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Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion

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This paper addresses religious pluralism as an academic, civic, and theological challenge. Looking at religious communities in their connections and interrelations is a critical academic challenge for students of religion who would gain insight into the dynamics of religious life and identities today. The encounter of people from different religious traditions in hometown America has reshaped the context of religious life, calling for attention and serious study. In short, the study of a complex city like Fremont, CA, might well be the study of today's Silk Road, today's *convivencia*. Religious pluralism is also a critical civic issue for citizens of increasingly diverse societies, raising fundamental questions about the nature of civic polity, the "we" of our civic life. And, to be sure, religious pluralism is a critical theological issue for people of faith, raising fundamental questions about one's own faith in relation to the religious other. Scholarly, civic, and theological issues have their own distinctive realms of discourse and require us to think

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carefully about the meaning of “voice” in our work. We cannot evade the question of voice in thinking theoretically about pluralism, for diversity is not only the characteristic of the worlds we study but of our own identities, our multiply-situated selves.

THE PAST DECADES have been challenging for the study of religion. I would sum up two of those challenges written in neon: religious extremism and religious pluralism. The first great challenge that has reshaped our field is the increasing visibility and violence of many radical religious and political-religious movements around the globe. The word “fundamentalist” is sometimes used as shorthand for the energies of these movements, but we know that “fundamentalism” is inadequate to the analytic task, and this is the first thing scholars who study these movements will say. Powerful extremist movements of various kinds have seized the headlines, to be sure; they have created the polarizations, the turbulence, and the instability that belligerent rhetoric and enactments of violence so effectively precipitate. The perpetrators of extremist and chauvinist ideologies have drawn an array of fine scholars to study them, and their work now constitutes a significant library from the volumes of the *Fundamentalism Project* to the monographs of Mark Juergensmeyer on terrorism, Sudhir Kakar on the *Colors of Violence* in India, Stanley Tambiah on ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and Karen Armstrong on the *Battle for God*.

The second great challenge of these decades is the one I want to address tonight: the challenge of religious pluralism. The global movements of peoples as economic migrants and political refugees and the global movements of business and technology have created increasingly diverse and complex societies. The United States, Canada, and the nations of Europe are wrestling with new levels of religious diversity and cultural encounter. At the same time, old complex cultures such as those of India and China, Malaysia and Indonesia are challenged in new ways by their own pluralities, by new global elites, by transnational mission movements, and by new articulations of nationalism.

I would wager that we as scholars of religion know far more about the currents of religious extremism today than we do about the progress of religious pluralism. It is commonplace to note that the news media is drawn to stories of violence rather than cooperation and to extremist rather than moderate voices. But what about those of us in the academic world? The Indian political psychologist Asish Nandy has written of what he calls the “conspicuous asymmetry” between the number of studies focusing on violence and those focusing on

non-violence and on new and old forms of creativity across the lines of difference.¹ The analysis of extremism and the violence it perpetrates is unquestionably important. But so, too, is the analysis of what I would call “pluralism”. We are far more aware of the forces of violence that tear communities apart than we are of those practices and movements that knit them together. Eruptions of communal violence in India, for instance, capture our immediate attention. But we have a harder time maintaining steady focus on the ways people have maintained vibrant connections across religious, cultural, and ethnic differences.

As scholars, we are suspicious of universalizing harmonies and of the rush to find common ground and agreement. Perhaps this is the place to make clear, at the outset, that religious pluralism is not primarily about common ground. Pluralism takes the reality of difference as its starting point. The challenge of pluralism is not to obliterate or erase difference, nor to smooth out differences under a universalizing canopy, but rather to discover ways of living, connecting, relating, arguing, and disagreeing in a society of differences. This is no small challenge, given the fact that some of the most contentious differences are within religious communities and even within particular sectarian or denominational movements. The complex movements we so readily call Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam have their own internal diversities and arguments, often more fraught with vicious disagreement than those across traditions.

As scholars, we also know that overemphasizing, specifically “religious” identities, too often derails our understanding of complex civilizations. What is too quickly referred to as “religious violence” or “religious nationalism” is complicated. Religion is enmeshed in economics, politics, class, race, and education. In his book, *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen argues that national, communal, and individual identities are plural and complex and to reduce those identities to Hindu, Muslim, or Christian is to misunderstand the reality of India’s culture or, more broadly, the world in which we live. As Sen puts it, the world is not a clash of religions stemming from their “imagined singularity,” nor is it “a federation of religions” whose presumed representatives gather to demonstrate their harmonies. Indeed, the very tendency to prioritize religion over other identities has often been a major source of violence (Sen 2006: 1–7).

Our individual identities are also multilayered and multivocal. Sen takes himself as case in point, enumerating the many labels that might

¹ Nandy (2002: 218) and the chapter entitled “Violence and Creativity in the Late Twentieth Century.”

be used to describe his own complex identity—Asian, Indian, Bengali, American or British resident, secularist, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, a man with a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, a non-believer in afterlife, with a non-religious lifestyle. Each of us could compile a similarly complex list of descriptors. I might propose a list for myself: a Montanan, a Methodist, a Fourth of July American, educated in America and India, a Christian by faith, a Banarsi in temperament, a foster-parent to four Muslims, a Harvard professor, gay and married in Massachusetts, also on the Fourth of July. Our prospects for pluralism surely begin with our ability to give voice to the diversity of voices within ourselves, not all of which we exercise at the same time, but which comprise the complex web of connections we call identity.

My own academic career has been a movement back and forth between two complex civilizations, India and America. Many of you who have shared this kind of journey know full well that it forces us to live, breathe, and think contextually, relationally, and, I would say dialogically. We are comparativists precisely because we are linked to networks of discussion, dialogue, and disputation that extend beyond ourselves and our departments into complex worlds of colleagues, friends, and research half a world away.

My first year in the city of Banaras was more than forty years ago now. I remember vividly those repeated walks down miles of Ganges *ghats*, past the cremation *ghat* at Manikarnika, to Ram Ghat, and to Panchaganga where the old Vaishnava temple had long since been replaced by a mosque. Years later, when I wrote a PhD thesis on the city of Banaras, its places and praises, its *tirthas* and *mahatmyas*, Professor J. L. Mehta, a Banarsi then at Harvard, became one of my examiners. Mehta, more than a generation my elder, had grown up on Ram Ghat and had known from childhood the city I studied as a young woman. Mehta had studied philosophy at Banaras Hindu University, learned German, and then traveled to Germany to study and to meet Martin Heidegger. For my part, I learned Hindi and Sanskrit and traveled to Banaras to study and to meet teachers like Pandit Ambika Datta Upadhyaya, J. N. Tiwari, and, eventually, Mehta.

Mehta often reflected on these kinds of encounters. They are not, he said, encounters that involve mastery, but rather encounters that involve risk. In these risky encounters, we experience the slippage of that sense of self that we carry with a normative lack of awareness. These encounters are not about adding to, or enriching, a sense of self and world already secured, but altering it in ways that are at times profoundly destabilizing. As Mehta used to put it, “no hermeneutic can somehow

precede the encounter.”² Mehta died in 1989. Ironically, he died in Cambridge on a summer visit. What would have been the ordinary course of ritual events in Banaras with a procession to the Manikarnika cremation *ghat* became extraordinary in Cambridge at Mount Auburn cemetery, as the family struggled to find a Brahmin priest, as we made arrangements for a fire altar outside the crematorium, as we made our brief procession from the fire outside to the fire inside. Indeed, no hermeneutic can somehow precede the encounter.

India was much farther away from Boston in the 1970s and 1980s than it is today. There were no reliable operative phones, save the crackling lines from the Banaras Hindu University post office that had to be booked a week in advance. There were letters that took two weeks, and occasional telegrams, delivered by bicycle. Today, satellite and cable communications put us all in close proximity. The very axes of time and space that orient a lived-in world have vanished. In India, I can call home from a tea stall on Asi Ghat. In Cambridge, the *Times of India* appears daily on my computer screen. E-mails to and from colleagues rocket back and forth. Hindus in the Boston suburbs send *e-hundi* offerings to Sri Venkateshvara, the Lord of India’s renowned hilltop pilgrimage center at Tirupati. Freshmen studying Vaishnava pilgrimages in my class can log into Tirupati’s Web site and hear the morning chants, the *suprabhatam*, in their dorm rooms in Harvard Yard.

The simultaneity of time and space creates a new global world, and reshapes our local worlds as well. Today, India and America are entwined more than ever in one another’s ongoing histories. The immigration of the past forty years, since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act, has created a living bridge between India and America with constant two-way traffic. South Indian Tamil and Telugu Americans consecrate temples in suburban Nashville and Kansas City, import sacred images from the artisan workshops of Mahabalipuram, and fly home to Chennai for a family wedding. Indian scientists in the Silicon Valley check the cricket scores on their cell phones. Gujaratis hold their *garbhas* in rented VFW halls. Bengalis

² Beyond Mehta’s well-known works on Heidegger, his primary essays on hermeneutics and the problem of understanding are “Problems of Inter-cultural Understanding in University Studies of Religion” in Mehta (1985), and “World Civilization’: The Possibility of Dialogue” in Mehta (1990). Mehta writes, “Liminality is the mode of existence of present-day man, who has his sojourn in a region where civilizations, cultures, and religions touch each other, where times and places flow together.... Dialogue and the interpretation of tidings that come from horizons so far alien to us, or those from which we have become alienated now, is not only our destined habitat today but constitutes our very being—we *are* a conversation and listen each to one another, as Holderlin said.” (1990: 46)

order up Durga Puja images from Calcutta and erect huge altars to the goddess in suburban high school gymnasiums. During the Diwali season in India, American Hindus create new versions of Diwali in Salt Lake City and Cleveland. The Hindu American Foundation lobbies the federal government to issue a Diwali postage stamp in recognition of America's Hindu community. It also keeps a watchful eye on Hindu civil rights, just as the Sikh Coalition documents discrimination against Sikhs and meets with the National Transportation Safety Board about travel restrictions relating to turbans and *kirpans*. Ours is, indeed, a new world of connectedness.

How do scholars reach into the complexity of this new world? How do we study the kinds of multireligious and multicultural dynamism that I have come to think of as "pluralism?" In graduate school, the most valuable seminar I took was one taught by W. C. Smith (1991) called "Historical Interrelations Among Religious Traditions." We explored the areas and eras in which what we came to call the "religions" were not at clear or boundaried, when religious movements were entwined in a common context. We studied the encounter of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist traditions in third-century China, the crossroads of religious currents on the Silk Road in Central Asia, the crystallization of what we now refer to as Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh traditions in Mughul India, the relation of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the so-called *convivencia* of Medieval Spain—in Toledo, Cordoba, Andalusia. Smith was a life-long critic and deconstructionist of the all-too-solidly-conceived "religions" that some scholars persist in trying to tame and study, arranging them in book-chapters as if they could be clearly and sequentially treated.³ Like many of us, Smith was especially drawn to

³ I am, of course, sympathetic with those who speak of "religions" this way. It is a first step in communication. Even though Smith suggested in *The Meaning and End of Religion* that we cease to use the term "religion" as a noun, it is difficult to put this change into effect. Those of us who are Smith's students constantly use the term "religious tradition" as if that conveyed more of the dynamic nature of the phenomena we study. In preparing the multimedia CD-ROM, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, I faced the question of representation with our graphic designers. How should we created an interface page through which one enters into the intersecting and often messy streams of tradition we call "religions?" They insisted on circles, and I acquiesced, finally, but only in conjunction with an essay that expressed just how problematic such representation is. I wrote, in part, "The religious traditions of humankind are shown here as circles, each containing a commonly used symbol of that tradition. 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.... 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.... And there is a third caution here as well: religious traditions are dynamic. Though they carry continuities through the centuries, they also have also changed through the centuries

the complex places that undermine our certainties. He did not often use the term pluralism, but there was much in the historical encounters and interrelations of cultures and peoples he chose to study that provides precedent for the more intense forms of encounter we see today. We can go on probing the energies of Mughul India or the confluences of medieval Spain, and there is much to be learned in doing so, but let us not forget that we are living today in a world as rich with the immediacy of profound cultural encounter. The living laboratory of the *convivencia* is at our doorstep.

For all of its twentieth-century episodes of communal violence, India continues to supply countless examples of the creativity of shared cultural and religious life. In the lanes and *galis* of Hindu Banaras, one finds the shrines of dozens of Muslim saints and martyrs. When Harvard undergraduate Rowena Potts (2006) set out to do a senior thesis there, she found a Muslim shrine with a Hindu caretaker, honored by both Hindus and Muslims, a reality widely duplicated in India and amply duplicated in Banaras. Even when a bomb exploded in the beloved Sankat Mochan temple in March 2006, killing twenty people, it failed to trigger the reverberations of violence intended. Indeed, the Shahar Mufti of Varanasi came immediately to the support of the *Mahant* of Sankat Mochan. Old patterns of business and commerce, pilgrimage and tourism seemed to hold steady through the explosions.

Indeed, if we were to study the responses to terrible episodes of communal violence in the past fifteen years, whether in Ayodhya or Gujarat, we would find a landscape of hundreds of countervailing civic groups, NGOs, and peace brigades, constructed across lines of religious difference. Imperative as it is to see clearly the raw facts of neighbor turning on neighbor in violence, is it not equally imperative to understand the deep resistance and active response to this violence?⁴ And might we not decide to investigate India's many bicultural traditions? After all, some 400 communities describe themselves as having more than one religious identity, such as the Rajput clan that gives each child two names: one Hindu and the other Muslim. Even the study of the religious complexity of a single village, as undertaken by Peter Gottschalk (2005), reveals widely overlapping religious worlds. One attentive chronicler of India's expressions of pluralism, Yoginder Sikhand (2003), has focused on shared sacred

and continue to change today. Religions are far more like rivers than like bounded circles or even complex structures."

⁴ See, for example, the incidents recorded by Agnivesh and Thampu (2002).

places where the breadth of pilgrim life simply defies the division and opposition of Hindu and Muslim. Dominique-Sila Khan (2004) studies the many forms of composite religious identities in India and the ways in which they are threatened as more monolithic identities expand into social and religious spaces that have long been liminal. Many shared sites are becoming contested, to be sure, and are targeted by those who want clearer lines and borders. Even so, there are persistent traditions of Indian thought and practice that continue to resist lines and borders. Nandy writes, "These traditions are only the most dramatic articulation of a more pervasive religious and public consciousness in South Asia which has remained, to use the expression of D. R. Nagaraj, playfully incommunicado—to modern Indians." (2002: 124–125)

And what of America? Is there a pervasive religious and public consciousness that provides nourishing ground for pluralism here as well? The American Constitution, guaranteeing freedom of religious practice, is fundamentally a recipe for religious diversity. The past forty years of renewed immigration have brought people to the United States from all over the world, many from South Asia, and with them have come a range of religious traditions that have made the reality of America's religious landscape ever more complex. Despite the massive normative presence of Christianity in America, the thresholds and crossing places are more plentiful than ever before. Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Muslim communities from India have put down roots in America, enjoy the benefits of religious freedom, and encounter the multiplicity of American religious and secular life. Christian, Jewish, or secular Americans encounter, many for the first time, religious communities they have never before known first-hand. Mayors of suburban towns are invited to Hindu consecration rites, Sikh parades, or Muslim *iftars*. Is there evidence here of new forms of religious pluralism, new forms of connection and relationship that are, shall we say, widely incommunicado?

It was more than fifteen years ago that I began feeling the ground under my feet shift intellectually as Hindu communities I had studied in India became more and more visible in the United States. I launched the Pluralism Project in 1991—part history, part ethnography, part immigration studies, part cultural geography, part what we used to call civics. I have not been alone in the exploration of this new reality. There are many of you who have been pioneers in the study of Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Buddhist communities in the United States and Canada, many who have also shifted your focus, at least in part, to what has been happening in our own cities and suburbs, under our

very eyes.⁵ This new focus has opened new areas of research, new pedagogies, and new collegial connections. Indeed, there are by now new units of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) dedicated to the discussion and exploration of Asian traditions in the American context.

For fifteen years now, the Pluralism Project has engaged students and many of you as colleagues in taking as our research agenda the dynamic life of religious America in our time. We have studied not only particular religious traditions in the process of dynamic change, but also the new patterns of religious complexity that all this has brought to the American scene. In a rapidly diversifying society, where are the tensions and fault lines, the ugly stereotypes, and the hate crimes? Where are the new connections, the convergences, the thresholds, and the hybridities? Where have people in cities and towns, in colleges and companies, in neighborhood across America been truly creative in forging bonds of connection and relationship among diverse communities? Where have we failed to do so?

A full decade before the events of 11 September 2001, the Pluralism Project began to study a multireligious reality not yet on the screen of many Americans. Most people had noted the changing demography of the United States; the word “multicultural” came into common use in the early 1990s.⁶ But what were the religious dimensions of a multicultural society? Although we were cautious about over-emphasizing “religion” in describing the “new immigration,” we found that many historians and sociologists paid little attention to religion at all. And yet, for many of the new immigrants, as for European immigrants a century ago, religious communities were an important focus of identity in a new society. Underlying our study was a deeply American ethos: the insistence that the diversity of religious communities in America is not a “problem” to be solved. It is, however, a new challenge, that of creating a cohesive society out of all these differences. And for us in the Pluralism Project, the intellectual challenge was and is studying the new phase of a multireligious society in the making.

Pluralism is vigorously discussed and debated in many arenas today. Here, I will address just three—the intellectual arena of our research,

⁵ In Hindu and South Asian religious traditions, see Williams (1988), Waghorne (2004), and Dempsey (2005). See also the work of Paul Numrich, Richard Seager, and Duncan Williams on American Buddhism; the work of Kambiz Ghanea-Bassiri, Yvonne Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Barbara Metcalf on Islam in America; and the work of Gurinder Singh Mann on the Sikh tradition in America.

⁶ Before the 1990s, “multiculturalism” was a term used far more commonly of the civic and cultural climate of Canada, where it was a policy of the government.

the civic arena of our public life, and the theological arena of our communities of faith. The confusion of these spheres of discourse is not uncommon. Let me offer one all-too-simple an example. A few years ago, a Minnesota state legislator complained vociferously that the Dalai Lama should not be allowed to address the state legislature because, as he put it, "Buddhism is incompatible with Christian principles" (Smith 2001). What do you suppose he was thinking? What was the basis of his complaint? Did he imagine that America is a land where only Christian principles can be articulated in public space? His charge might launch a multitude of theological discussions about the relation of Buddhist and Christian principles, but it has little to do with whether the Dalai Lama should be permitted to give an address in the state house.

This confusion of arenas of discourse might also be illustrated by the case of the American Hindus who were both hurt and angry when the Southern Baptists published a prayer guide, asking Baptists to pray for Hindus during their fall festival of Diwali. According to the publication, Hindus are people "lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism... who worship gods which are not God" (*Diwali: Festival of Lights Prayer for Hindus* 1999). A few Hindus, deeply offended, picketed Southern Baptist churches, and eventually decided to appeal for justice to the Attorney General of the United States. What were they thinking? What did they hope the Attorney General might do? The Attorney General is not charged with rectifying the theological views of either Baptists or Hindus. There is no one in public office given that charge, and so it should be. Our freedom of religion means that Southern Baptists have every constitutional right to think what they will about Hindus, ill-informed or hurtful as it may be. Whether it is theologically well-informed is another question. Other Christians may want to challenge the Baptists on biblical or theological grounds, but that challenge falls into a realm of discourse quite distinct from the civic discourse of citizens.

As teachers and writers, we learn to analyze and distinguish the registers of "voice" that we use in these various arenas of discourse. In commenting on student papers, we routinely take note of voice: How is an argument made? What are the sources of authority? the footnotes? the evidence? Who has not had students who flounder in navigating these waters? Many are not used to articulating arguments with which they may personally disagree, finding their own voice in the midst of a multisided discussion. We do not speak in the same "voice" in the seminar, the civic lecture, or the church. As scholars, studying the communities and crossroads of plural societies, our arguments are

constructed from multiple ethnographic and textual sources. As citizens, those of us who speak or write about critical and volatile public issues might also use a public voice and our authoritative sources are likely to be legal and constitutional. And those of us who think about the challenge of religious pluralism from the standpoint of our particular tradition of faith will also employ a theological voice. Here, we speak explicitly as Christians, Jews, or Muslims, as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, or ardent atheists, and our authoritative sources are likely to be those of our own traditions of thought and faith. I say those “of us” because a large number of us in AAR acknowledge that these registers of voice are all ours and that we participate in scholarly, public, and theological discussions, all three. When we switch lanes, we learn to use turn signals.

“Voice,” in this context, is a term of rhetoric: it describes where we position ourselves, and in this case, where we stand in addressing the issue of pluralism. Voice depends upon the location of people to whom we speak, the context in which we speak, and what is at stake in that context. How do we assemble an argument and on what do we rely for persuasive evidence and footnotes—is it primary and secondary texts? Is it the constitution? Is it biblical or Qur’anic authority? Anyone who is a parent, a lover, a teacher, all three knows what it is to be multivocal. And so it is with our multivocality as scholars, as persons of faith, and as citizens. As a scholar of America’s religious diversity, I might deliver a very interesting lecture on the changing religious landscape of Kansas City—the historic Christian and Jewish communities, the Shawnee Mission, the new Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist communities, the old and new interfaith initiatives. This would not be the same lecture in the same “voice” I would give to members of a large suburban Presbyterian church in Kansas City, a church whose members are trying to think about what the new religious diversity means to them as Christians. And were I asked to address a group assembled by the mayor of Kansas City to think about her approach and that of suburban mayors to interfaith prayer breakfasts or the National Day of Prayer, I would turn largely to the language lodged in our civil and political covenants of citizenship.

This seems stunningly simple, but in practice many of us are not adept at thinking through the issues of voice, so strident is the push toward the unitary, the unequivocal. Many people are still uneasy with a candidate for office who would oppose abortion as a Catholic, for example, and support *Roe v. Wade* as a candidate, convinced that this is an issue on which deeply religious and ethical people disagree and one that should not be legislated by a government based on the free exercise of conscience. Many do not know what to make of a political figure

who opposes civil marriage for gays and lesbians and yet embraces a lesbian daughter, her partner, and their child. We do not make it crystal clear that uniformed commanders in the U.S. military are not to proselytize on the job and that it is not a restriction of their freedom of speech to insist on this principle.

Naturally, one cannot evade the question of voice in thinking theoretically about pluralism, for we know full well that diversity is not only a characteristic of the global and local world in which we live; diversity is not only a characteristic of every religious tradition we study; diversity is also a characteristic of our very selves—in the web of our thoughts, emotions, religious impulses, and relationships. We are, as Michael Sandel puts it, “multiply situated selves.” As Sen puts it, our identities are not choiceless and singular, but complex, chosen, and plural.

Now I want to sketch these three arenas of discourse in which pluralism is challenging us today: pluralism as a challenge for the academy, pluralism as a challenge for our public life, and pluralism as a challenge for our theological thinking and our religious communities.

PLURALISM AS A CHALLENGE FOR THE ACADEMY

Our first task is one of scholarship. In the American context, this has meant learning as much as we can about the religious life of this latest post-1965 phase of American history. The task has been largely ethnographic for, at the outset, there were few sources beyond the lives of the religious communities themselves. The task is also complicated by the fact that most historians and sociologists who have attended to the new immigration have been quite uninterested in the religious communities and lives of new immigrants.⁷ We owe to many religious studies scholars and researchers what will be seen as the first draft of a new phase of American religious history, shining the light of attention on America’s many religious communities. In my own field of Hindu studies, I think of Fred Clothey’s pioneering work on the Sri Venkateshwara Temple in Penn Hills outside Pittsburgh, Vasudha Narayanan’s extensive work on Hindu cultures in America, and Jack Hawley’s ground-breaking New York-based course called “Hinduism Here.” In addition, there are many projects smaller in scope, such as

⁷ Much of the work in Asian American studies, for example, has been pioneered by scholars for whom religion is not at all a category of analysis. Some notable exceptions include Warner (1998) and Ebaugh (2000). A new generation of scholars, including David Kim, Jane Iwamura, Sharon Suh, and Duncan Williams, is doing important work with Asian American religious life very much in their line of vision.

the work of Michael Linderman, a young scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, who worked as a Pluralism Project researcher documenting some thirty of the Hindu temples of New Jersey (Linderman 2001/2003). I think also of the work of Harvard College sophomore Sarina Paschrica who documented the consecration of the very first Hindu temple in Delaware, summer intern Mathilda McGee of Oberlin, who focused on the zoning problems faced by the huge Swaminarayan temple complex in Chino Hills, CA; Harvard senior Anar Dinesh Shah of New Jersey who wrote about the issues discussed in the summer conference of the Young Jains of America; and Anjali Dhindhiwal, Harvard Divinity student, who spent a week listening and learning at a conference of young Sikh women in California. This work, published on the Pluralism Project Web site, represents what is basically the first work to be done on many of these topics.

The growth of America's religious diversity has taken place slowly, locally, step by step, in a thousand microhistories that must be collected one by one, to become primary sources in this new phase of American history. The Sikhs of Charlotte, NC, buy land, construct and dedicate the Gurdwara Sahib of Charlotte. The Vietnamese of Claremont, CA, turn a two-car garage into a Buddhist temple. Muslims in Cambridge, MA, turn a Knights of Columbus hall into the home of the Islamic Society of Boston, and now they are building a new center in the heart of Boston that will stand as a landmark mosque for the entire city. I want to be clear that research into the microhistories of these communities is not just about real estate and the struggle to find a home. Behind each garage door, each storefront mosque, each church-converted temple is the story of a community encountering an American neighborhood, bridging somehow the place from which it came and the place it now inhabits. Their local struggles, mostly incommunicado, are very things we most need to know to assess the prospects for real pluralism in the United States today. Each deserves the careful attention that Robert Orsi brought to the New York Italians and the *Madonna of 115th Street*.

In 1993, a Methodist Church and an Islamic Society bought adjoining property in the East Bay city of Fremont, near San Francisco. They named their frontage road Peace Terrace, and broke ground together to build St. Paul's United Methodist Church and the Islamic Society of the East Bay. Then what? How have these communities related to one another beyond landscaping and allocating parking? What happened that year when the Christmas season coincided with Ramadan? What happened when the Islamic Center started its own private school, the Peace Terrace Academy? What happened after 9/11? What can we learn from

these two neighbors? Are they an example of the kind of engagement we call pluralism, or are they still, after fifteen years, a reminder that proximity does not guarantee engagement? What lens do these collaborations give us into new patterns of religious life in America? Why and how is it important as we think about American prospects for pluralism?

Ellie Pierce, Pluralism Project senior researcher, has followed Fremont for a decade. She and filmmaker Rachel Antell are looking closely at this new city, which has just celebrated its fifty-year anniversary. Fremont is a window into a new kind of American city, its citizens born in 155 countries and speaking 137 languages, a city with more Singhs than Smiths, a city 49.7% Asian, 30.6% White, 13.9% Latino, and 2% African American. Fremont's India Day Parade attracts tens of thousands of people to downtown Fremont. When a Sikh Gurdwara was built on Hillside Terrace a decade ago, Sikhs petitioned the city council to rename its street Gurdwara Road. "But I can't even pronounce *gurdwara*!" said a fellow citizen at the town meeting. "Well, I can't pronounce Paseo Padre Parkway," countered a member of the Sikh community. This is indeed our new American situation, learning to pronounce one another's names and glimpse one another's communities. Civic officials are at the forefront of grappling with this new reality. A Hindu woman has been elected to the City Council. The mayor of Fremont has made sure that Muslims have a prayer space somewhere in city hall for use during town meetings. The Fremont police chief was invited to the *gurdwara* and made an honorary Sikh with the presentation of symbolic sword.

In September of 2006, Fremont celebrated its fifty years and its multicultural civic life with a public "Hands Around the Lake" ceremony, ringing a park-lake in the city with a human chain of Fremont citizens. Within a few weeks, the celebratory spirit of multiculturalism was shattered when Alia Ansari, an Afghan Muslim woman wearing *hijab*, was shot and killed in a residential area while walking to school to pick up her children, her three-year-old child in tow. The murder was deeply unsettling for a city that has struggled with and steered boldly into its own diversity. In response to the violence, Fremont citizens organized a "Wear a Hijab or Turban Day" on which hundreds of citizens wore headgear—a headscarf or a turban—in public solidarity with those who are targeted for their visible difference. One of the organizers said, "This is another version of walk-in-another-person's-moccasins. It's walk in another person's headgear."⁸

⁸ Search *Religious Diversity News* by keyword "Fremont" for a summary of linked news stories on this issue. <http://www.pluralism.org/news/index.php>.

These are not simply assorted facts about a growing city of 212,000, but the markers of a research agenda calling for our academic attention. Now in the twenty-first century, Fremont is the Silk Road. Fremont is Mughul India. Fremont is Toledo. We in the AAR should be paying sustained attention to the Fremonts of America. Perhaps we might adopt a city or a neighborhood, each of us, a thousand of us, simply as a way of training our eyes on what is happening right in front of us. Even a single temple, mosque, or gurdwara will do. What must catch our eye are not just the mega-churches and the most visible and vocal Christian organizations, important as they are, but the developing microhistories of hundreds of smaller religious communities and hundreds of cities and towns, where America's prospects for pluralism are being worked out, on the ground, every day.

Our own universities are also sites for sustained academic attention. What prospects for pluralism are suggested by focusing on our own college campuses? Collectively, those of us in the Academy know a great deal about the changing shape of religious practice in America, looking as we do through the lens of institutions of higher education. Those of you from the University of Chicago know that Rockefeller Chapel has been adapted for multifaith use, with two octagonal prayer rooms specifically designated for Hindu and Muslim students (Carnig 2006). Those of you from Rutgers and Brown could tell us about the development of explicitly interfaith campus housing (Teicher 2006). If you are from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, you might tell us about the initiative called "A Day in the Life of a Muslim," in which any non-Muslim student was invited to spend a day with a Muslim student (Maines 2006). At Harvard, it has become customary over the past decade to hear the *adhan*, the call to prayer, from the steps of Widener Library during Islam Awareness Week and to witness a spring-time *yajna* sponsored by the Hindu student group called Dharma on the steps of the Memorial Church. In the fall of 2006, Dharma consecrated Harvard's first-ever designated and architect-designed Hindu prayer room. On Yom Kippur, members of the Islamic Society who were fasting for Ramadan invited Jewish students for the *iftar* meal at the end of their Yom Kippur fast. The next week, during Sukkoth, Jewish students invited the Muslims to an *iftar* in the spacious *sukkah* created in the courtyard of the Hillel center. For more than a year, a student group called JAM, Jews and Muslims, has met for weekly discussion. Anyone in college chaplaincy knows that this is the emerging reality. But what is its significance for those of us who are scholars of religion? In what ways is this emerging reality significant to our very field of study, to the ongoing history of religions?

JAM is but one example of widespread phenomenon that also deserves critical study: today's multifaceted interfaith movement, beginning in earnest in the 1980s, growing in the 1990s, and burgeoning since 9/11. A recently released study by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that "Interfaith activity among faith communities has more than tripled since 2000."⁹ In the fall of 2006, for example, an ambitious plan for partnership was unveiled in Omaha, NE: the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska, the Reform Jewish community of Omaha, and the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture pledged to learn and work together, to share ministries of outreach and service, and eventually, perhaps, to build a joint Tri-Faith campus together. There was no Akbar presiding, but the religious leaders of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities took the initiative (Sherman 2006). The conscious, deliberate forging of relationships among people of different faiths is a phenomenon so significant, so widespread, both locally and internationally, that to study this movement and to gain insight into what is happening would indeed require the joint efforts of many members of the Academy. But would a potential graduate student who identified the study of pluralism and interfaith networks in America as his or her major focus of interest gain admission in today's top graduate programs? Probably not, at least not yet, or at least unless he or she applied to the newly created PhD program at Georgetown University or the recently launched PhD in Interreligious Studies offered jointly in Yogyakarta, Indonesia by a Christian, a Muslim, and a secular university.

Pluralism is not just the enumeration of difference, and pluralism is certainly not just 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. In investigating the deliberate construction of multireligious relationships,

⁹ Press release of Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, 4 May 2006. "David A. Roozen, Director of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership and Professor of Religion and Society at Hartford Seminary, said that 'immediately after September 11 there was a surge of interfaith activity, but that by the following year many social commentators were talking about a return to the general interfaith indifference of pre-2001. There was no hard data to support or refute such claims. Now we know, four years later. The increased attention being given by communities of faith to interfaith engagements continues to be dramatic.' Perhaps even more significantly, Roozen said, 'the Sept. 11 upturn in interfaith awareness has been accompanied by a fundamental change in the United States' perception of the American religious mosaic. Our public consciousness has had acknowledge in the most powerful way in our history that the religious liberty-in-diversity that Americans cherish has moved from ecumenical Christian to interfaith, and that this American, interfaith consciousness will forevermore include Islam.'"

we might find a set of paradigms for pluralism, a set of practices, each of which expands the social space of religious encounter. Let me give you just a few examples.

Ten years ago, some citizens of Louisville, KY launched the Festival of Faiths, a major weeklong civic event to highlight and better understand the religious communities of Louisville. It includes citywide events, with speakers, breakfasts, dinners, and arts performances. It includes a passport program that extends that week into a year of visiting in one another's places of worship with a "passport," enabling participants to learn first-hand about religious communities other than their own. The Louisville festival packaged its approach so that other cities and towns might replicate it. One such city was Greenville, SC, which launched its own Festival of Faiths (Bogert 2005).

Assistant Pluralism Project Director Kathryn Lohre has kept a close eye on women's interreligious networks, especially in the years since 9/11. She has collected the stories of dozens of seemingly disparate initiatives. In Syracuse, NY, shortly after 9/11, a Presbyterian woman brooded about rumors that Muslim women were feeling unsafe leaving their homes. She invited one of the women from the local Islamic Center for coffee in her kitchen. Each invited nine friends to a meeting, and before long *Women Transcending Boundaries* was born. The group kept meeting and kept growing. In their discussions, they took hold of critical issues, including the alarming arrests of local Muslims in upstate New York, the impending war in Iraq, and their own life cycle issues—birth, marriage, and death. They began to look beyond Syracuse as well, linking their local concerns to those of women around the world and raising money for a school in Pakistan (Dugan 2006; Lohre 2006; *Women Transcending Boundaries Website* 2007).

The workplace is, in many places, a ready-made multireligious environment with its own tensions and built-in opportunities for interfaith relationships. In Dearborn, MI, officials of the Ford Motor Company became convinced that pluralism is a workplace issue for some 350,000 people at 100 plants around the world. Rather than create dozens of religion-based employee resource groups, Ford's management developed the Ford Interfaith Network, an employee resource network launched in 2000 that steers into the religious diversity of the workplace. The mission? "To assist the company in becoming a worldwide corporate leader in promoting religious tolerance, corporate integrity, and human dignity." One company official said, "It's the right thing to do, and it's good for business" (Ronald 2005).

In Chicago, a young Ismaili social entrepreneur, Eboo Patel, believes that interfaith service is a young people's movement and so he founded

the Interfaith Youth Core. Looking around the world, Patel observed that the shock troops of religious extremist movements are, on the whole, youth—whether they be members of the Hindu-chauvinist Bajrang Dal in India or the young men attracted to Al-Qaeda. Patel asks candidly, “Why are religious extremists beating the hell out of religious pluralists?” Because they recruit the energies of young people. The term “interfaith movement” cannot just signal old people talking, but has to signal young people acting, and the Interfaith Youth Core is action-based. Young people already live in local proximity, in schools, colleges, and neighborhoods. So, how can the passive acknowledgment of diversity be transformed into active relationships of common community service? This is the work of the Interfaith Youth Core. As Patel puts it, “Imagine a world where young people from different religious backgrounds come together to create understanding and respect by serving their communities. This is the world we are building.”¹⁰

What is at stake in gaining an intellectual grasp of these forms of pluralism? 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. It is not surprising to me that this is work that is especially compelling to so many young scholars. They know already, from life experience, that the future lies somewhere between Armageddon and *Convivencia*.

PLURALISM AS A CIVIC ISSUE

I have tried to sketch broadly some of the academic challenges in the study of pluralism. I turn now to the contentious issues of pluralism in American civic and public life. Here, what is at stake is not the competence of our field of religious studies in a fast-changing world, but the very principles and ideals of our societies. I speak specifically as an American, although those of you who are from other countries will recognize analogous civic issues in your own contexts. What is at stake in our many highly symbolic public controversies over religious issues, such as the public posting of the Ten Commandments? Is it really about religious respect for the Ten Commandments or is it about

¹⁰ See the Interfaith Youth Core Web site, <http://www.ifyc.org/index.php>, and Patel (2007).

Christian claims to public space? When Chief Justice Roy Moore was challenged for installing a two and a half ton monument of the Ten Commandments in the Federal Courthouse in Montgomery, AL, in 2000, he said, "We need to reclaim our Biblical heritage."¹¹ But which "we" is he invoking here? Surely not "we the people of the United States of America." Are "we" a Christian nation? A Judeo-Christian-Muslim nation? A secular nation? Or, are "we" a nation in which freedom of conscience is guaranteed for all people, including those who are not religious?

Most polls indicate that "we" are 80% Christian, that 90% of us believe in God, and that Christianity is the predominant religious tradition even of new immigrants. America is an overwhelmingly "Christian nation" in sheer numbers, and many Americans, like Judge Moore, presume something more profound from that fact. However, the Bill of Rights is not about majorities. It is about the rights of all citizens, even, and perhaps especially, those who do not win elections.

There are many ways in which civic identity is being reconfigured in the United States today. Some Americans are alarmed by this and are uncomfortable with a "we" that includes ever more co-citizens who are Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist. Samuel Huntington has titled his book on American identity simply *Who are We?* The "we" question is critical to ask, but Huntington's response is unsettling. He speaks of what he calls a "cult" of diversity and multiculturalism (Huntington 2004: 145), as if the new demographic reality of America were somehow the invention of those whom he sees as "elitist" liberal academics and as if people of Muslim or Buddhist background were not part of the "we." In the face of this "cult of diversity," he calls for a renewed assertion of "Anglo-Protestant" culture and religiosity. America was "born protestant" (Huntington 2004: 63), as he puts it. "The American Creed is the unique creation of a dissenting Protestant culture" (Huntington 2004: 68). Its core values are deeply protestant: liberty, equality, democracy, civil rights, nondiscrimination, and the rule of law.

So, what about the American Buddhist communities that offered an *amicus* brief in the Pledge of Allegiance case, arguing that they and their children should not have to choose between faith and citizenship?¹² What about Michael A. Newdow, the atheist father who brought

¹¹ Search *Religious Diversity News* by keyword "Ten Commandments, Alabama" for a summary of linked news stories on Judge Moore's case: <http://www.pluralism.org/news/index.php>.

¹² No. 02-1624, *Elk Grove Unified School District and David W. Gordon, Superintendent, Petitioners v. Michael A. Newdow, Respondent*. Brief Amicus Curiae of Buddhist Temples, Centers,

the case to begin with? Huntington's answer is disconcerting: if Buddhists or atheists feel like strangers in America, they really *should* feel like strangers, because they are. This is a land founded and shaped by Christians. Newdow was right: atheists *are* outsiders in American culture. And they should be, as Huntington sees it. Muslims or Buddhists who view a public cross on Table Rock near Boise Idaho and feel strangers to the Boise community *should* feel strangers, because they are (Huntington 2004: 83). That is Huntington's view, and it is widely shared, to be sure.

I do not presume that in the AAR we are of one mind about many issues of the role of religion in public life. My question is a larger one: do we have a stake as scholars and as citizens in this public discussion of American "identity," or is this to be the domain of political scientists, sociologists, and legal scholars alone? Clearly, I *do* think scholars in religious studies also have a public voice. It is a voice to be exercised not only because of the scholarly perspectives we bring to public issues, but also because of the allegiance we pledge as citizens. As a citizen, I believe that it strengthens the American "we" when Buddhists protest the words "under God," that it amplifies the American "we" when the Muslim Public Affairs Council weighs in on the limits of surveillance, the constitutional treatment of detainees, or the war in Lebanon. When the Hindu American Foundation writes an *amicus* brief in the Texas Ten Commandments case explaining their views on the Ten Commandments monument on the lawn of the state capitol, it strengthens the American "we," no matter what the outcome in the Supreme Court.¹³ And when the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund resolves an employment dispute with Dominoes Pizza,

and Organizations representing over 300,000 Buddhist Americans in Support of Respondents. Kenneth R. Pierce, Counsel of Record. The summary of argument begins: "When children from Buddhist homes across the United States recite the Pledge of Allegiance, they utter a phrase that is inconsistent and incompatible with the religious beliefs and ethical principles they are taught by their parents, by other adults in their communities, and by their teachers at after school religious programs and at Sunday Dharma school. That phrase is that this is a nation 'under God.' Although these children may wish to say the Pledge, express their patriotism, and state aloud their commitment to this 'indivisible' country and the values of "liberty and justice for all" represented by the flag, they can only do so by referring to a deity and a particular religious paradigm that is at odds with their Buddhist beliefs."

¹³ The Brief for the Hindu American Foundation and Others Representing the Interests of Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, as *Amicus Curiae* in Support of Reversal. No. 03-1500 in the Supreme Court of the United States: *Thomas Van Orden v. Rick Perry*, Governor of Texas and Chairman, State Preservation Board, et al. In March 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court heard the Texas case, which was decided on 27 June 2005 in favor of allowing the Ten Commandments monument to remain on the lawn of the state capital building. Justice Stevens, dissenting, 13. 03-1500.

which had denied employment to a turban-wearing Sikh, this too enriches and expands the American “we.”¹⁴

Some ninety years ago, the sociologist Harold Kallen argued that the assimilative melting pot image was unworthy of a democracy. What is required for a nation of immigrants to thrive is not the shedding of difference, but the engagement of that difference in the construction of a society, a nation, or a city. A great democracy requires that we all be equals in the political sphere. It does not require that we all be the same. It requires our participation—like the participation of Hindus and Sikhs—but not our conformity. Kallen used the term cultural “pluralism” to describe it—and offered it as a radical alternative to the assimilative vision of the melting pot.¹⁵

In the civic arena, the study of pluralism means studying public issues—those places where the growing religious diversity of America meets old, sometimes entrenched presuppositions. This might mean studying what goes on in public schools and school boards, city councils, zoning boards, state legislatures, and courts. And it might also mean participating in what goes on in school boards, city councils, zoning boards, state legislatures, and courts. It means looking carefully at the speech and voice of public officials and candidates for office; it means carefully considering the voice of uniformed military officers, of the chain of command in our military academies (Davis n.d.).

Local city council controversies are windows into the civic tensions in a pluralist America. Some of you may remember the controversy in Palos Heights, IL, the Chicago suburb that became infamous in 2000 when its city council voted to offer an Islamic society \$200,000 to walk away from a purchase and sale agreement on a church. In the public city council meeting, an alderman referred to the religion of Islam as “upside down” and many citizens expressed fears about having a Muslim center in town. In the end, the mayor vetoed the buyout offer, calling it “an insult to Muslims and fiscally irresponsible for the city.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, <http://www.saldef.org>, 16 May 2006: “Washington, DC, May 16, 2006—The Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) successfully resolved the issue of a Sikh American gentleman who was disallowed from wearing his *daastar*—or turban—while on the job working as a pizza delivery driver for a Domino’s Pizza franchise in Maryland.”

¹⁵ Kallen (1915). Kallen’s vision of cultural pluralism did not, however, embrace African Americans, Asian workers, and native peoples. His vision, alas, extended only to the cultures and peoples of Europe. Even so, Kallen’s rejection of the “melting pot” model of America gives us much to think about in an even more racially, culturally, and religiously diverse America today.

¹⁶ Transcript of *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 30 June 2000. Search *Religious Diversity News* by keyword “Palos Heights” for a summary of linked news stories on this issue. <http://www.pluralism.org/news/index.php>.

Our Pluralism Project senior researcher, Ellie Pierce, logged dozens of hours of interviews with officials and residents of Palos Heights to gain a sense of the very human complexity of the issues. The mayor, the town's elected representatives, the clergy, the members of the Muslim community, and those who came to the open council meetings all have their views of this story and all give expression to the multi-sidedness of local issues and the leadership required to tackle them. As a case study, Palos Heights gives us insight into some of the most difficult issues American communities face in the years ahead.

In assessing our civic prospects for pluralism, we might also look to the Wiccans, the "canary in the mineshaft" of many religious freedom issues. Pluralism Project staff member, Grove Harris, documented the controversial case in Chesterfield County, VA, in which a Wiccan priestess asked the Board of Supervisors to put her name on the list of clergy offering to give the invocation at the monthly Board meeting.¹⁷ She was summarily denied a place on the list and the Board of Supervisors expressed its view that America's "civil religion" is Judeo-Christian in form and that Wiccan forms of belief and prayer would be out of place in a public forum. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which finally declined to hear it, but the issue will not go away as long as Wiccans continue to believe that the Constitution supports their freedom too. More recently, Wiccans have persisted in petitioning the Veterans' Administration to have a pentacle, a Wiccan symbol of faith, placed on the headstones and grave-markers of Wiccans killed in the line of duty as members of the armed forces.¹⁸

In assessing our civic prospects for pluralism in the United States, we will also want to pay careful attention to incidents of hate crimes, the harassment of religious minorities, and the vandalism of their property. As minority religious communities become more visible, they simultaneously become more vulnerable. Last year, 2006, for example, we followed the vandalism and the smashing of the sacred images at the almost-completed Hindu temple in the Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove in April. We followed the uprooting of the flagpole and burning of the Sikh flag at a *gurdwara* in South Salem, OR, in July, and the bullets shot through the front door of a mosque in Michigan City, IN,

¹⁷ For a research report and linked news summary of the case *Simpson v. Chesterfield County*, Virginia see Harris (2005).

¹⁸ In April 2007, that battle was won when the case brought against the Veterans' Administration by Circle Sanctuary and other plaintiffs in Wisconsin was settled and the pentacle was added to the list of approved religious symbols (Case No. 06-C-0660-S in the U.S. District Court of the Western District of Wisconsin).

also in July. Cumulatively, one might imagine that the prospects for pluralism dim with each new incident. But following each incident beyond the initial violence, we realize that often something else is also happening. The public response to incidents of vandalism, violence, and discrimination has often been to assert, to the contrary, that this is not who “we” are. In Maple Grove, for instance, 600 concerned citizens attended a public forum the week after the vandalism. The temple community worked hard to clean up the mess and keep its sites on the future. The nineteen-year-old vandals were apprehended a month later. They pleaded guilty, and the Hindu community invited them for a meeting. The temple representative said, “They are suffering as much if not more than we are suffering.” To the boys he said, “As long as a few people from my community know how sorry you are, the purpose will be served. Your presence here will allow my community, the Hindu Temple of Minnesota, to close a very painful chapter in our history. So thank you.” When the young men were brought to court for sentencing, representatives of the temple interceded with the judge to ask for lighter sentences. Included in their sentence was a course on Hinduism and 200 hours of community service.¹⁹

In assessing the civic prospects for pluralism, we as scholars must also attend carefully to the religious and racial profiling that has beset Muslims, Sikhs, Arab Americans, and even South Asians in the past five years. This is primary source material in the effort to assess our prospects for pluralism. In its annual report, released in September of 2006, the Council on American Islamic Relations reported a 30% increase in incidents of anti-Muslim bias in 2005 over the previous year. The Discrimination and National Security Initiative, an affiliate of the Pluralism Project, released a study in September of 2006 reporting that 83% of Sikh respondents had either experienced a hate crime or incident or personally knew someone who had (Han n.d.). Here in the Academy, we know colleagues who have found themselves on the “no-fly list,” for no other reason than that they are Muslim, Arab, or South Asian. We are alarmed by the continued border blockades, denying entry into the United States of scholars and religious leaders on the basis of unspecified charges. I think of the late Zaki Badawi, eighty-four years old, founder of the Muslim College in London and longtime leader of the Council of Mosques and Imams in the U.K., held for hours at Kennedy Airport in the summer of 2005, *en route* to an

¹⁹ Search *Religious Diversity News* by keyword “Maple Grove” for a summary of linked news stories on this incident of vandalism and its aftermath. <http://www.pluralism.org/news/index.php>.

Abrahamic Dialogue at Chautauqua. He was finally sent back on the plane to London, deemed simply “inadmissible.” Salam Al-Marayati of the Muslim Public Affairs Council remarked, “People wonder why the moderates are not being heard. It is because they are being excluded.”²⁰

We in the AAR are well aware of the continued exclusion of Tariq Ramadan, invited twice now to address us at our annual meeting, and denied entry both times. An ethicist and theologian, a Muslim theorist of pluralism, Ramadan has been read and studied not only in Europe, but in American colleges and theological schools as well. He has had a powerful influence in the intra-Muslim discussion of living creatively as Muslims in western societies. Ironically, one of the very causes Ramadan advocates is to give up the victim’s stance, the psychology of being a beleaguered minority, to participate in the social and political life of France, the U.K., or America.

This past summer, Ramadan published an important article called “Manifesto for a New We,” in which he takes up, once again, the question of identity as Western Muslims (Ramadan 2006). In this online article, Ramadan calls for a “revolution of trust”—among Muslims and between Muslims and their fellow citizens. “Citizens of the Muslim faith,” he says, “must contribute to a reformulation of the political questions of the day.” Ramadan writes:

Our societies are awaiting the emergence of a new “We”. A “We” that would bring together men and women, citizens of all religion—and those without religion—who would undertake together to resolve the contradictions of their society: the right to work, to housing, to respect, against racism and all forms of discrimination, all offenses against human dignity. Such a “We” would henceforth represent this coming together of citizens confident in their values, defenders of pluralism in their common society and respectful of the identities of others; citizens who seek to take up the challenge in the name of their shared values at the very heart of their societies. As loyal and critical citizens, as men and women of integrity, they join forces in a revolution of trust and confidence to stem the onrush of fear. Against shallow, emotional, even hysterical reactions they stand firm for rationality, for dialogue, for attentiveness, for a reasonable approach to complex social questions.

I wish Ramadan were here to engage with us on the issues he sees in France, Switzerland, and Britain. He writes, “The future of Western

²⁰ BBC News online, Friday, 15 July 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4684489.stm>.

societies is now being played out at the local level. It is a matter of greatest urgency to set in motion national movements of local initiatives in which women and men of different religions, cultures, and sensitivities can open new horizons of mutual understanding and shared commitment: horizons of trust.”

What is at stake in the civic and public discussion of pluralism is the very foundation of American constitutional society. As scholars of religions, we cannot sleep through this period of turbulence that has so challenged the core values of American religious freedom. It not only shapes the context of our study, but is a worthy subject of study as well. When Muslims who are co-citizens or our academic colleagues, here and abroad, are harassed and silenced by our own government or by special interest groups in our society, it is a matter of serious concern to us as both scholars and citizens.

PLURALISM AS A THEOLOGICAL ISSUE

Let me turn now to that third arena in which the pluralism debate is raging: theological thinking. By theology I mean, broadly put, the ongoing reformulation of a tradition of faith by the adherents, practitioners, and leaders of that tradition. Understanding and interpreting religious diversity is not only an academic and civic challenge, it is a theological challenge, a question of faith—age old, and yet insistent and new in our time. A theological argument utilizes the language, the symbols, and the authoritative sources of one’s own religious tradition. It is plainly evaluative and interpretive. It speaks from the tradition to the tradition.

In distinction from civic discourse, the focus of theological discourse is not on the civic “we,” but on the “we” of a particular community of faith. This does not mean that our religious discourse is private, whereas civic discourse is public. Rather, both religious and civic speech are quite public, but different. Their rhetoric of persuasion is different, their appeals to authority are different, even in the common ethical and social issues they address.

In distinction from scholarly discourse, the focus of theological argument is on the community of faith for which it is meaningful. Of course, there is a long tradition of the scholarly study of theology, which is not unlike the scholarly study of poetry or historical writing. Scholarly investigation can give us all insight into the historical circumstances of the community in which the Gospel of John was produced. However, if we ask what the teachings of Jesus in this Gospel mean for Christians, what it meant and means for Jesus to say, “I am the way,

the truth, and the life. No one cometh to the Father but through me,” we are in the realm of theological discussion: what it means to a community that holds it to be important. In fact, we are in a realm of high theological argument, for there is no one Christian response to such a question. The foundational arguments have to do with what it means to be a Christian; its rhetoric of persuasion is articulated in Christian terms—and this is theological discourse.

A North American Christian or Jew has a Hindu surgeon, a Buddhist co-worker, a Sikh roommate, a Muslim congressman. These are on-the-ground facts that require us to think about our understanding of the religious other. Faces replace anonymous stereotypes. The questioning of presumed certainties becomes a common experience—and not just the experience of those cosmopolitans who travel the world, but of ordinary people of faith making sense of their experience in their own hometowns. How do we Christians, Jews, Muslims, or Hindus understand and interpret the diversity of religious worlds in light of our own? Is our engagement with people of other faiths a threat to our own faith? Where do religious others fit in our own religious understanding?

When Robert Wuthnow investigated the ways American Christians are responding to religious pluralism, he found roughly one in three (31%) whom he classified as “spiritual shoppers,” Christians who do not privilege Christianity, but regard all religions as more or less true. Slightly fewer *do* privilege Christianity, but see there is truth and even salvation in other religious traditions and paths. And slightly more (34%) are the one-way people, believing that only Christianity is ultimately true. All in all, we would have to say that the one-way people, although very vocal about Christian claims, are in the minority by two to one. And even among this group, it might surprise you to learn that one in twenty believes you can be a good Buddhist and a good Christian at the same time (Wuthnow 2005).

I teach an introductory course that steers into the theological interpretation of religious diversity today from the standpoint of particular thinkers in five religious traditions. What does it mean to be a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim in the kind of world in which we live today—a world of such rapid technological globalization, such rampant human crises, such argumentation within each religious tradition, and so many religious others? The first assignment is self-interrogation. Write about the most significant encounter you have had with someone of another faith; if you are not religious, then describe the most significant encounter you have had with someone who is. What was significant for you about this encounter? What did

you learn from it, if anything? The cumulative text of these essays is revealing. Let me share just one of hundreds of accounts. I will call her Ann, a sophomore from Minneapolis and a Lutheran. She wrote about hearing a multireligious panel on environmental issues back home in Minnesota.

Even today, five years later, I can still remember sitting in that auditorium and being struck by the complexity of religious identity. I had been raised and confirmed a Lutheran, but what did that really mean? Listening to the dialogue of the various religious leaders, I realized that the person I agreed with the most was the Dalai Lama. And the reasoning that best dealt with the questions raised and best represented my own beliefs about acceptance and non-violence was not, as I had hoped, the Protestant views, but rather the Buddhist ideas, as explained by the Dalai Lama.

Ann's experience is not so uncommon these days. When Ann shared her thoughts with some of her classmates, they were shocked. A close friend told her, "If you accept this then you are not a good Christian. I would kill to defend My God." Ann wrote, "I knew that there were people in the world willing to fight for their religion, but I always assumed they were fanatics. It took my encounter with the Dalai Lama, and the contemplation of the issues he raised, for me to realize how complex faith can be, and why this results in complex social issues that tear people apart."

Ann's theological challenge was not only her encounter with Buddhist ideas, but also her encounter with other Christians whose absolutism and imperial certainty confounded her. What does it mean to be a Christian who finds the Dalai Lama's way of looking at things compelling? What does it mean to be a Christian who disagrees with the absolutism and certainty of other Christians? What does it mean to be a Christian who finds the language of "My God" strange and perhaps idolatrous?

My point here is not to wade into the discussion of a Christian theology of religions, although this is a discussion in which I have been an active participant as a Christian. Our family disputes about questions of religious pluralism will not soon be resolved. Some of us, and I include myself here, will be deeply involved in these discussions in our own voice, and some of us will avoid them at all costs. Here, however, my point is to recognize that our work as teachers and scholars is shot through with these evaluative and normative questions, and both we and our students must be clear in recognizing and distinguishing our theological and academic voices. While recognizing the importance of

theological disputation, we are not to confuse it with the aims of scholarly and civic discourse in which “we” are simultaneously engaged.

A recent discussion on the Islam AAR list raised the question of voice: How do Muslim scholars of Islam address the range of Muslim truth claims and views on particular issues? Do they simply enumerate and explain the various Muslim schools of interpretation? Do they evaluate them? Do they weigh in on them as teachers or writers in this discussion? Do they have a Muslim voice, or not? It is no secret that many scholars of religion believe that religious commitments have no place in the religious studies classroom. Here, I have come to some clarity in my own mind: If scholars of religion do not permit themselves a Muslim voice, a Buddhist voice, a Christian voice, we do a deep disservice to our students, for learning to distinguish their own theological voice from the deliberative discourse of academic discussion and civic discussion is one of the most important things they must learn in the religious studies classroom. We, and they, have to be able to distinguish academic, theological, and civic discourse, and we need to be adept at using clear turn signals in moving from one to another.

As teachers and scholars, we do well to acknowledge how great and difficult a task we ask of ourselves and our students, what strenuous intellectual work it is to grapple seriously with an alternative or even alien way of looking at the world, what strenuous intellectual work it is to understand the subjectivity of others, and what strenuous theological work this invariably precipitates for our students, and ourselves. For most of us, it would be intellectually dishonest to claim we have no stake in these theological disputations. Theological interpretations of the religious other—whether within or outside our own religious tradition—are rife on the airwaves, in the streets, in sermons and *qutbas*, in our classrooms, and on our campuses.

Both we and our students realize that the complex landscape of the religious world today is not only “out there” in the multitude of temples, mosques, and churches that stretch from the suburbs of Atlanta to the small towns of the Pacific Northwest. It is also “in here” in our own complex identities. We insist on the multivocality of Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. So, can we be equally insistent, vigilant, and adept at the registers of our own multivocality?

We inhabit multiple, competing, overlapping, harmonious, or disharmonious worlds—all of us. At home and school, in the workplace and by the fireplace, in the neighborhood and in the courts, in the civic space of citizens, and in the sacred space of temple, mosque, church, or synagogue. In different contexts, one of these identities may be

dominant. In some contexts, we might use those turn signals and speak to a particular issue from several perspectives.

To the Southern Baptists who published their prayer guide for Hindus whom they deemed lost in hopeless darkness, I might say something like this. “As a scholar of Hinduism, I must say you have seriously misrepresented the Hindu tradition in the ways in which you portray it in your publication and I would be happy to speak with you about where I think your portrayal is misleading. As an American and fellow citizen, however, I will defend your right to believe and practice Christianity as you do, to believe the worst about our Hindu neighbors, to believe they are all going to hell, and to say so, both privately and publicly. But as a Christian, let me challenge you here, for I believe that your views of our neighbors that are not well grounded in the Gospel of Christ, as I understand it.” I use this as a simple example of the ways in which we should be able to recognize, distinguish, and tease apart the “voice” we use in this context or that. In my view, this is essential to the task of education.

Finally, let me say that the complex issues of religious pluralism are not ours alone in the AAR. The issues we speak of here may be critical issues for the United States, but they are also critical issues in many other parts of the world. In the summer of 2005, I went to Indonesia where *A New Religious America* (Eck 2001) was being released in translation. Just before I arrived, the Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) issued a *fatwa* denouncing pluralism. I hasten to add, the *fatwa* was not in honor of my visit, but it charged the public discussions I had over the next week with an electric atmosphere. The same *fatwa* denounced secularism, liberal forms of Islam, the Ahmadiyyas, interfaith marriage, and interfaith prayer. But the overarching *fatwa* against pluralism was especially ironic, for that same month, Indonesia celebrated sixty years of independence as what many would call a pluralist, multireligious, multicultural state. While Indonesia is often referred to as the world’s most populous Muslim nation, it is not a Muslim state, although some Muslims would still like it to be one. It is, rather, a state based on the Panchasila—the basic principles or values of belief in God, common humanity, the Indonesian nation, democracy, and social justice. The motto of the Indonesian nation is, in some respects, similar to that of the United States: “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*,” or “Unity in Diversity.” On my first Friday in Jakarta, I witnessed thousands of white-clad Muslims streaming at noon into the Istiqlal Mosque, one of the largest in the world. At the same time, a short distance away, I witnessed Indonesia’s brilliantly multihued 60th birthday parade throughout downtown Jakarta, featuring dancers, musicians, and

artists representing the diverse cultures of Indonesia and wearing vibrant traditional dress, body paint, feathers, and flowers. The huge religious majority and the living multicultural reality are in wary tension, as they are in the United States.

Not surprisingly, during my time in Indonesia, there was much public discussion of the MUI *fatwa* and the future of a multicultural and multireligious society. Many of the colleagues from Indonesia who are members of the AAR were energetic participants in this discussion. Distinguishing between Muslim theological views of truth and the Indonesian national ethos was also thrust into public discussion. The intra-Muslim discussion of pluralism was debated in the newspapers. One of our colleagues, Azyumardi Azra, the Rector of the State Islamic University, called for a rethinking of religious pluralism from the Islamic point of view, looking closely at the Qur'an as a text that "establishes the legitimacy of differences, diversity, and pluralism." Although he was keen to rethink Islamic perspectives on religious diversity, he was careful to distinguish this theological question from the national civic issues of the Indonesian nation (Azra 2005).

The editors of the *Jakarta Post* entitled their own comment, "Pluralism: Beyond Unity in Diversity," and said, "Indonesia has miraculously remained intact as one nation, but if it is to survive for six decades or more, merely accepting our differences will not be sufficient. We need to go further to turn every corner of this country, from Sabang to Merauke, into a better place to live for everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, generation, social and economic status. If we want to go one step beyond unity in diversity, pluralism is the way forward."²¹

In putting together their 60th Anniversary supplement, it was clear the editors were convinced that mottoes and slogans would not provide the adhesion of a common society. They provided living portraits of pluralism in Indonesia, including people of diverse religious traditions living together in the context of cities and villages, marriages and families, their many stories illustrating the ways in which ordinary people have persistently come to terms with difference.

The world of religious pluralism about which we need to know much more is a world of bridge-builders whose aim is not to eliminate the different cultures and religious worlds in which we live, but rather to connect them.

²¹ The Editor, *The Jakarta Post, The Independence Anniversary News Supplement*, 16 August 2005.

Studying the shifting dynamics of religious life in a fast-paced world of global change will require the best of a new generation of scholars, alert to emerging ways of thinking, acting, and connecting across religious and cultural traditions and astute in their analysis of what is going on. Creating pluralistic societies, whether in the United States or Indonesia, will require the energies of citizens who participate in the forms of public life, political life, and civic bridge-building that make diverse societies work. Generating new thinking adequate for the twenty-first century and its religious life will also require the best of theological reflection in every religious tradition, new theological thinking that is responsive to the challenges of both secularism and religious pluralism.

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