

## ***Pluralism: Problems and Promise***

**By Diana L. Eck**

The Pluralism Project began twenty-five years ago as a research project, investigating the many ways in which America's religious landscape has changed with the renewed period of immigration launched 50 years ago this year, in 1965, with the passage of the Immigration and Nationalities Act. This issue of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* brings together several perspectives on pluralism, each of which raises important issues, drawing for the most part from research in on-the-ground studies. This gives me the opportunity to reflect on the roots of the Pluralism Project, why it began, and what are the problems and the promise of this research.

The project began during the early 1990s when the University of Chicago, under the leadership of Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, had commissioned scholars from across the academy to write about the dynamic phenomenon loosely identified as "fundamentalism" that seemed to have new relevance in global life. A term that had a particular identity in American Protestantism was used as a marker for the phenomenon. The term was used, not without controversy, but also not without full awareness of its deficiencies on the part of the remarkable group of scholars who contributed to the first of the five volumes published, *Fundamentalism Observed* (1994). As important as the Fundamentalism Project was in its time, and in ours, I was not tempted to participate.

For intellectual reasons, and as a matter of temperament and personal history, I was not drawn to this aspect of human religious life. I was far more interested in finding out what was happening at the other end of the spectrum, in those places, those movements, those coffee shops where people of every faith were expressing themselves anew in more hopeful and positive ways, even in contexts fraught with the religious and ideological energies of extremism. I had seen some of those places, those movements, those coffee-shop thinkers and the emerging relationships between and among people of different religious traditions. For most of the 1980s, I had served on a working group of the World Council of Churches on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, a twenty-five person commission of people from member churches of the W.C.C. from Korea to Kenya, charged with thinking anew about the relation of Christians to neighbors of other faiths. It marked a turn in a history that had long been driven by mission and evangelism, a history that to be sure had grown over the centuries in the entourage of empire and colonialism. And yet that same history had given rise to vibrant churches that now asked tough and complex questions about their relations with people of other faiths in their own societies.

There was, of course, a range of responses to the challenge of living in communities and contexts of religious difference. There were and are exclusivists whose life as Christians is secured by theological and social exclusivism that could be seen as part of the "family resemblance" of fundamentalism. There were inclusivists who had a more benign incorporative vision, including strangers and neighbors at the table they had already set in the Christian household. But there were also those who had a different vision, one based on the conviction of mutual witness—that Christians did have a faith and witness to share, but

also had a witness to hear from the voices and visions of the people with whom they shared a village, a city, a society. Many who saw this turn in Christian thinking used the term "pluralist" to describe it. The logic of pluralism was not one of incorporation, but of genuine encounter, an encounter that recognizes difference, that does not elide differences into a "we" that is already known.

As the Fundamentalism Project got underway, therefore, my interest and engagement was with movements at the "other end of the spectrum," having found among Christians and among Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu colleagues, a range of dynamic and deliberate movements toward a new relationship with one another. The movement of people as refugees, political, and economic migrants had reshaped many societies, including those in Europe and including our own in the United States. What was happening as societies became more religiously complex? How were religious or theological views of each other challenged and changed? How did religious traditions handle their own internal divisions and diversities? Were there interfaith initiatives? Were there new civic organizations or advocacy groups? How did public schools, hospitals, and city councils respond to the growing diversity?

Approaching these questions as a scholar, I asked how we in the academy might study the complexity of this new world. How might we study the forms of multireligious and multicultural engagement that I have come to think of as "pluralism?" Pluralism, after all, is not just the enumeration of difference, and pluralism is certainly not premised upon the celebration of diversity in a spirit of good will. Pluralism is the engagement of difference in the often-difficult yet creative ways that we as scholars can observe, investigate, and interpret. We were challenged to study something that had received very little attention: the deliberate construction of multireligious relationships.

In my 2006 address to the American Academy of Religion, I asked, "What is at stake in gaining an intellectual grasp of these forms of pluralism?"<sup>1</sup> I believe it is nothing less than understanding the currents of religious history and the remaking of religious life in our time. It is a history that is, to be sure, rent with episodes of violence that hit the newsstands every day. But it is also an evolving history shot through with new forms of connections that do not seize the headlines, except now and then, and locally. We need scholars in the academy who make it their work to see, track, and analyze what is going on." I was not the only person thinking about this, as this issue of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* so clearly demonstrates.

Ellie Pierce has been a pioneer for the Pluralism Project in researching and developing case studies focused on some of the local controversies that have been the "stretching exercises" of America's expanded and complex religious diversity. As we mined two decades of cumulative research and thought about some of the persistent issues, it became clear that there were many that could be used as discussion cases, in much the same way that

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<sup>1</sup> For the full text of my remarks, see "Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2007) 75 (4): 743-776. Accessed July 9, 2015. <http://jaar.oxfordjournals.org/content/75/4/743.full?keytype=ref&ijkey=hwfp56s1RLBhmWt>.

Harvard Business School uses case studies to teach decision making in business and corporate contexts. These cases are embedded in local contexts, but the questions they raise are those that perplex many communities in the U.S. and beyond.

Ellie has worked closely with those involved in each local context to understand the perspectives they have on the issue. What is at stake for them in, for instance, the public broadcast of the call to prayer? Are there legal issues here? Long-standing community issues? Religious issues? Emotional issues? A case study asks students not simply to talk *about* the situation, but to inhabit it, to try to articulate points of view of various stakeholders, including perspectives they may not hold. It is an in-class exercise in the kind of engagement and dialogue that is foundational to pluralism.

The Vanderbilt team has also undertaken to look closely at the local context. Their research project asks what is actually happening in the many local initiatives that go under the name "interfaith." Looking at "local ecologies" the team has been seeking to understand the experience of those involved in interfaith practice. They looked at five interfaith groups in the southeastern U.S.—groups that themselves represent something of the range of interfaith initiatives: a campus-based student group, a women's dialogue and service group, a congregation-based community service group, a youth dialogue and service group, and a parent-focused school-based group.

It is clear that the markers of religious identity (Christian, Muslim, Jewish) structure the experience of interfaith relations in these initiatives only in the most general sense. The complex identities of participants include their experience in families and extended families, in the workplace, and in the school. And the communities from which participants come vary widely in their interest in or commitment to interfaith engagement. Some are long-established liberal Protestant or Catholic churches that have a clear commitment to interfaith relations and give positive support to those involved in these ventures. Even churchgoers who don't participate themselves applaud those who do. Not so some of the communities the authors describe as "immigrant/ethnic minority faith communities." They often don't see interfaith work as critical at the level of their own community. The "energy and focus" of such communities is of necessity on getting the community established. This confirms some of my own experience visiting with members of Cambodian or Vietnamese Buddhist, South Indian Vaishnava Hindu, and Muslim communities. They are busy with what is most immediately at hand for them—festivals and worship, finding permanent homes for their community, perhaps buying or building a place of worship, dealing with both elders and teenagers, relating to newcomers who have come from the home country.

The members of these communities who do participate in interfaith activities often have quite a different experience from that of those coming from more established communities, especially churches. The Vanderbilt researchers report that not only are their home communities reluctant, or at least not proactive, participants, but as individuals they often feel called upon to "represent" a complex and often misunderstood community. They become "the Muslim voice" or "the Hindu voice," in the eyes of their interfaith colleagues, when in fact they themselves realize just how diverse their communities are. Even so, they often feel the responsibility to be educators, steering into the prevailing misunderstandings

of "Muslim violence" or "women's role in Islam," for example, in order to disabuse their interfaith colleagues of misleading impressions. In addition, our colleagues report on the perception that interfaith relations is sometimes seen as "risky" for minority faith communities: even adults might feel unprepared for theological dialogue as "representatives" of their community, and they might simultaneously feel that their young people are distinctly vulnerable to the powerful voices of a majority Christian community. The Vanderbilt project has enabled us to have a much closer look, not just at organizations, but at the experience of participation.

It is the close look that is also so valuable in the contribution of Aziza Hasan who has given us a portrait of *NewGround: A Muslim Jewish Partnership for Change*. In the varied multireligious landscape of Los Angeles, *NewGround* has truly excavated and settled new ground in the practice of pluralism, beginning with 20 young Jewish and Muslim professionals who commit themselves to a year of engagement with one another through weekend retreats and twice-monthly meetings. Building relationships is front and center as the participants work together to present what is most authentic and meaningful in their own tradition to the other. This involves story-telling, expressing one's own narrative as a Muslim or Jew, in the context of a wider and complex identity. Of course, such interfaith encounter reveals the many ways in which "our own" tradition is diverse and often messy and fractured with its internal diversity. Recognizing and expressing this diversity requires a certain vulnerability, both to those of the "other" faith, but also to those other voices in one's own faith.

Deep and sustained encounter, developing mutuality in the practice of dialogue, is not easy and *NewGround* has skilled facilitators, both Muslim and Jewish. While *NewGround* encounters are not issue driven, there is no way that national and international issues and controversies can be excluded from the dialogue. Islamophobia? Antisemitism? Israel-Palestine? This is rough terrain for dialogue, based in careful listening and mutual respect. Many an evening panel or program has brought these issues to the foreground. The participants come, speak, raise their voices, and leave with no commitment or obligation to return the next day, the next week, the next month and continue the discussion. The sustained, year-long trajectory of *NewGround* is a very different encounter, one in which relationships are built and tested on this rough terrain, understanding that conflict is "natural and inevitable, yet not intractable."

Here the language of dialogue, brought to sustained encounter, creates a process of learning, both about the "other" and oneself. A year as a fellow in this program enables young professionals to claim some new ground for themselves. This is leadership training for a world in which encounter can often mean collision.

Alumni of the program, now in its 8<sup>th</sup> year, often continue the relationships they have built by undertaking joint initiatives, such as the Muslim-Jewish initiative to help communities with clean water. While modest in size, *NewGround* has a potentially wide impact. There are many more applicants for the year-long fellowship than can be accommodated. There are now high school *NewGround* groups now. And *NewGround* participants also bring their experience to large-scale public events, to National Public Radio, and to other civic engagement non-profit groups.

If pluralism is about relationship-building across lines of difference, it is also about place-making, that is, creating a new sense of place in a diverse and changing landscape. Whitney Barth explores this aspect of pluralism: the importance of the local, of place and context in relationship building. The cultural and religious diversity of many cities testifies to the fragmentation and fracturing of communities and the emergence of ghettos in which migrants, refugees, and religious minorities live unto themselves. What are some of the ways in which the relationship building that is critical to interfaith initiatives can also be "place-making?" For immigrants, this means recognizing the particular place from which they come, creating a sense of place through establishing temples, gurdwaras, churches, and mosques on new ground, and finding a place in a broader and more complex landscape.

Barth asks how—in practice—people of diverse faith communities have been able to create a new sense of community in their own city, a sense of community that embodies "the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population." A city is not just a giant, sprawling town of indeterminate border, center, and ethos. It is not simply an agglomeration of people, industry, and power in one place. A city is an ordered human habitation with a center, perhaps many centers, with an ethos, with a sense of boundedness however large. It is, as Lewis Mumford put it, "energy converted into culture."

The city is one of the most important sites of inter-religious encounter in our time. It is the primary workshop of pluralism. There are new ways in which diverse religious communities inhabit common space, many informal ways in which citizens are ever more aware of the multiple religious lives lived right next door. On the bus, one might pass the cathedral, the storefront Islamic prayer hall, the new mosque, the small Islamic bookstore. Cities expand awareness, but cities are also places of isolation and ghettos, places where the pieces of a complex mosaic touch, but don't overlap or mix. Yet in cities of all sizes across the United States today there are new spaces created deliberately, carefully, with creativity and often with difficulty, where people of different religious faiths come together in a multitude of interfaith, multifaith initiatives. They begin to constitute a human infrastructure for the traffic and encounter of a new era.

Whitney Barth gives several examples from among the hundreds that have been studied by the "Interfaith Infrastructure" initiative of the Pluralism Project. Interfaith Immersions in Atlanta, for example, is a deliberate attempt to see the city of Atlanta as a place of pilgrimage, framing a program of visits to the religious centers and houses of worship as a sacred journey to make connections, to explore and learn, and to deepen relationships. "Immersion" also suggests an intention that is deeper than what Robert Wuthnow describes as the "ceremonial forms" that interfaith activity too often takes. Barth asks how such pilgrimages of leaders, of laity, of students enable those who live in Atlanta to reimagine and re-inhabit their place.

In Omaha, the Tri-Faith Initiative has brought together three congregations to settle new ground by co-locating their houses of worship. Temple Israel, the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture, and Countryside Community Church UCC have intentionally joined a partnership to place themselves on the same plot of land, as neighbors. Temple

Israel has already moved in, and the Islamic and Christian communities are envisioning the day when they will as well. Story-telling, relationship building, and place-making are all part of this initiative. It is place-making that is not proprietary, with one inviting the others in. From the beginning, it is a shared initiative. And it has been fraught, from the beginning, with the difficult issues that *NewGround* attempts to address. How do their relations begin to fray when violence in the Middle East, in Israel, in Gaza? How do they address the tensions, head on. This is the kind of place-making, reimagining the local, that takes courage.

Barth also lifts up some of the many ways in which someone else's "place" becomes part of one's own landscape of sacred meaning. Vandalism and threats against a religious community calls out the members of other communities join in solidarity with neighbors they may not even know. She cites many examples, including religious communities and interfaith groups that responded with services of solidarity and mourning following the killings at the Oak Creek Sikh Temple in Milwaukee in the summer of 2012. For many Americans, this high-profile hate crime, widely covered in national news, became the first view they had of a Sikh community and the individuals whose lives were lost. In response to the June 2015 killings inside the AME Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, many religious leaders, including those who led services in that very church, explicitly cited the experience of the Wisconsin Sikhs whose house of worship had also become a scene of violence.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, it has been clear that research on the ways in which people encounter religious and cultural difference must look outside religious communities and interreligious initiatives. City councils, zoning boards, courts, corporations, and hospitals—all are sites where values and assumptions, claims and counterclaims, are negotiated in a diverse society. Nowhere is the respectful engagement of difference more important than in educational institutions. Here we need to be acutely aware of the ground on which we stand. Is it the civic ground that informs our lives, choices, and norms as citizens, co-citizens, in a society premised on the rights we have as citizens, regardless of our religious communities or convictions? Or is it the religious/theological ground of our own tradition of faith that informs the challenges and choices we face in a diverse society?

Here Brendan Randall, both a lawyer and an educator, investigates the dilemmas in schools where a diverse student body is increasingly the norm. Constitutionally protected standards of free speech and freedom of religious expression might well protect speech that is offensive to others or considered harassment by others. In a landmark 1969 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." Offensive speech cannot be limited without the evidence that it "would substantially interfere with the work of the school or impinge upon the rights of other students."  
(*Tinker v. Des Moines*).

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<sup>2</sup> "Houses of Worship Hit by Violence Offer Advice, Prayers for Charleston" *The Huffington Post*. June 18, 2015. Accessed July 9, 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/faith-charleston-church-shooting\\_n\\_7613088.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/faith-charleston-church-shooting_n_7613088.html).

Randall takes what some call a "lightning rod issue" to test for a norm of discourse that would be adequate for the case: the Day of Dialogue, a day designated to enable and empower Christian students to present their views on sexuality, sexual orientation, harassment, and marriage. Sponsored by the family-values group, Focus on the Family, the day aims to bring a viewpoint not ordinarily heard in what they consider to be the liberal context of the public schools. Students who participate express views that are rooted in clear truth claims and not really amenable to the mutuality of dialogue.

Randall raises a question that underlies the discourse of dialogue: How does one engage in dialogue with those whose truth claims are exclusivist? He finds the model of religious pluralism to be more helpful than the civic viewpoint of civil discourse, especially the insistence that pluralism is not premised on relativism or the retreat from commitments, but is the encounter of commitments. Religious speech is not excluded, but expressed in the context of mutual respect for others who may not accept the fundamental premises of one's truth claims. It is this norm that Randall as an educator finds most conducive to education for citizenship in a diverse society: not the norm of civil discourse, avoiding the hot-button issues that are divisive, but what he calls the "more robust norm of religious pluralism" that gives room for free expression in a context of mutual respect for real differences.

The final essay by Lucia Hulsether raises some important critiques that help us assess what we think we mean by pluralism. First, a clarification: The Pluralism Project is a university based research project and not an interfaith organization, not as the author puts it, "an organization established to promote pluralism." The Interfaith Youth Core, which is discussed as if its mission and work were one and the same with that of The Pluralism Project, is one of the kinds of organizations and initiatives that is a subject of our research. To be sure, the IFYC has drawn upon Pluralism Project research and has hired former Pluralism Project student researchers and staff. There are many other kinds of interfaith organizations, with many constituencies and modes of operation. The challenge I posed in "Prospects for Pluralism" is for academics to take into the domain of our interest and research the encounters, engagements, hybridizations, and initiatives that are happening in our own communities, our cities, states, and in our nation. I could see an eventual graduate student thesis on the Interfaith Youth Core.

Of course, undertaking to study something necessitates setting forth a general definition of what it is we are looking for. While documenting the changes in the religious landscape of Boston gives us a map of extraordinary and relatively "new" ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, this diversity alone is not pluralism. It is just a new set of facts, neighborhoods and neighbors, socio-economic, racial, and educational issues. Our purview has been deliberately limited to the United States as a practical matter, although our work has become a model for that of other scholars, especially in Europe. Here in the U.S. local engagements with religious difference have been studied by the scholars in this volume.

One concern of Lucia Hulsether and some of the scholars she cites from the *After Pluralism* volume is that religious pluralism re-inscribes and reifies the notion of "religions" as "units," skimming over the deep and abiding internal differences, the historic and

continuing diversity and inherent messiness of religiousness as one of many forms of identity. Of course, any serious student of "religion" will realize this sooner or later, the sooner the better. After five years of Pluralism Project research, our graduate students pressed for a CD-ROM format in presenting research and representing communities not only in text, but in visual form. In developing the CD-ROM, *On Common Ground*, we struggled with our router page, *America's Many Religions*, recognizing that "religions" are diverse, many without a term that even comes close to the term "religion."<sup>3</sup> To make matters worse, we decided to use buttons with religious symbols, to "represent" fifteen "religions," warning the reader/user that beneath the seemingly simple button is a complex and dynamic river of tradition, history, practice, and interpretation. We included on the router page itself (now online):

But this visual image of separate boundaried circles—graphically convenient as it is—is highly misleading, for every religious tradition has grown through the ages in dialogue and historical interaction with others. Christians, Jews, and Muslims have been part of one another's histories, have shared not only villages and cities, but ideas of God and divine revelation. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, and Sikhs have shared a common cultural milieu in India, while in East Asia the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian traditions are not only part of common cultures, but are also part of the complex religious inheritance of families and individuals whose lives are shaped by all three religions.

And there is a second caution: each tradition represented so neatly by a circle and a symbol has its own internal complexity which you will discover as you click one of those circles and begin to explore the tradition. The Native Peoples of America are not one, but many, each with its distinctive life-ways. The Hindu tradition is a rich tapestry of many streams of thought and devotion, many gods, and many regional cultures. The Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions have spanned the world and speak in hundreds of languages and cultural contexts. Many traditions have their own complex internal disagreements and sectarian movements: Sunni and Shi'i Muslims; Orthodox and Reform Jews; Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians. And each tradition has many voices—women and men, traditionalists and reformers, clergy and laity.<sup>4</sup>

These are, of course, the issues all of us who teach in introductory religious studies wrestle with and articulate in one way or another in countless contexts. The issues raised here are our common concerns: How do we use language and critique it at the same time?

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<sup>3</sup> See *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, <http://www.pluralism.org/ocg/> and <http://www.pluralism.org/religion>.

<sup>4</sup> "Rivers of Faith" in *America's Many Religions*, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*. Accessed July 9, 2015. <http://www.pluralism.org/religion/rivers-of-faith>.



Of the many important issues raised by Hulsether, perhaps the most significant to address is her contention that the "logic of pluralism" is one of incorporation, a term she uses and critiques often. A pluralist move, in her view, would respond to ever increasing constituents of diversity—humanists, atheists, gay activists—including even critics of the relationships of pluralism at the "table." I would agree that the incorporative move characterizes many ways of dealing with difference—include more and more people. In this sense, the project of incorporation is, indeed as Hulsether contends, like the project of mission movements and, if you will, the project of economic and political imperialism. This is not, however, the project of pluralism and is a fundamental misunderstanding of pluralism in my view. Pluralism is more about transformation, not incorporation.

The inclusivist or incorporative move is usually majoritarian. Universities, for example, are proud to admit a more diverse student body and include a more diverse group of trustees and faculty, but assume that the structures of the university will not change when they do. The pluralist would insist that the shape of the table will change, the structures will change. The inclusivist understanding of citizenship and the polity of government is fixed and when newcomers come, they assimilate to the way things are. The pluralist would insist that newcomers bring new perspectives. Their voices count and that the incorporative, "melting pot," image of America is one that is not worthy of true democracy. The incorporative move is to assume one can incorporate "others" whomever they are into the structure of a body that is already formed. The pluralist would insist that process of engagement, however conceived, will change everyone. What Hulsether calls the "structural logic of incorporation" is, in my view, antithetical to the process of relationship building that is pluralism.

When I say that the "language" of pluralism is dialogue, this means the expression of critique and counter-critique, the mutuality of voices that count and have something to say. It is a language of give and take, and the bridges of understanding created by dialogue are also bridges snarled with traffic. Dialogue is not always the language of agreement or "common ground," but the language of relationship. But as in any relationship, it is strongest in its mutuality, and it is weakest when one incorporates the other.

The most important of our two-letter words is "we." Who do we mean when we say "we?" As scholars, in our analysis of what "we" see happening in the world, we need words to describe the range of new initiatives and relationships that are cropping profusely in cities and towns, colleges and chaplaincies. Pluralism is such a word. It is not a doctrine, but a process.

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