx of scholars and activists has rejected pluralism both as an aspirational discourse and as a political program.

Such critics launch sharp accusations: Pluralism is a Trojan horse for U.S. military and economic imperialism. Interfaith dialogue, advanced in pluralism's name, is a civilizing project. Working in tandem, pluralism discourse and interfaith initiatives advance American exceptionalism, in ways both overt and covert, both conscious and unconscious, both actively instrumentalizing and *passé*. They announce that "America" is the most religiously diverse and/or most exceptionally pluralist nation on earth. This means that the United States and its citizens are uniquely capable of combatting religious extremism—through both directive intervention and soft development. All of this translates to a mandate for American global hegemony, exercised in the name of development, dialogue, and democracy.

Critical appraisals of religious pluralism have emerged within a broader academic turn to interrogate the limits of liberalism as political philosophy, mode of discourse, and affective economy. Scholars like Chandan Reddy, Wendy Brown, Roderick Ferguson, Jasbir Puar, and Rey Chow have argued that American imperialism is justified by the idea that the United States is uniquely capable of incorporating and managing diversity.⁵ Scholars within the academic study of religion have extended such critiques to the embrace of pluralism within their own discipline. As early as 2001, Peter Gardella mused that the "American attachment to pluralism and the universalism of our elite culture express the simultaneous drives toward freedom, riches, and global empire that have marked the whole history of Europeans on this continent."⁶ The critique is *not* that pluralism fails to be sufficiently inclusive. It is that its ideal of inclusion—especially when paired with soliloquies about the exceptional capacity of America to accommodate difference—recapitulates arguments to expand U.S. economic, political, and military power into further corners of the globe.

Yet liberal pluralism discourses have remained largely unmarred by critics of pluralism's disciplinary power. Indeed there has been no indication that advocates of pluralism are even aware of the gravity of the structural charges leveled against them. There is significant irony here—given that these groups of scholars share much in common. Both are preoccupied with human difference as a problem and a promise. They circulate in the same universities. They participate in the same professional associations. They are concerned about threats to human freedom. Presumably they all have good intentions. And still an impasse seems to divide them. It divides not "pluralists" from "extremists," nor "scholars of religion" from "theologians," nor "the west" from "the rest." It separates people

⁵ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Chandan Reddy, *Freedom With Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the U.S. State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁶ Peter Gardella, "Pluralisms in the United States and in the American Empire," *Religious Studies Review* 29, no. 3 (2003): 259.

who celebrate pluralism as ascension toward freedom and those who condemn it as a descent into tyranny.

Why have these groups of scholars remained so disconnected? In this essay I argue that their impasse is prefigured in part by the ways the most pervasive discourses of pluralism—those propagated by the Interfaith Youth Core and the Pluralism Project—tend to relate to their various critics.⁷ On one hand, discourses of liberal pluralism survive and grow by responding to a subset of their critics—those who critique them only on the basis of their capacity to accommodate more difference—and working harder to include them at the multicultural table. This is to their credit. On the other hand, the logic of liberal pluralism has thus far failed to conceptualize a response to critiques that would result in anything other than the simple inclusion of a new identity category at the multicultural table. It is exactly this incorporative logic that the most sophisticated critics of pluralism fault.

Pluralism as Philosophy of History

This special issue of the *Journal for Interreligious Studies* is framed by Diana Eck's definition of pluralism as the "energetic engagement with diversity, active seeking of understanding across lines of difference, encounter of commitments, and willingness to engage (and remain) in dialogue." Eck's definition asserts pluralism as an action that takes place in the present moment, as each individual seizes responsibility for creating a better world *today*. But, as the opening essay for this issue gently suggests, the habits prescribed by pluralism come with a history—Christopher Cantwell specifically names "America's founding documents"—which act as both their past precedent and their inspiration for subsequent work. This mode of historical consciousness, by which I mean not events themselves than the commitment to identify one's past in order to work toward a possible future, is the key to the discourse of pluralism. To explore the historical imagination of pluralism is to delve into the internal logic of this discourse. Ultimately, this inquiry uncovers the sites at which pluralism's flagship values—such as the commitment to engaging difference—reach a point of breakdown.

Pluralism is a complicated term that various actors have mobilized in myriad ways over the past three centuries. For the purposes of pluralism's role in contemporary conversation about religious diversity, however, it is possible to break its definition into three parts. It is an assertion of a *past legacy* (pluralism is in America's founding documents); an injunction to *present practices* (we live up to this legacy by coming to the table and committing to stay), and vision for a *better future* (our present habits hasten tomorrow's more unified world). Pluralism is a philosophy of history, wherein the past is marked by identitarian discord and the future is marked by collective reconciliation. Pluralism is an ethical

⁷ Of the numerous interfaith organizations in the US, I focus in this essay on the Interfaith Youth Core because of its impressive, unmatched role in popularizing interfaith initiatives on over 400 college campuses and providing to prospective interfaith leaders. IFYC staff have served on Presidential Interfaith Councils, consulted the State Department, and—since the organization was founded in 2002—won prominent grants from prominent nonprofit and corporate philanthropic groups.

program, where pluralist subjects transform discord into collaboration and reconciliation. *Out of many, one.*

In the United States, this process comes to its most developed fruition in the historical drama of the American nation-state. Eboo Patel explains it this way in a promotional video for his book, *On Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*:

I think the spine of the American project is pluralism, is this idea that we're a nation that welcomes the contributions of all communities and nurtures cooperation between those communities—and we were the first nation in human history to have that idea, to believe in that dream, and there's still people who don't believe in that dream. And what that means is that those of us who believe in the American project of pluralism cannot be shy, we have to be on the rise. ... [T]his is work that would make our founding fathers proud.⁸

Within this quotation, the basic ingredients to a pluralist philosophy of history—past legacy (“we were the first nation” and “founding fathers”), present practice (“welcomes the contributions of all communities and nurtures cooperation”), future goal (“we have to be on the rise”)—converge on the United States landscape. For Patel, this does not mean that America is special in *essence*; it means that American citizens have *made* America exceptional. National exceptionalism is built through exceptional enterprise; Americans have earned, and must continue to earn, their exceptional status on an international stage. Patel insists, “America is exceptional not because there is magic in our air but because there is fierce determination in our citizens. ... Every generation has to affirm and extend the American promise.”⁹

This imperative to “affirm and extend” is made urgent by a seeming litany of religious tensions gripping the world. “Increasing religious diversity is causing increasing religious conflict,” declares the Interfaith Youth Core.¹⁰ A cursory glance at today’s newspaper headlines—the ascent of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine, mass-kidnappings by Boko Haram in Nigeria, the trial of Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev—seems to reaffirm the high stakes of interfaith dialogue projects. Patel continues in the promotional clip,

If we are not advancing a positive, public discourse about religious diversity, we sacrifice that territory to terrorists, and folks who want to dominate, and folks who want to spread prejudice. Those people don't just go away. They get defeated. It's the forces of pluralism that rise up and live out the next

⁸ Eboo Patel, Interfaith Youth Core, website, “Sacred Ground,” <http://www.ifyc.org/sacred-ground> (accessed March 1, 2015).

⁹ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013): xxviii.

¹⁰ Laurie Goodstein, “An Effort to Foster Tolerance in Religion,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2011.

generation of the American project. Sacred Ground is a call to this generation's forces of pluralism.¹¹

The forms of violence and extremism that gain public reputation as being “terrorist” and “prejudiced”—the kinds of violence that demand intervention from a secular state that values pluralism— usually are coded as Muslim, racialized as non-white, and situated as either outside of the U.S. body politic or traitorous to it.¹² This is not a coincidence. William Cavanaugh has shown that the concept of “religious violence” emerged alongside the modern secular state as it sought to control and dominate populations elsewhere. Modern states cordon religion into a private sphere, while describing their public spaces as secular, rational, and neutral. What is understood as “religious violence” depends on the distribution of power. To condemn some forms of violence as “religious”—while simultaneously disavowing the religious genealogies of the secular state and its armies—is to underwrite other kinds of violence as neutral, rational, secular, and supportive of pluralist futures. The concrete effect of this discourse is to affirm the (rational, humanitarian) violence of a secular state, as deployed against (irrational, fanatical) violence of religious extremists (most often in the Middle East).¹³

Within this binary-producing discursive field, threats to the hegemony of the state and its pluralist ethos double as a mandate for the state to expand its reach. “There’s still people who don’t believe in that dream,” reminds Patel, “...and that means that those of us who believe in that dream have to be on the rise.” Threats to pluralism must be neutralized for the protection of the common. But preferably, those who pose a threat to pluralism are reformed and incorporated as part of its growing realm. This is the extension of the “American promise,” which finds expression in the extension of citizenship to people long denied it. The failures of pluralism are an argument for more and better pluralism. Menaces to pluralism are opportunities to expand its borders.

Expanding the border of the American democratic influence is, within the pluralist narrative espoused by Patel and Eck, an opportunity to achieve both *social* and *historical* progress. Such expansion writes the next chapter in a pluralist narrative. This is a developmentalist frame on history, wherein past inadequacies are replaced by a promise of a better future, through the work of enlightened subjects in the present. This form of historical reasoning is the inheritance of Enlightenment philosophy and the watermark of

¹¹ Patel, IFYC, “Sacred Ground,” <http://www.ifyc.org/sacred-ground> (accessed March 1, 2015).

¹² Certainly this is not *always* the case—one need only think of white Christian bombers of abortion clinics, often tagged as “religious extremists” in mainstream media—but on a grand scale, it is undeniable that the people most often targeted by secular interventions against religious extremism have black or brown bodies. Jodi Melamed lucidly describes how in the context of shifting regimes of race within neoliberal multiculturalism, “categories of privilege and stigma determined by ideological, economic, and cultural criteria overlay older, conventional racial categories so that traditionally recognized racial identities—black, Asian, white, Arab/Muslim—can now occupy both sides of the privilege/stigma opposition.” The overall *effects* of these discourses remain largely stratified along lines of race, in addition to producing new racial formations. Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text* 89 (Winter 2006): 42.

¹³ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Religious Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

modernity, described by Gustavo Benavides as marked by conscious “self-extrication from a situation now regarded as naïve.”¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown how these historicist narrative structures are repeated to different political ends by thinkers from Hegel, to Heidegger, to Marx.¹⁵ Christian evangelicals in particular have long made use of this genre in millennialist commitment to prepare the world for Christ’s return and to build multicultural churches. Consider, for example, a *Christianity Today* article, published on Martin Luther King Day in 2014, on the state of race in American churches. “Sunday morning remains one of the most segregated hours in American life,” the survey announced, gesturing toward King’s famous quip. And yet “most worshipers think their church is fine the way it is.”¹⁶ To fail to foster diversity within the universal church is to abrogate the duties of discipleship. “The Bible talks a lot about men and women from every tongue, tribe, and nation being in heaven,” a spokesperson admonished, “so it might be good to get accustomed to that heavenly expression here and now.”

Here, we have all of the basic ingredients of a laxly Hegelian philosophy of history. There is an assertion of an origin (the revelation of God’s word in the Bible); a future ideal (the kingdom of heaven); and a prescription for present action in the meantime (to diversify churches). The *Christianity Today* article and Patel’s quote mimic each other. In their intersecting madlib, “America” substitutes for “Kingdom of God”; “God” substitutes for “founders.”¹⁷ In one version, multiculturalism represents and actualizes the Kingdom of God. In the other account, multiculturalism represents and actualizes America.

My comparison of a Christian evangelical magazine with the Interfaith Youth Core should not be taken as an argument that Christian missions and interfaith projects are the same thing. Nor am I echoing the common argument that pluralism is covertly Christian.¹⁸

¹⁴ Gustavo Benavides, “Modernity,” in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP: 2000).

¹⁶ Bob Smietana, “Sunday Morning in America Still Segregated – and that’s OK With Worshipers,” *Christianity Today*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.lifewayresearch.com/2015/01/15/sunday-morning-in-america-still-segregated-and-thats-ok-with-worshippers/> (accessed February 1, 2015).

¹⁷ In the suggested “madlib” version of these pieces, the *Christianity Today* article would read, “American founding documents talk a lot about men and women from every tongue, tribe, and nation being in the nation, so it might be good to get accustomed to that national expression.” Patel’s quote above would read, “I think the spine of the Christian project is pluralism, is this idea that we’re a church that welcomes the contributions of all communities and nurtures cooperation between those communities—and we were the first people in human history to have that idea, to believe in that dream, and there’s still people that don’t believe in that dream. And what that means is that those of us who believe in the Christian project of pluralism cannot be shy, we have to be on the rise.”

¹⁸ A growing group of scholars suggests that American pluralism, and the secularism that supports it, is normatively Protestant. The argument is that the discourse of religion as ossified in United States law maps onto a normatively Protestant definition of religion as belief-centered, individual, and privatized—and disciplines subjects according to its rules. It is not possible to be counted as a “religious” subject if one’s practice is not legible to this concept of religion. For the most developed versions of this argument, see Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, ed. *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). For a thick historical account of how the legal category of religion has facilitated violence against

Rather, it is to examine developmentalist historical narratives as one potent move in a repertoire of exceptionalist claim-making, deployed by a wide variety of political, cultural, and religious organizations. Cultural studies scholar Jasbir Puar defines exceptionalism as a “paradoxical” form that “signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress.”¹⁹ In our examples, the *mastery of the linear teleology* is denoted by an assertion of a unique origin that is blooming into a reconciled future. Insofar as these narratives assume some version of teleological progress, the invocation of past materializing as a better future offers a sense of being superiors in a cosmic race into universal futures. And still, some actors operate outside the governing force of this trajectory—demonstrating that this particular destiny is a product of particular effort. These are the agents who, by educating and recruiting others, midwife the reconciled future. They cajole others from point A to point B. They are, so to speak, *in* but not *of* the teleology.

The rhetorical parallelism between the *Christianity Today* article and IFYC is not the only point of common ground between them. The somewhat counterintuitive affinity between a classically (if not politically) liberal interfaith NGO and certain evangelical churches manifests in an emergent effort to incorporate evangelical Christians into the interfaith movement. Patel urges interfaith leaders not to exclude evangelical and conservative people from their organizations—because interfaith work aims toward “bridging social capital” among “different” groups, rather than “bonding social capital” by bringing homogenous groups together. To bridge social capital is to engage more “identities” in projects that enhance civic life for the whole. *Out of many, one*. In ten years, IFYC has led interfaith organizations in broadening its general lexicon from “religious traditions” to “religious and philosophical traditions” (to include atheists and humanists) and from “people of faith” to “people who orient around religion differently” (to include anyone who has a relationship to “religion” as a category). Seemingly mundane examples about normative words belie the extent to which interfaith groups have become veritable entrepreneurs at expanding their constituencies. As with missionaries who gained global reach by translating the Bible into multiple languages, interfaith projects thrive on their capacity to accommodate identitarian claims about difference. This reconciliation of difference indexes historical progress.

Those who ascribe to developmentalist philosophies of history, whether stated in abstract terms or in terms of practices, need not change their structural form in response to conflicts with designated others. They annex new common ground. They move their borders. In other words: the presence of difference and critique is not an occasion for basic structural overhaul of the philosophy of history that informs pluralism. Rather, critique of pluralism is merely occasion for the territorial growth, incorporation of others, and historical ascent of pluralism. *Interfaith projects grow when they encounter new forms of*

Native American nations, see Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

difference to incorporate; they rely on critics for their growth. The incorporative thrust of pluralism discourse reflects the expansionist logic of empire, as it surrounds more people, builds more bridges, transgresses more borders, and wins more hearts for its cause.

Pluralist Dyspepsia

When pluralist and interfaith projects depend on the presence of critique for their own flourishing, it becomes difficult to constructively question their *structural* logic of incorporation. Again, in normal circumstances, every threat to pluralism is license for it to get better at its job. So when critics argue that the problem is not in a *failure to include*, but rather in the *politics of recognition and incorporation*, the critique easily gets lost in translation. The argument is not that advocates of pluralism and interfaith cooperation need to include more atheists, more black people, more Muslims, or more evangelicals in their organizations. The argument is that the incorporative project is the problem—namely because this is the logic of American empire, which itself becomes stronger by transgressing ever more borders and adding more and more subjects to its realm. If pluralists engaged the fundamental grievances of their critics, their developmentalist narrative might shift to the point of non-recognition.

When we accept as natural the basic terms on which so much of pluralism discourse is constructed—the primacy of the nation-state, the concept of “world religions,” a concept of redemption through linear time, the naturalness of the individual and self-contained subject—other configurations of difference and power are rendered not only invisible, but even unthinkable.²⁰ If we take the terms of the Pluralism Project and IFYC for granted, for example, it becomes quite difficult to see how discourses of religious diversity might contribute to the regimes of anti-Muslim violence that these organizations decry. We should analyze the increased prominence of interfaith initiatives in this country in light of the tremendous pressure upon Muslims to answer to a U.S. state with sophisticated and growing regimes of racial and religious profiling. In this climate, interfaith and pluralist initiatives can play numerous roles. They might affirm America’s most authentic legacy of pluralism and cajole from suspicion to engagement. They might offer an informal platform for religiously and racially minoritized subjects to demonstrate their patriotism. They might offer much-needed avenues for self-protection against a state that has assumed a disturbingly active role in surveilling its own citizenry. But in all of these roles, they will necessarily go beyond simply *providing* a platform for celebrations of citizenship and demonstrations of loyalty. When harnessed to state power—which they increasingly are—organizations founded to promote pluralism naturalize criteria for dividing pluralists from terrorists, civilians from barbarians, the saved from the damned, lives worth saving from lives marked for death.

²⁰ I am grateful to Richard Amesbury for feedback on an earlier project, in which he helped me find this language.

Conclusion: On Common Ground

The stakes of pluralist discourses, and the subject-formations and taxonomies that they produce, are literally life and death for people who remain illegible to or dispossessed by U.S. regimes of governance. Within the logic of pluralism, individual and communal progress is measured the capacity to reconcile identitarian difference into shared “common ground.” This plausibility structure for this common ground is “America,” as formal state and imagined community. The condition for stepping onto this ground is access to—and a commitment to uphold—an exceedingly specific performance of citizen-subjectivity.

Numerous interfaith organizations encourage participants to seek “common ground” in shared values and commitments to service, while steering clear of divisive and politicized issues that accentuate difference. But underneath the abstract discursive ground of pluralism, there still remains the common ground of soil, territory, resources, and homeland. If the soil is poisoned; if an army occupies the territory; if the homeland’s police gun down the populace; if the wealthy hoard the resources; if the perpetrators and guilty bystanders describe ourselves as pluralists; if we cannot hear the calls of those who point us to our faults—of what pluralism do we speak?

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