

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Pluralism—sinful or faithful?

Some Christians say pluralism is sinful. Others say it is the only loving and wise approach—the faithful Christian approach—to a religiously diverse world. In the latter group is lifelong United Methodist Diana L. Eck, who leads Harvard's Pluralism Project.



“We cannot live in a world in which our economics and markets are global, our political awareness is global, our business relationships take us to every continent, and the Internet connects us with colleagues half a world away,” says Eck in *A New Religious America* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), “and yet live on Friday, or Saturday, or Sunday with ideas of God that are essentially provincial, imagining that somehow the one we call God has been primarily concerned with us and our tribe.”

Pluralism is more than diversity

Pluralism was present among Native Americans before European settlers came, Eck finds, and the settlers also had diverse religious traditions. That diversity, Eck and many other observers report, has increased over the past 300 years of settlement, and has expanded exponentially during the last three decades.



Pluralism, however, is more than diversity. “Being a Christian pluralist,” says Eck, “means daring to encounter people of very different faith traditions and defining my faith not by its borders, but by its roots.” Claiming the principles of our faith and of the religious freedom that shaped our nation, she believes, “will require moving beyond laissez-faire inattention to religion, to a vigorous attempt to understand the religions of our neighbors.” Pluralism is that attempt.

God speaks many languages

God speaks multiple languages and is not exhausted by any one faith. So says Rabbi David Hartman, from Jerusalem, according to columnist Thomas L. Friedman (*New York Times*, Nov. 27, 2001). Hartman therefore urges Jews to recognize this characteristic of God and to reinterpret their faith in a way that embraces modernity without weakening religious passion. I suspect Hartman's advice is appropriate not just for Jews but also for Christians.



Fighting religious totalitarianism?

Friedman believes this advice is especially important right now when the world is battling terrorism. We're fighting not just to get rid of terrorism, he believes, but to defeat religious totalitarianism, the view that one's own faith (whichever faith it may be) must reign supreme, and that it can be affirmed and held passionately only if it denies all others. The opposite of religious totalitarianism, Hartman points out, is pluralism, which embraces religious diversity and the idea that one's faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth.



“Can we have a multilingual view of God—a notion that God is not exhausted by just one religious path?”, Hartman asks. “Many Jews and Christians have already argued that the answer to that question is yes,” Friedman says, “and some have gone back to their sacred texts to reinterpret their traditions to embrace modernity and pluralism ...” Hartman sees America as the Mecca of pluralism, and believes that is why bin Laden and his followers want to destroy it.

Christian totalitarianism wouldn't be Christian

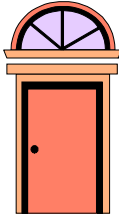
It seems to me that many U.S. Christians are trying to drag the nation and their church denominations away from pluralism, and to me that's scary. I'm afraid that if those Christians' efforts succeeded, we'd become a Mecca of religious totalitarianism. And religious totalitarianism inflicted by Christians would be just as oppressive as totalitarianism inflicted by Muslims or followers of any other religion. In fact, it wouldn't be Christian.



Three responses to diversity

Eck finds that we Americans have approached our ever-broader cultural and religious diversity mainly in three different ways.

- **Exclusion**—“What is foreign should leave.” Exclusionists’ answer to the influx of cultural and religious diversity has been closing the door. The message from exclusionists, Eck observes, has been “stay home, or go home, or in any case be excluded from the table of participation here in America.” For the exclusionists (whom Eck also calls exclusivists), the oneness of our union requires excluding those who are different.



- **Assimilation**—the melting pot. Assimilationists ask immigrants to come but to leave their differences behind as quickly as possible—to come and be like us. Assimilationists see our oneness as requiring newcomers to shed their differences and join the majority’s culture. Eck observes that in the traditional image of the melting pot, differences add their flavor but lose their form. She reminds us, too, that our melting pot has had invisible exclusions. It was basically “an Anglo-conformist melting pot, ... a wholly European melting pot.”



- **Pluralism**—a symphony, or maybe jazz. Pluralists, says Eck, expect newcomers to come as they are, with all their differences, pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship—to come and be themselves. In the pluralists’ view, our oneness as a nation is shaped by the encounter of the many and their engagement with each other.

For describing pluralism, Eck likes the image of a symphony orchestra. Its sound is not unison but harmony. Each instrument contributes to the music of the whole but keeps its own distinctive sound. However, because a symphony is fully composed before it is played, but no society or religion has a finished score to follow, Eck thinks a jazz ensemble might be an even better image for religious pluralism. “In jazz,” she observes, “the playing is the writing.” The players must collaborate and invent while giving close attention to the music of every other instrument.

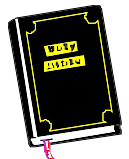


The new American dilemma

Diana Eck believes that today’s diversity poses difficult and potentially divisive challenges to America’s Christian churches. “As long as religious diversity meant Methodists, Congregationalists, Southern Baptists, and Catholics, or ... at the most, Christians and Jews,” she observes, “the issues were not so troubling and the tension not so palpable.” But with our new religious diversity, Eck warns, “the presupposition that America is foundationally Christian is being challenged, really for the first time.”



What confronts us now, Eck sees, is a deep-seated contradiction in the minds of many Americans. It’s the contradiction between the religious liberty that we claim to favor and our laws protect, and what Eck calls “deep structures of Christian entitlement and ideological Christian exclusivism.”



A dynamic religion with many voices

Part of what makes our dilemma so hard to deal with, Eck finds, is that like all living religions Christianity is dynamic rather than static and speaks with many different voices. What being Christian means, she observes, “is highly contested among Christians themselves.”



Anyone who is active in a church or keeps up with today’s news knows how different those voices can be. Sometimes it’s hard to believe they’re all part of the same religion. Responses to last month’s *Connections* have reminded me of that. Most responders have expressed agreement or at least appreciation, but two assured me that I would go to Hell because of what I had written, yet all those responders claim to be Christian.

Relativism and moral decay?

Many Christians who reject pluralism assume that it means the blending of religions into a religious melting pot of relativism and moral decay. They believe pluralism means the chaos of “anything goes.” Others fear that America will be fractured by putting too much emphasis on difference. The pluralism Eck advocates, however, is neither a meaningless religious blur nor a refusal to join together. It is

what she calls “a oneness of commitment to the common covenants of our citizenship.”



“The language of pluralism,” Eck tells us, “is the language not just of difference but of engagement, involvement, and participation. It is the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue, and debate.”

It’s time to listen and learn



Pluralism requires listening and learning, and unfortunately many of us aren’t willing to listen or learn. “Americans on the whole,” says Diana Eck, referring to what polls report, “have a high degree of religious identification ... and yet a very low level of religious literacy.” To respond wisely and faithfully to the challenges that today’s diversity presents, we’d have to raise that level. If we know little about the Bible’s contents, Christian history, other religions, and the nature of religious language and experience, we can’t evaluate our own religious beliefs or anyone else’s very accurately.



Eck suggests that saying “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” as our Declaration of Independence does, “is not to hold these truths in the safe deposit box of the past, but to keep them alive through argument and dialogue in the present.” That’s apparently what’s necessary for keeping our religious truths alive, too, as well as for discovering which of our beliefs are actually truths and which are mistaken assumptions. Vigorous engagement, even argument, around the common table, Eck assures us, is not only vital to a democratic society. “It is vital also to



the health of religious faith, so that we appropriate our faith not by habit or heritage alone, but by making it our own within the context of dialogue with people of other

faiths.” And she assures us that such dialogue is aimed not at achieving agreement but at achieving relationship.

Interfaith groups—helpful or harmful?

Many Christians feel that participating in interfaith groups and interfaith worship services is valuable for listening, learning, and talking with followers of other religions. Other Christians feel that such participation would lead them astray or require them to worship false gods. The effect of an interfaith group, however, may depend a lot on the group’s purpose and on what its participants do when they come together.



In Diana Eck’s view, “each interfaith initiative has to decide, sooner or later, who should be at the table and on what basis. And each has to think carefully about who is excluded and why.”

Eck finds that many interfaith groups have grown out of councils of churches that expanded to include clergy or other representatives of other religious traditions. She mentions one interfaith group whose membership requirements included having a recognized scripture and a monotheistic belief structure. Group members had to reconsider this policy when Hindus applied for membership, and again when the group had to decide whether to include Buddhists. Another interfaith group Eck mentions is based on “the belief that all religious groups have the individual’s and society’s best interest at heart and work toward a more perfect union of humankind and higher forces.”



What do you think? Do all religions actually have that interest and aim? Should Christians participate only in groups that require participating religions to have a recognized scripture and monotheistic be-

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I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

liefs? Would that requirement be necessary if participants merely wanted to learn about other religions and work together for the good of their communities? Can Christians take part in interfaith worship without worshipping idols? Being confronted



**Brothers and sisters,
do not be children in
your thinking; rather,
be infants in evil, but
in thinking be adults.
—1 Corinthians 14:20**

with such questions makes us reevaluate what we believe, and it's important for us to do that from time to time in order to keep increasing our maturity as Christians.

What kind of sound do we want?

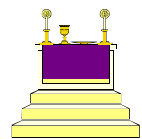
What kind of sound do we Christians want our churches and society to make? "Our challenge today," Di-ana Eck believes, "is whether it will be jazz or simply noise, whether it will be a symphony or cacophony, whether we can continue to play together through dissonant moments." That's a big challenge. If we want our nations and our churches to thrive, we can't just ignore it and hope it will go away. It won't. If we don't deal with it wisely and faithfully, it may destroy us.



Barbara

A common quest?

"A common ground in the major religions is the hunger to be in union with the one who creates. It is a quest for meaning and a desire to move beyond unsatisfying self-centeredness." That's the view Christian author Corinne Ware expresses in her book *Saint Benedict on the Freeway: A Rule of Life for the 21st Century* (Abingdon, 2001). "I find it affirming, not threatening," Ware says, "to realize that



we are not the only ones seeking a sense of being accompanied by God. ... It is encouraging to know that seeking a state of recollection, which is a continuous awareness of God, is not some quirkiness found just in me or only in Christianity, but is a fundamental human hunger."

Ware thinks we're losing track of our common ground, however. "When religions become too institutionalized, their followers are likely to forget their original purpose and so no longer remember that *connection* was the central reason for being." Ware sees this happening especially when we attend worship services merely as something that must be done because it's a particular day, or when we make them recruitment tools or entertainment. When she goes to a worship service, she finds, "I am there primarily to worship God, to seek God, and to be found by God." And she believes that whatever particular vocabulary religions may use, they begin with this end in mind. Do you agree? Do they all have this end in mind? If so, how important are the differences in their ways of pursuing it? And if not, should we should avoid contact with those whose aims differ from ours to any extent?

