

*The* **BOISI CENTER** *for*  

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**RELIGION *and* AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE**

**Symposium on Religion and Politics**

**RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE  
COMMON GOOD**

**Reading Packet 1**

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# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## Symposium on Religion and Politics

### RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE COMMON GOOD

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## Chapter 1:

# The Religious Composition of the United States

The Landscape Survey details the great diversity of religious affiliation in the U.S. at the beginning of the 21st century. The adult population can be usefully grouped into more than a dozen major religious traditions that, in turn, can be divided into hundreds of distinct religious groups. Overall, nearly eight-in-ten (78.4%) adults report belonging to various forms of Christianity, about 5% belong to other faiths and almost one-in-six (16.1%) are not affiliated with any particular religion.

Members of Protestant churches now constitute only a slim majority (51.3%) of the overall adult population. But Protestantism in the U.S. is not homogeneous; rather, it is divided into three distinct traditions – evangelical Protestant churches (26.3% of the overall adult population and roughly one-half of all Protestants); mainline Protestant churches (18.1% of the adult population and more than one-third of all Protestants); and historically black Protestant churches (6.9% of the overall adult population and slightly less than one-seventh of all Protestants). Protestantism is also comprised of numerous denominational families (e.g., Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal) that fit into one or more of the traditions.

Catholics account for nearly one-quarter (23.9%) of the adult population and roughly three-in-ten American Christians. Other Christian traditions are much smaller. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other Mormon groups account for 1.7% of the adult population, while Jehovah’s Witnesses and members of Orthodox churches each account for slightly less than 1% (0.7% and 0.6%, respectively). A variety of other Christian churches account for an additional 0.3% of the adult population.

<b>Major Religious Traditions in the U.S.</b>	
	<i>Among all adults</i>
	<i>%</i>
<b>Christian</b>	<b>78.4</b>
Protestant	51.3
<i>Evangelical churches</i>	<i>26.3</i>
<i>Mainline churches</i>	<i>18.1</i>
<i>Hist. black churches</i>	<i>6.9</i>
Catholic	23.9
Mormon	1.7
Jehovah’s Witness	0.7
Orthodox	0.6
Other Christian	0.3
<b>Other Religions</b>	<b>4.7</b>
Jewish	1.7
Buddhist	0.7
Muslim*	0.6
Hindu	0.4
Other World Religions	<0.3
Other Faiths	1.2
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>16.1</b>
<b>Don’t know/Refused</b>	<b>0.8</b>
	<b>100</b>

\* From “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” Pew Research Center, 2007

Due to rounding, figures may not add to 100 and nested figures may not add to the subtotal indicated.

Other major faith traditions in the U.S. include Jews (1.7% of the adult population), Buddhists (0.7%), Muslims (0.6%), Hindus (0.4%) and members of other world religions, including Baha'is, Zoroastrians and others (which together account for less than 0.3% of the population). Members of a variety of other faiths, including Unitarians, New Age groups and Native American religions, combine to make up an additional 1.2% of the population.

Finally, individuals who are not affiliated with any particular religion make up about one-sixth (16.1%) of the adult population. They thus comprise the fourth largest "religious" tradition in the United States, nearly approximating the number of members of mainline Protestant churches.

The following table summarizes the religious affiliation of U.S. adults and provides a sense of the remarkable diversity that characterizes the U.S. religious landscape.

## Religious Composition of the U.S.

	% of U.S. Adult Population		% of U.S. Adult Population		% of U.S. Adult Population
<b>Evangelical Protestant Churches</b>	<b>26.3</b>	<b>Mainline Protestant Churches</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>Jehovah's Witness</b>	<b>0.7</b>
<b>Baptist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>Baptist in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>Orthodox</b>	<b>0.6</b>
Southern Baptist Convention	6.7	American Baptist Churches in USA	1.2	Greek Orthodox	<0.3
Independent Baptist in the Evangelical Tradition	2.5	Other Baptist denomination in the Mainline Tradition	<0.3	Russian Orthodox	<0.3
Baptist Missionary Association	<0.3	Baptist in the Mainline Tradition, not further specified	0.6	Other Orthodox church	<0.3
Free Will Baptist	<0.3	<b>Methodist in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>5.4</b>	Orthodox, not further specified	<0.3
General Association of Regular Baptists	<0.3	United Methodist Church	5.1		
Other Baptist denomination in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Other Methodist denomination in the Mainline Tradition	<0.3		
Baptist in the Evangelical Tradition, not further specified	0.9	Methodist in the Mainline Tradition, not further specified	0.4		
<b>Methodist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>Nondenominational in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>Other Christian</b>	<b>0.3</b>
<b>Nondenominational in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>3.4</b>	Interdenominational in the Mainline Tradition	0.3	<b>Metaphysical</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>
Nondenominational evangelical	1.2	Other nondenominational group in the Mainline Tradition	<0.3	Spiritualist	<0.3
Nondenominational charismatic	0.5	Nondenominational in the Mainline Trad., not further specified	0.6	Unity; Unity Church; Christ Church Unity	<0.3
Nondenominational fundamentalist	0.3			Other Metaphysical	<0.3
Nondenominational Christian	<0.3	<b>Lutheran in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>
Interdenominational in the Evangelical Tradition	0.5	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	2.0		
Community Church in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Other Lutheran denomination in the Mainline Tradition	<0.3		
Other nondenominational group in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Lutheran in the Mainline Tradition, not further specified	0.8		
Nondenominational in the Evang. Trad., not further specified	0.8	<b>Presbyterian in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>Jewish</b>	<b>1.7</b>
<b>Lutheran in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>1.8</b>	Presbyterian Church USA	1.1	Reform	0.7
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	1.4	Other Presbyterian denomination in the Mainline Tradition	<0.3	Conservative	0.5
Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Synod	<0.3	Presbyterian in the Mainline Tradition, not further specified	0.7	Orthodox	<0.3
Other Lutheran denomination in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3			Other Jewish groups	<0.3
Lutheran in the Evangelical Tradition, not further specified	<0.3	<b>Anglican/Episcopal in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>1.4</b>	Jewish, not further specified	<0.3
<b>Presbyterian in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>0.8</b>	Episcopal Church in the USA	1.0		
Presbyterian Church in America	0.4	Anglican Church (Church of England)	0.3	<b>Buddhist</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Other Presbyterian denomination in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Other Anglican/Episcopal denomination in the Mainline Trad.	<0.3	Theravada (Vipassana) Buddhism	<0.3
Presbyterian in the Evangelical Tradition, not further specified	<0.3	Anglican/Episcopal in the Mainline Trad., not further specified	<0.3	Mahayana (Zen) Buddhism	<0.3
<b>Pentecostal in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>Restorationist in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>0.4</b>	Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism	<0.3
Assemblies of God	1.4	Disciples of Christ	0.3	Other Buddhist groups	<0.3
Church of God Cleveland Tennessee	0.4	Restorationist in the Mainline Tradition, not further specified	<0.3	Buddhist, not further specified	0.3
Four Square Gospel	<0.3	<b>Congregationalist in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>0.7</b>		
Pentecostal Church of God	<0.3	United Church of Christ	0.5	<b>Muslim*</b>	<b>0.6</b>
Pentecostal Holiness Church	<0.3	Congregationalist in the Mainline Trad., not further specified	<0.3	Sunni	0.3
Nondenominational, Independent Pentecostal	<0.3	<b>Reformed in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	Shia	<0.3
Church of God of the Apostolic Faith	<0.3	Reformed Church in America	<0.3	Other Muslim groups	<0.3
Apostolic Pentecostal in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Other Reformed denomination in the Mainline Tradition	<0.3	Muslim, not further specified	<0.3
Other Pentecostal denomination in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Reformed in the Mainline Tradition, not further specified	<0.3		
Pentecostal in the Evangelical Tradition, not further specified	0.7	<b>Anabaptist in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>Hindu</b>	<b>0.4</b>
<b>Anglican/Episcopal in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>Friends in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	Vaishnava Hinduism	<0.3
<b>Restorationist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>Other/Protestant nonspecific in the Mainline Tradition</b>	<b>2.5</b>	Shaivite Hinduism	<0.3
Church of Christ	1.5			Other Hindu groups	<0.3
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	<0.3	<b>Historically Black Churches</b>	<b>6.9</b>	Hindu, not further specified	<0.3
Restorationist in the Evangelical Trad., not further specified	<0.3	<b>Baptist in the Historically Black Tradition</b>	<b>4.4</b>		
<b>Congregationalist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	National Baptist Convention	1.8	<b>Other World Religions</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>
Conservative Congregational Christian	<0.3	Progressive Baptist Convention	0.3		
Other Congregationalist denomination in the Evangelical Trad.	<0.3	Independent Baptist in the Historically Black Tradition	0.5	<b>Other Faiths</b>	<b>1.2</b>
Congregationalist in the Evangelical Trad., not further specified	<0.3	Missionary Baptist	<0.3	<b>Unitarians and other liberal faiths</b>	<b>0.7</b>
<b>Holiness in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>1.0</b>	Other Baptist denomination in the Historically Black Tradition	<0.3	Unitarian (Universalist)	0.3
Church of the Nazarene	0.3	Baptist in the Historically Black Tradition, not further specified	1.7	Liberal faith	<0.3
Free Methodist Church	0.3	<b>Methodist in the Historically Black Tradition</b>	<b>0.6</b>	Spiritual but not religious	<0.3
Wesleyan Church	<0.3	African Methodist Episcopal	0.4	Eclectic, "a bit of everything," own beliefs	<0.3
Christian and Missionary Alliance	<0.3	African Methodist Episcopal Zion	<0.3	Other liberal faith groups	<0.3
Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)	<0.3	Christian Methodist Episcopal Church	<0.3	<b>New Age</b>	<b>0.4</b>
Other Holiness denomination in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Other Methodist denomination in the Historically Black Trad.	<0.3	Wicca (Wiccan)	<0.3
Holiness in the Evangelical Tradition, not further specified	<0.3	Methodist in the Historically Black Trad., not further specified	<0.3	Pagan	<0.3
<b>Reformed in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>Nondenominational in the Historically Black Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	Other New Age groups	<0.3
Christian Reformed Church	<0.3	<b>Pentecostal in the Historically Black Tradition</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>Native American Religions</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>
Other Reformed denomination in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Church of God in Christ	0.6		
Reformed in the Evangelical Tradition, not further specified	<0.3	Apostolic Pentecostal in the Historically Black Tradition	<0.3	<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>16.1</b>
<b>Adventist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>0.5</b>	United Pentecostal Church International	<0.3	Atheist	1.6
Seventh-Day Adventist	0.4	Other Pentecostal denomination in the Historically Black Trad.	<0.3	Agnostic	2.4
Other Adventist group in the Evangelical Tradition	<0.3	Pentecostal in the Historically Black Trad., not further specified	<0.3	Nothing in particular	12.1
<b>Anabaptist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>Holiness in the Historically Black Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>		
<b>Pietist in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>&lt;0.3</b>	<b>Protestant nonspecific in the Historically Black Tradition</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>0.8</b>
<b>Other Evangelical/Fundamentalist</b>	<b>0.3</b>				
<b>Protestant nonspecific in the Evangelical Tradition</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>23.9</b>		
		<b>Mormon</b>	<b>1.7</b>		
		Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	1.6		
		Community of Christ	<0.3		
		Mormon, not further specified	<0.3		

\* From "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, 2007

## American Protestantism: Diverse, Fragmented and Declining in Number

Protestants account for roughly half (51.3%) of the adult population and nearly two-in-three (65%) Christians in the United States. But American Protestantism is very diverse. It encompasses more than a dozen major denominational families, such as Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and Pentecostals, all with unique beliefs, practices and histories. These denominational families, in turn, are composed of a host of different denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the American Baptist Churches in the USA and the National Baptist Convention.

Because of its great diversity, American Protestantism is best understood not as a single religious tradition but rather as three distinct traditions – evangelical Protestant churches, mainline Protestant churches and historically black Protestant churches. Each of these traditions is made up of numerous denominations and congregations that share similar beliefs, practices and histories.

For instance, churches within the evangelical Protestant tradition share certain religious beliefs (such as the conviction that personal acceptance of Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation), practices (such as an emphasis on bringing other people to the faith) and origins (including separatist movements against established religious institutions). In contrast, churches in the mainline Protestant tradition share other doctrines (such as a less exclusionary view of salvation), practices (such as a strong emphasis on social reform) and origins (such as long-established religious institutions). Meanwhile, churches in the historically black Protestant tradition have been uniquely shaped by the experiences of slavery and segregation, which put their religious beliefs and practices in a special context.

The Protestant denominational families include denominations that are associated with different Protestant traditions. For instance, some Baptist denominations (such as the Southern Baptist Convention) are part of the evangelical tradition; some (such as the American Baptist Churches in the USA) are part of the mainline tradition; and still others (such as the National Baptist Convention) are part of the historically black

### The Terminology of Affiliation

#### Denominations

The term “denomination” refers to a set of congregations that belong to a single administrative structure characterized by particular doctrines and practices. Examples of denominations include the Southern Baptist Convention, the American Baptist Churches in the USA and the National Baptist Convention.

#### Families

A denominational family is a set of religious denominations and related congregations with a common historical origin. Examples of families include Baptist, Methodist and Lutheran. Most denominational families consist of denominations that are associated with more than one of the three Protestant traditions. The Baptist family, for instance, consists of some denominations that fall into the evangelical tradition, others that belong to the mainline tradition and still others that are part of the historically black church tradition.

#### Traditions

A religious tradition is a set of denominations and congregations with similar beliefs, practices and origins. In this report, Protestant denominations are grouped into three traditions: evangelical churches, mainline churches and historically black churches.

Protestant tradition. Not all families, however, are represented in all three traditions. (For more details, see the “Religious Composition of the U.S.” table on page 12.)

Despite the detailed denominational measures used in the Landscape Survey, many respondents (roughly one-third of all Protestants) were either unable or unwilling to describe their specific denominational affiliation. Some respondents, for instance, describe themselves as “just a Baptist” or “just a Methodist.” In this report, Protestant respondents with this type of vague denominational affiliation were sorted into one of the three traditions in two ways.

First, blacks who gave vague denominational affiliations (e.g., “just a Methodist”) but who said they were members of Protestant families with a sizeable number of historically black churches were coded as members of the historically black church tradition. Black respondents in families without a sizeable number of churches in the historically black tradition were coded as members of the evangelical or mainline traditions depending on their response to a separate question asking whether they would describe themselves as a “born-again or evangelical Christian.”

Second, non-black respondents who gave vague denominational affiliations and who described themselves as a “born-again or evangelical Christian” were coded as members of the evangelical tradition; otherwise, they were coded as members of the mainline tradition. (For more details on the analytical processes used to sort respondents with vague denominational affiliations into Protestant traditions, see Appendix 2.)

### *The Composition of American Protestantism*

The largest of the Protestant families in the U.S. is the Baptist family, which accounts for one-third of all Protestants and close to one-fifth (17.2%) of the overall adult population. Baptists are concentrated within the evangelical tradition, making up a plurality (41%) of this tradition. Baptists also account for nearly two-thirds (64%) of members of historically black churches. However, they constitute a much smaller share (10%) of mainline Protestantism.

The largest Baptist denomination, and the largest Protestant denomination overall, is the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention accounts for more than a quarter (26%) of the membership in evangelical Protestant churches and nearly 7% of the overall adult population. The National Baptist Convention is the largest of the historically black Baptist denominations, while the American Baptist Churches in the USA is the largest mainline Baptist denomination. (For details, see the “Religious Composition of the U.S.” table on page 12.)

Methodists represent the second largest Protestant family, accounting for more than one-in-ten of all Protestants (12.1%) and 6.2% of the overall adult population. Methodists are particularly well represented within mainline Protestantism, accounting for nearly one-third (30%) of all members of mainline churches, as well as within the historically black church tradition, where they account for nearly one-in-ten (9%) of all members. Most Methodists within mainline Protestantism are members of the United Methodist Church, while most Methodists in the historically black church

## The Composition of American Protestantism

	Total Population	All Protestants	Evangelical Protestant Churches	Mainline Protestant Churches	Historically Black Protestant Churches
	%	%	%	%	%
Baptist	17.2	33.5	41	10	64
Methodist	6.2	12.1	1	30	9
Lutheran	4.6	9.0	7	16	0
Nondenominational	4.5	8.9	13	5	3
Pentecostal	4.4	8.5	13	0	14
Presbyterian	2.7	5.2	3	10	0
Restorationist	2.1	4.0	6	2	0
Anglican/Episcopal	1.5	3.0	<0.5	8	0
Holiness	1.2	2.2	4	0	2
Congregationalist	0.8	1.5	<0.5	4	0
Adventist	0.5	0.9	2	0	0
Reformed	0.3	0.5	1	1	0
Anabaptist	<0.3	0.4	1	<0.5	0
Pietist	<0.3	<0.3	<0.5	0	0
Friends/Quakers	<0.3	<0.3	0	1	0
Other Evangelical/Fundamentalist	0.3	0.5	1	0	0
Protestant nonspecific	4.9	9.5	7	14	8
	<b>51.3% PROTESTANT</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Due to rounding, figures may not add to 100.

tradition are affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Methodists represent a very small share (1%) of the evangelical Protestant tradition.

Nearly 5% of the adult population consists of Protestants who attend nondenominational churches, that is, churches that are not affiliated with any specific denomination. Members of these churches are particularly well represented within the evangelical tradition; 13% of all members of evangelical churches belong to nondenominational congregations. By contrast, only 5% of the members of mainline churches and 3% of the members of historically black churches belong to nondenominational congregations.

Like nondenominational Protestants, the Lutheran and Pentecostal<sup>1</sup> families each account for slightly less than 5% of the overall adult population (4.6% and 4.4%, respectively). Lutherans are

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information about American Pentecostals, see "Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2006.

## Ten Largest Protestant Denominations

	Percent of Total Population	Percent of Total Protestants
	%	%
Southern Baptist Convention (Evangelical Tradition)	6.7	13.1
United Methodist Church (Mainline Tradition)	5.1	9.9
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Mainline Tradition)	2.0	3.8
National Baptist Convention (Historically Black Tradition)	1.8	3.5
Church of Christ (Evangelical Tradition)	1.5	3.0
Assemblies of God (Evangelical Tradition)	1.4	2.8
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod (Evangelical Tradition)	1.4	2.7
American Baptist Churches in the USA (Mainline Tradition)	1.2	2.4
Presbyterian Church USA (Mainline Tradition)	1.1	2.2
Episcopal Church in the USA (Mainline Tradition)	1.0	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>45.3</b>

Note: The Protestant tradition to which each denomination belongs is indicated in parentheses.

highly represented within mainline Protestantism and less so within evangelicalism. More than one-in-ten members of evangelical churches and historically black churches are affiliated with the Pentecostal family (13% and 14%, respectively).

The Presbyterian family is the next most numerous Protestant denominational family (2.7% of the overall adult population), followed by the Restorationist family (2.1% of the adult population). The Anglican/Episcopal and Holiness families each account for slightly more than 1% of the adult population. Episcopalians and Anglicans account for nearly 10% of the mainline Protestant tradition, while the Holiness family is distributed among the evangelical and historically black church traditions. None of the remaining Protestant families account for more than 1% of the overall adult population.

Finally, Protestants who do not identify with any particular family, including those who describe themselves as “just a Protestant,” account for nearly 10% of all Protestants and roughly 5% of the overall adult population.

## *Protestant Traditions and Denominational Families*

Although most denominational families include denominations that belong to different Protestant traditions, it is also true that certain denominational families tend to fall primarily into one of the three traditions. For example, the Baptist, Pentecostal, Restorationist, Holiness and Adventist families as well as nondenominational churches are primarily associated with the evangelical tradition. The denominational families that consist primarily of members of mainline Protestant

churches include the Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican/Episcopal and Congregationalist families. No Protestant denominational family consists primarily of historically black churches, though the Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and Holiness families all include a sizable number of members of historically black churches.

### Classification of Protestant Traditions by Denominational Family

	Evangelical Protestant Churches	Mainline Protestant Churches	Historically Black Protestant Churches	
	%	%	%	
Total Protestants	51	35	13	<b>=100</b>
<i>Largely Evangelical Families</i>				
Reformed	56	44	0	<b>=100</b>
Baptist	63	11	26	<b>=100</b>
Nondenominational	75	20	5	<b>=100</b>
Pentecostal	79	0	21	<b>=100</b>
Restorationist	83	17	0	<b>=100</b>
Holiness	88	0	12	<b>=100</b>
Adventist	100	0	0	<b>=100</b>
<i>Largely Mainline Families</i>				
Lutheran	39	61	0	<b>=100</b>
Presbyterian	30	70	0	<b>=100</b>
Congregationalist	14	86	0	<b>=100</b>
Methodist	2	88	10	<b>=100</b>
Anglican/Episcopal	6	94	0	<b>=100</b>
Protestant nonspecific	38	50	11	<b>=100</b>

Due to rounding, figures may not add to 100.

### The Decline of American Protestantism

The detailed religious composition of the United States provided in the Landscape Survey raises an important question: How does the current religious makeup of the United States differ from previous years?

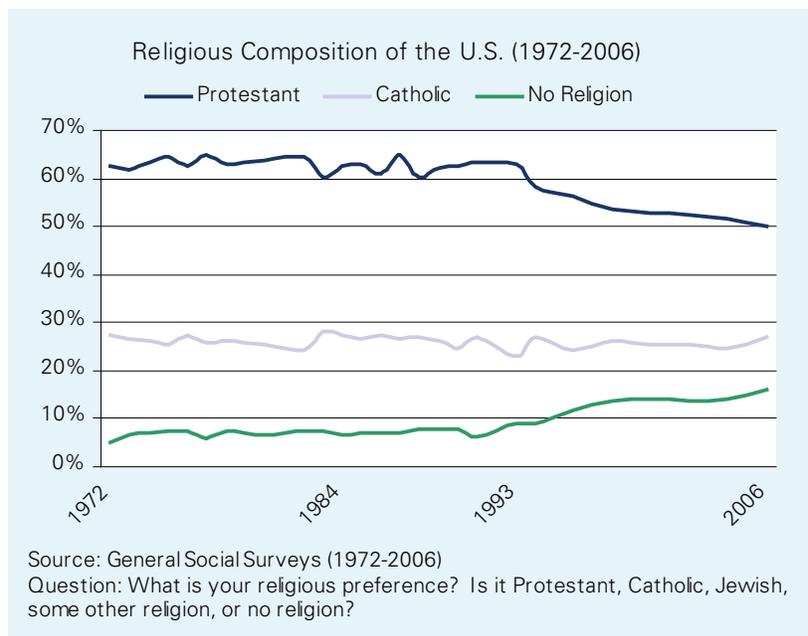
Although the questions on religious affiliation in the Landscape Survey are not directly comparable to those in previous surveys, there is a rich body of research that looks at the question of change

over time in the religious affiliation of the U.S. population. Although scholars contributing to this research have adopted a variety of definitions of major religious groups and pursued various approaches to measuring change over time, this research arrives at a similar conclusion: The proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades while the proportion of the population that is not affiliated with any particular religion has increased significantly.

This trend is clearly apparent, for example, in the findings of the General Social Surveys (GSS), conducted between 1972 and 2006 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Over this period, the GSS have asked the same basic religious identification question each time the survey was conducted: "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?" Through the 1970s and 1980s, between 60% and 65% of respondents described themselves as Protestant. In the early 1990s, however,

the proportion of adults identifying as Protestant began a steady decline. By 2006, the GSS registered Protestant affiliation at 50%, an estimate that is very similar to the one produced by the Landscape Survey.

The decline in the Protestant share of the U.S. population raises another important question, namely, whether the decline in Protestantism has occurred across all three traditions or has been concentrated in one or another of the traditions. What scholars who have analyzed the GSS data have found is that the proportion of the population identifying with the large mainline Protestant denominations has declined significantly in recent decades, while the proportion of Protestants identifying with the large evangelical denominations has increased.



## Catholicism

Unlike Protestants, who have seen their ranks dwindle as a share of the population, the GSS findings suggest that the proportion of the adult population that identifies itself as Catholic has held fairly steady, at around 25%, in recent decades. But the Landscape Survey makes clear that this apparent stability obscures a great deal of change in the makeup of Catholicism in the U.S.

An analysis of changes in religious affiliation (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) finds that Catholicism has lost more people to other religions or to no religion at all than any other single religious group. These losses, however, have been offset partly by people who have switched their affiliation to Catholicism, but mostly by the significant number of Catholics who have immigrated to the U.S. in recent decades, primarily from Latin America. The Landscape Survey finds, for example, that nearly half of all immigrants (46%) are Catholic, compared with 21% of the native-born

### Religious Composition of the Native Born and Foreign Born

	Total Population	Born in U.S.	Born in a Foreign Country*
	%	%	%
<b>Christian</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>74</b>
Protestant	51	55	24
Catholic	24	21	46
Mormon	2	2	1
Jehovah's Witness	1	1	1
Orthodox	1	<0.5	2
Other Christian	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
<b>Other Religions</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>
Jewish	2	2	1
Muslim	1	<0.5	2
Buddhist	1	1	2
Hindu	<0.5	<0.5	3
Other world religions	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Other faiths	1	1	1
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Don't Know/Refused</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<i>Share of Total Population</i>	<i>(100%)</i>	<i>(88%)</i>	<i>(12%)</i>

\* Includes respondents who were born in U.S. territories (Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, etc.) and Puerto Rico

Due to rounding, figures may not add to 100.

population. (Differences in the native-born and foreign-born Catholic population are discussed further in Chapter 3.)

In addition to helping keep the Catholic share of the U.S. population steady, immigrants are also fueling the growth of many non-Christian religious groups in America. For instance, immigrants are roughly four times as likely as native-born adults to be Muslim (2% vs. less than 0.5%), twice as likely to be Buddhist (2% vs. 1%), more than six times as likely to be Hindu (3% vs. less than 0.5%) and roughly four times as likely to be affiliated with Orthodox churches (2% vs. less than 0.5%).

## The Unaffiliated

According to the Landscape Survey, more than one-in-six American adults (16.1%) are not currently affiliated with any particular religious group. Through the 1980s, the GSS consistently found that between 5% and 8% of the public was not affiliated with any particular religion. By 2006, however, the GSS showed that 16% of U.S. adults reported no religious affiliation.

The Landscape Survey finds that the unaffiliated population is quite diverse and that it is simply not accurate to describe this entire group as nonreligious or “secular.” Roughly one-quarter of the unaffiliated population identifies itself as atheist (1.6% of the overall adult population) or agnostic (2.4% of the adult population). But the remaining three-quarters (12.1% of the adult population) consists of people who describe their religion as “nothing in particular.” (A fuller discussion of the religious beliefs and practices of the unaffiliated population will be included in a subsequent report.)

This latter group consists of two smaller, fairly distinct subgroups. About half of people who describe their religion as nothing in particular (6.3% of the overall adult population) say that religion is not too important or not at all important in their lives. Thus, they can be thought of as being mostly secular in their orientation. But the other half of this group (5.8% of adults) says that religion is somewhat important or very important in their lives, despite their lack of affiliation with any particular religious group. Thus, this group can be thought of as the “religious unaffiliated.” (Differences in the demographic characteristics of the religious unaffiliated and their more secular counterparts are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.)

### Makeup of the Unaffiliated

<i>Among all adults...</i>	
	%
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>16.1</b>
Atheist	1.6
Agnostic	2.4
No particular religion	12.1
<i>Secular unaffiliated</i>	<i>6.3</i>
<i>Religious unaffiliated</i>	<i>5.8</i>
<b>Affiliated with a religion</b>	<b>83.1</b>
<b>Don't know/Refused</b>	<b>0.8</b>
	<b>100</b>

Due to rounding, nested figures may not add to the subtotal indicated.

## Diversity Within Smaller Religious Traditions

Even smaller religious traditions in the U.S. exhibit considerable internal diversity. For example, members of the Orthodox Christian tradition, who account for 0.6% of the adult population, come from a number of different Orthodox churches, including the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches as well as at least a dozen other Orthodox churches mentioned by respondents in the survey, such as the Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

Judaism (1.7% of the overall adult population) also consists of several distinct groups. More than four-in-ten Jews (43%) describe themselves as Reform Jews. Nearly one-in-three (31%) describe themselves as Conservative Jews and 10% say they are Orthodox Jews. The Buddhist tradition (0.7% of the adult population), too, is made up of several distinct groups, the largest of which is Zen Buddhism. Muslims (0.6% of the adult population) fall primarily into two traditions: Half of the Muslims in the U.S. identify as Sunni and 16% are Shia; one-in-three, however, either say they are affiliated with a different Muslim group or describe themselves as “just a Muslim.”

### Makeup of Smaller U.S. Religious Traditions

<i>Among all adults...</i>	
	<i>%</i>
<b>Orthodox</b>	<b>0.6</b>
Greek Orthodox	<0.3
Russian Orthodox	<0.3
Others	<0.3
<b>Jewish</b>	<b>1.7</b>
Reform	0.7
Conservative	0.5
Orthodox	<0.3
Others	0.3
<b>Muslim*</b>	<b>0.6</b>
Sunni	0.3
Shia	<0.3
Others	<0.3
<b>Buddhist</b>	<b>0.7</b>
Zen Buddhism	<0.3
Theravada Buddhism	<0.3
Tibetan Buddhism	<0.3
Others	0.3
<b>Other Faiths</b>	<b>1.2</b>
Unitarians and other liberal faiths	0.7
New Age	0.4
Native American relig.	<0.3

\* From “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” Pew Research Center, 2007

Due to rounding, nested figures may not add to the subtotal indicated.

# AMERICAN GRACE

*How Religion Divides and Unites Us*



Robert D. Putnam  
David E. Campbell

*with the assistance of*  
Shaylyn Romney Garrett

*Simon & Schuster*

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## AMERICA'S GRACE: HOW A TOLERANT NATION BRIDGES ITS RELIGIOUS DIVIDES

**T**he previous chapter demonstrates that religion can be divisive. For example, 72 percent of Americans say the country is divided along religious lines. That sounds like a lot, and it is. However, the potential for religious conflict can be put in context when we compare Americans' perceptions of religious division to other types of division. The perceived degree of religious divisiveness pales when compared to divisions by race, class, or politics.

- 93 percent of Americans believe America is divided along racial lines
- 96 percent see divisions along economic lines
- 97 percent say the country is divided along political lines<sup>1</sup>

The fact that religion is not nearly so divisive as race, class, or politics is the puzzle this chapter seeks to solve. How can America be both devout and diverse without fracturing along religious lines? If we be devout but not diverse would lead to little division (e.g., Poland) likewise if a society is religiously diverse but not devout (e.g., the Netherlands). In the former case, there is little to disagree about

the latter, there might be much to disagree about but little motivation to do so.

This chapter picks up where the last one left off. Rather than emphasize religion's potential divisiveness, we instead highlight how describing religion as merely "not very divisive" hardly does justice to its role in American public life. For many Americans, religion serves as a sort of civic glue, uniting rather than dividing. Next, we show how most Americans embrace religious diversity—including those who are highly secular and those who are highly religious. We shall also see that many Americans experience religious diversity on a personal scale. Americans typically have friends and family of different faiths, creating their own religiously diverse social networks. The chapter provides new evidence that the diversity embodied within these networks enables the peaceful coexistence of myriad religions in contemporary America. We then go on to demonstrate that most of the American population—save a small but intensely religious segment—are reluctant to assign a unique status to any religion as "true," even their own. A majority of Americans believe that members of other faiths can go to heaven, and this is true even in religions that explicitly teach that salvation is reserved for their own adherents. Finally, we argue that Americans' expansive view of heaven results from their personal experience with people with different religious backgrounds, including their close friends and family. America manages to be both religiously diverse and religiously devout because it is difficult to damn those you know and love.

### CIVIL RELIGION

For many Americans, religion—or at least a belief in God—serves to bind the nation together. Embedded in the American psyche is an implicit article of patriotic faith that the nation owes its very existence, and survival, to a God in the heavens. References to deity thus abound during the solemn ceremonial moments of our public life, when the national sense of unity is strongest. When our leaders seek

to mobilize, inspire, or console, they invoke God. In arguing that religion serves as a glue holding America's civil society together, sociologist Robert Bellah has described the nation's civil religion, which stands apart from the beliefs of any particular sect, denomination, or religious tradition. In his words, "the civil religion was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals."<sup>2</sup> Civil religion has no partisan overtones. Thus, Jefferson (Democrat<sup>3</sup>) declared independence with the bold statement that the creator endowed mankind with inalienable rights. Lincoln (Republican) found meaning in the Civil War at Gettysburg by poignantly declaring that America, "under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." Kennedy (Democrat) began his presidency asking for God's blessing and help, "but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." George W. Bush (Republican) consoled the nation following the September 11 terrorist attacks by saying that he prayed for the comfort of a "power greater than any of us" and citing the 23rd Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." And lest one think that the growing connection between religiosity and the vote means that civil religion has been supplanted by partisan appeals to religion, such that God is invoked only by Republicans these days, consider the inaugural address of Barack Obama (Democrat). In it, he spoke of "the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny."

From Jefferson to Obama, the United States has become far more diverse in religious terms, and yet appeals to God at times of national unity are still *de rigueur*. America's civil religion endures, notwithstanding the myriad faiths, creeds, denominations, and religious traditions found within the population.<sup>4</sup> The First Amendment to the Constitution says that Congress shall pass no law to curtail the free exercise of religion, but these sparse words do not fully reflect the way in which religious diversity is encoded in America's national DNA. Examples abound. Every Thanksgiving—the major holiday most every religion can agree on—Americans celebrate the arrival

of the Pilgrims, recounting the Puritans' desire for refuge from religious persecution. In naming the four essential human freedoms, Franklin Roosevelt included the quintessentially American sense of religious liberty, "the freedom of every person to worship God in his own way."

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The civic role of religion has resulted, in large part, from the unique constitutional status afforded religion. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that Congress will not endorse, or "establish," a religion. In the immediate wake of the nation's founding this clause did not preclude states from supporting particular denominations by, for example, allowing clergy to be paid out of the public purse. By the early 1800s, all such public subsidies for religion ended and nonestablishment was taken to mean that all levels of government are precluded from providing financial support to any particular religion. Thus, no religion has been established as the official national church. Likewise, the U.S. Constitution also prohibits religious tests for public officials. Today, this may seem like a quaint provision, but at the time of the founding it was a significant issue, given that England had employed the Test Acts to limit public office to members of the Church of England. To borrow language from the marketplace, governments in America have not been picking winners and losers in the religious "economy." Instead, religions have had to fend for themselves in attracting, and retaining, members. Furthermore, the constitutional protection provided to the free exercise of religion has created social space for the public expression of religion. This combination—a government restricted from supporting any particular religion, while individuals are largely unfettered from exercising a wide array of religions—has given American religion its vitality.

No founding father is more closely associated with religious liberty than Thomas Jefferson, whose convictions on the subject were undoubtedly affected by his own unorthodox religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Jef-

erson famously summarized the way many Americans think about religious differences: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson's sentiment provides a vision of religious tolerance that is essentially a quid pro quo—you let me worship as I please and I will do the same for you. By and large, Americans today hold to Jefferson's philosophy. Eighty-five percent agree that "morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard." Even among the most religious Americans,<sup>7</sup> half believe that morality is a personal matter.

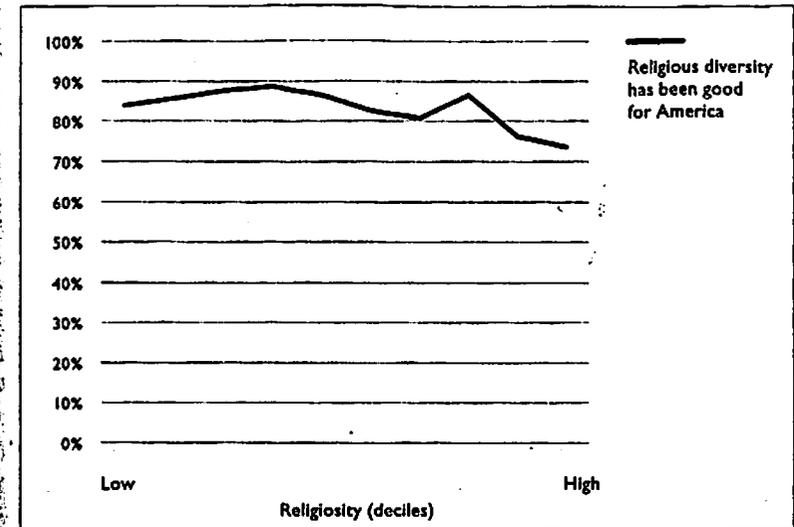
If the Jeffersonian conception of religion as a personal, private matter were the extent of how Americans accommodate religious difference, it would probably suffice for keeping simmering religious tensions from boiling over. However, grudging acceptance of others' religious beliefs would mean only that religious diversity is tolerated, not seen as an intrinsically good state of affairs. It could be that religious believers deign to tolerate other religions purely for self-preservation, calculating that since no single religion has majority status it is best to grant a full measure of liberty to other faiths, to ensure maximum liberty for oneself. That is, it could be that Americans do not really think that religious diversity per se is good, but only the best possible situation under the circumstances.

It could be that way, but it appears not to be. By a wide margin, Americans see the value in religious diversity for its own sake. As we see in Figure 15.1, when asked whether "religious diversity has been good for America," 84 percent agree. Furthermore, the endorsement of religious diversity remains high regardless of Americans' own religiosity. While religious diversity loses a little luster among those with the highest levels of religiosity, they still endorse it overwhelmingly (74 percent of Americans in the top decile of religiosity see the good in religious diversity).

Perhaps, you might think, the widespread endorsement of religious diversity hangs on the normative force of "diversity" as the

Figure 15.1

REGARDLESS OF THEIR LEVEL OF RELIGIOSITY, AMERICANS VALUE RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

buzzword of our time. Who would dare admit that they are uncomfortable with diversity of any sort? In the words of legal scholar Peter Schuck, "diversity is right up there with progress, motherhood, and apple pie."<sup>8</sup> It seems reasonable, therefore, to be suspicious that Americans pay lip service to religious diversity but really harbor suspicions about those of other faiths. After all, we have seen that at least a few religious groups get a chilly reception. What can we really tell about Americans' attitudes regarding religious diversity from abstract questions with little bearing on anyone's daily life? They talk the talk, but do they walk the walk? One answer lies in the religious complexion of our most intimate associations, namely family and friends.

We have already seen, in Chapter 5, that in the most intimate association of all—marriage—Americans are increasingly comfortable with religious diversity.<sup>9</sup> One third of all Americans are married

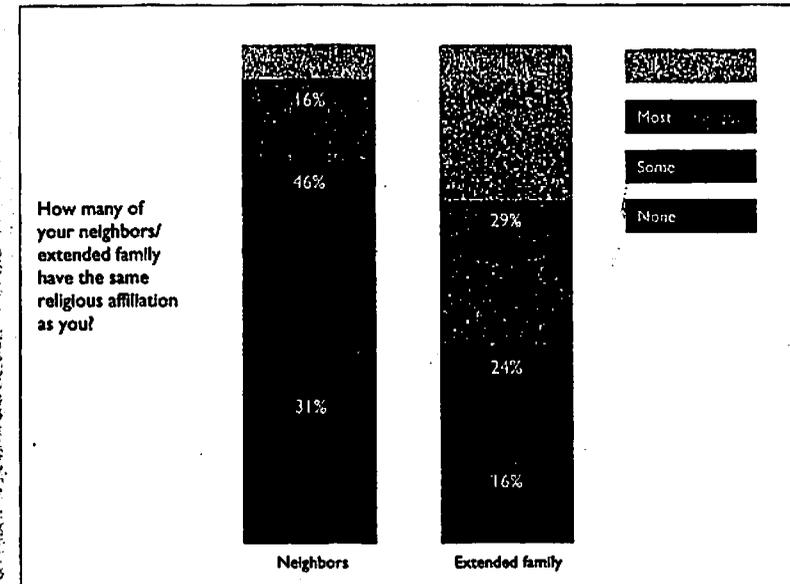
to someone of a different religious tradition, and one half are married to someone who came from a different tradition (the difference being explained by spousal conversions).

However, we do not wish to leave the impression that interreligious marriage is equally fine with everyone. When Americans are asked to project into the future about the potential marriage of a child, we see a measure of ambivalence about marrying outside one's faith. This ambivalence is a perfect illustration of the tension between the religious devotion and diversity that characterizes American society. On the one hand, over two in five Americans say that it is very (22 percent) or somewhat (20 percent) important that their child marry someone of the same religious background. Not surprisingly, it is the most highly religious who place the greatest value on their children marrying someone of the same religion. On the other hand, this still leaves a majority of Americans who say either that it is not important at all (39 percent) or not very important (18 percent) that their children marry within their religion. Interreligious marriage, while not a problem for most Americans, is a concern for some.

We can probe further into Americans' lived experience with religious diversity using a measure that asks about one's neighbors, extended family, and friends. For neighbors and extended family, we asked for a general report—roughly what proportion has the same religious affiliation as you? The results (Figure 15.2) make clear that Americans live in religiously diverse neighborhoods. Only 7 percent say that all of their neighbors share the same religion, and nearly a third report that none do. Not surprisingly, extended families are less diverse than neighborhoods, but even there we find a reasonably high degree of religious heterogeneity. Sixteen percent of Americans indicate that no one in their extended family shares their religion; roughly one in three say that everyone in their extended family does. When it comes to friends, we asked our respondents to be more precise (see Figure 15.3). How many of their five closest friends share their religion? Just under a quarter (24 percent) of Americans say that all of their five closest friends have the same religious affiliation,

Figure 15.2

### MOST AMERICANS HAVE RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE FAMILIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

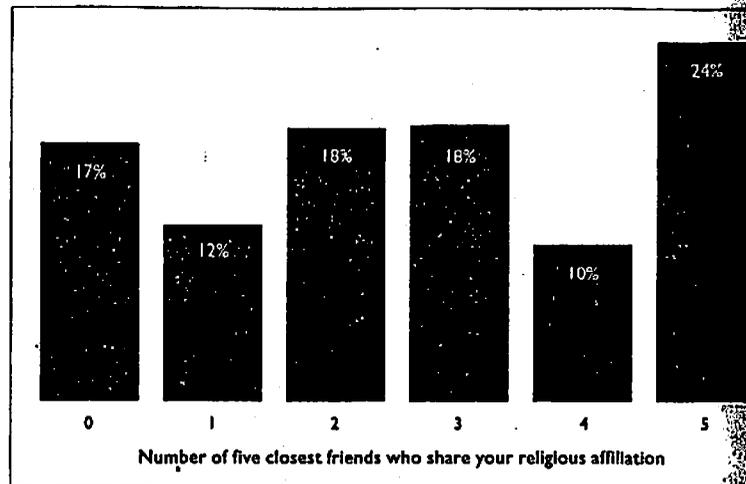
that they do, while 17 percent say that none of them do. On average, they told us that 2.6 of their five closest friends are co-religionists.<sup>11</sup>

These numbers all point toward a single conclusion—most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths. Two out of three have at least one extended family member who is of another religion, while the average American has at least two (technically, 2.4) close friends with a religious affiliation different from theirs. When we ask Americans about religious diversity they speak from personal experience.

The constitutional framework for religion in America does not guarantee this degree of interfaith mingling, mixing, and matching, but it has enabled the religious fluidity that we have described throughout this book. This fluidity, in turn, facilitates interpersonal connections across religious lines. Religious churn means that many

Figure 15.3

## EVEN AMERICANS' CLOSEST FRIENDS ARE RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

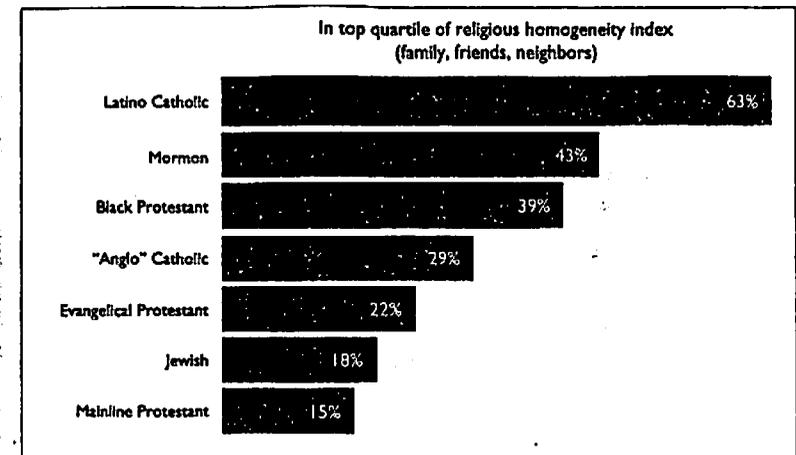
Americans change religions, thus introducing family and friends to their new faith. So even if you never change your religion, you almost certainly know someone who has. Such a high state of flux also facilitates the acceptance of religious intermarriage, as it is difficult to maintain bright lines between religions when the boundaries are blurred by frequent switching from one to another.

Some boundaries, however, are blurrier than others. While most Americans have close associations with people of other religions, there are also fascinating differences in the degree to which they experience religious diversity closely. Members of some religious traditions are more likely to have friends, family, and neighbors of different religions than are members of other faiths. We can most easily see these differences by combining all three types of relationships together into a single measure of overall religious homogeneity within one's personal social network.

As displayed in Figure 15.4, Latino Catholics are most likely to score high in religious homogeneity—far higher than any other religious groups. While below Latino Catholics, Black Protestants also

Figure 15.4

## MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS DIFFER IN THE RELIGIOUS HOMOGENEITY OF THEIR FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND NEIGHBORS



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

rank high. The high degree of homogeneity is to be expected for both Latinos and African Americans, as people tend to associate with others of the same ethno-racial group.<sup>12</sup> Latinos are thus likely to be friends with other Latinos, and blacks with other blacks. Likewise, we would expect them to be friends with Latino Catholics and Black Protestants. The result is that both groups have a high level of religious homogeneity among their family, friends, and neighborhoods. The especially high degree of homogeneity among Latino Catholics is likely a reflection of limited integration between Latino and non-Latino populations within the United States.

Black Protestants are matched by Mormons in their degree of religious homogeneity. (The gap between the two groups is too small to be statistically meaningful.) Here we have further evidence that Mormons resemble an ethnic group. Mormons have an unusually high strength of religious identity, and share a distinctive culture. Furthermore, they are often met with disapprobation from members of other religions. As a cause, a consequence, or both,

Mormons stick together: They marry each other, live by each other, and associate with one another. Puzzlingly, "Anglo" Catholics also have a relatively high level of religious homogeneity. This might have been expected in the 1950s or earlier, when the church stressed the importance of marrying within the faith and Catholics were concentrated in the ethnic neighborhoods of urban centers. Today, however, Catholics have a high rate of interreligious marriage, and increasingly have left the old neighborhoods in the city to buy a house in the suburbs.<sup>13</sup> When put alongside the relatively high regard Catholics show for fellow Catholics, the relatively high degree of religious homogeneity within their social networks is perhaps less surprising. Both are mutually reinforcing evidence that while the explicitly ethnic dimension of Catholicism has faded—except among Latinos—"Anglo" Catholics nonetheless are somewhat more likely to stick together than are either evangelical or mainline Protestants or even Jews.

## RELIGIOUS BRIDGING

Although differences in levels of religious diversity by religious tradition are interesting and important, one should not miss the forest for the trees. *Most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths.* This, we argue, is the most important reason that Americans can combine religious devotion and diversity. We call it the "Aunt Susan Principle." We all have an Aunt Susan in our lives, the sort of person who epitomizes what it means to be a saint, but whose religious background is different from our own. Maybe you are Jewish and she is a Methodist. Or perhaps you are Catholic and Aunt Susan is not religious at all. But whatever her religious background (or lack thereof), you know that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven. And if she is going to heaven, what does that say about other people who share her religion or lack of religion? Maybe they can go to heaven too.

To put the Aunt Susan Principle in more technical terms, we are suggesting that having a religiously diverse social network

to a more positive assessment of specific religious groups, particularly those with low thermometer scores. In offering this hypothesis, we can look beyond our hypothetical Aunt Susan for reasons to think that religiously diverse social networks do indeed have a positive effect on interreligious acceptance. One place to find such a rationale is in the literature on social capital, by which we mean the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise out of our social networks. Some social capital consists of bonding, or interconnections among people with a common background. Other social capital is bridging in nature, and thus connects people of different backgrounds. While both bonding and bridging each serve important purposes, bridging is vital for the smooth functioning of a diverse society. When birds of different feathers flock together, they come to trust one another.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of bridging social capital for building intergroup acceptance is rooted in the venerable theory of social contact. This theory is often loosely described as positing that contact among people of different but salient social groups reduces prejudice. That, however, is not an accurate description of the theory. As articulated in the mid-1950s by Gordon Allport, the theory actually says that four conditions have to hold before contact diminishes prejudice: All parties must have equal status, share common goals, have intergroup cooperation, and have the support of authorities, law, or custom. In the setting of an interreligious friendship, the first and the fourth are clearly met: Most friendships presumably entail equal status, and the sheer frequency of interreligious contact indicates its widespread societal support. The constitutional protections afforded religious liberty contribute further to the normative force behind religious diversity. Furthermore, very few religious traditions actively discourage their members from interacting with those of other faiths; indeed, the evangelistic nature of many American religions means that they encourage making friends with people of different religious backgrounds. It also seems likely that friendships are characterized by the second and third conditions, namely common goals and cooperation. Indeed, in reviewing hundreds of intergroup contact studies, social psychologists Thomas Pettigrew and

Linda Tropp "assumed that friendship requires the operation of conditions that approach Allport's specifications for optimal contact." Their results confirm that intergroup friendships are an example of the socially salutary consequences of contact among people of different social groups. The Pettigrew and Tropp analysis even suggests that intergroup friendships reduce prejudice to a greater extent than other forms of contact, leading Pettigrew to recommend that "potential for friendship" be added as a fifth condition to the social contact theory.<sup>16</sup>

We expect that religious diversity within social networks—religious bridging—will foster greater interreligious acceptance. We find this is indeed the case when you look at who is friends with whom. To pick just one example, there is a positive correlation between, say, having an evangelical friend and rating evangelicals positively. On its own, we concede, such a finding is not terribly persuasive; there is obviously a huge problem in determining what causes what. Do you rate evangelicals positively because you have an evangelical friend, or are you friends with an evangelical because you are warm toward evangelicals? With a survey taken at a single point in time, this is impossible to answer.

Far more convincing is an analysis of who becomes friends with whom. In earlier chapters, we have used the fact that the Faith Matters surveys can measure changes in the same individuals over time to show that politics affects religion (Chapter 5) and that gaining more religious friends increases good neighborliness, civic engagement, and even happiness (Chapter 13). Now we employ the same type of analysis to see whether an increase in religious bridging leads to an increase in interreligious acceptance.<sup>17</sup> While we must caution that such an analysis of panel data does not definitely determine causation—the Holy Grail of any social science analysis—it does provide much stronger evidence for causation than a single-shot survey.<sup>18</sup>

The logic of the analysis is simple. We simply see whether, over the course of a year, gaining a friend of group X means warmer feelings toward group X. Note that we exclude anyone who has adopted

the religious label in question, to rule out the possibility that because respondents have converted to a new religion, they simultaneously gained new friends in that same religion and became more positive toward it. For example, anyone who became an evangelical is excluded when we examine the impact of gaining an evangelical friend. Our results, then, cannot be explained by an enthusiasm for a new way of life that both increases the feeling thermometer rating and leads to new friends who share that way of life. Furthermore, we have tested whether having greater warmth toward the group in question in the first wave leads to becoming friends with a member of that group in the second wave. In other words, perhaps you are already warm toward evangelicals and, because of that warmth, end up friends with an evangelical. In those cases where we find a significant impact of gaining a friend within a particular group, we find no evidence that the warmth leads to the friendship rather than the other way around.

Our analysis finds strikingly consistent results, as there are multiple examples of how religious bridging corresponds to a warmer assessment of the group in question. Gaining an evangelical friend means a more positive evaluation of evangelicals; gaining a nonreligious friend means warmer regard for "people who are not religious."<sup>19</sup>

While determining the statistical significance of the increase in warm feelings is straightforward, gauging the substantive importance is less so. Upon gaining an evangelical friend, the thermometer score for evangelicals rises by 7 degrees—more than the gap between the initial average rating for evangelicals and the neutral point of 50 degrees. That seems to us like a substantively important rise. The thermometer score for nonreligious people rises 4 degrees—less, but still noteworthy.

Stepping back from the subjective question of whether a 7 or 4 degree gain is big or small, we acknowledge that feeling thermometers are an abstract, even artificial, indicator. And so when we speak of feelings toward a group as measured by a thermometer, we cannot necessarily conclude that this means that members

of these groups will get along. On-the-ground cooperation is much more difficult than saying you feel warm or cold toward one group or another. On the other hand, however, such attempts at cooperation will be smoother if prior opinions about the group are positive rather than negative.

These results for the consequences of religious bridging are compelling evidence that the purported effects of social contact—under the right conditions—are not merely a fuzzy-headed aspiration. Here we have verification that our friends affect how we perceive the religious groups to which our friends belong. (Indeed, the existing research suggests that this phenomenon is not limited to religious groups, but applies to other social categories too, like race, ethnicity, and class.)

In making sense of these results, we must note that someone we have described as a “new friend” may not actually be so new. Instead, it could be that an existing friend has adopted a new religion. Or it could be that the respondent comes to learn of a friend’s previously unknown religion. Neither possibility changes the interpretation of the results, nor their importance. Either situation still suggests that knowing someone within a particular religious group means a more positive assessment of that group in general—whether you have known that someone for a long time or not.

A process by which one becomes friends with someone first, and then comes to know their religion second, is an example of a more general process by which people come to like one member of an “outgroup,” and then generalize their positive feelings to the group as a whole. First, you become friends with someone without being aware that she is a member of the outgroup. As the friendship develops, her outgroupness becomes salient but by that time you are already friends. From there, it is a short step to concluding that other, perhaps all, members of this particular outgroup are not so bad after all.

Interreligious friendships are a likely candidate for this type of revelation. While there are some exceptions (e.g., Ultraorthodox Jews, Sikhs, Old Order Amish), the religious affiliation of most

Americans is not obvious from outward appearances. In this respect, interreligious contact is qualitatively different from contact with people of different races and, arguably, of different socioeconomic backgrounds. It is therefore likely that in the early stages of many friendships, neither party’s religious affiliation is salient. However, given the high rate of religious adherence in the United States, it is also likely that friends become aware of one another’s religious affiliation—as suggested by the fact that virtually all respondents to the Faith Matters surveys were able to describe the religion of their five closest friends. From there, it is a small step to recognizing commonality with other members of that friend’s religion.

In *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, Robert Wuthnow summarizes a series of in-depth interviews with people who have experienced this inadvertent contact with someone of a different religion. In describing how Americans are exposed to people of different religions, Wuthnow writes:

[The exposure] occurs because a friend happened to belong to another religion, not because the person was actively engaged on a quest for new spiritual experiences. Often this exposure is involuntary (for example, being dictated by being assigned a roommate of a different religion in college) or focuses less on religion and more on sports, music, and other interests. In many instances, it nevertheless broadens a person’s horizons and reinforces the idea that there are valuable things to be learned from other religions.<sup>20</sup>

Call this the My Friend Al Principle, a corollary of the Aunt Susan Principle. You become friends with Al for, say, your shared affinity for beekeeping. As you get to know Al, you learn that in addition to his regard for apiculture, he is also an evangelical Christian. Prior to learning that, you may have been suspicious of evangelicals. But if your pal Al is an avid beekeeper—just like you—and is also an evangelical, then perhaps evangelicals are not so bad after all.

The My Friend Al Principle has a strong intuition behind it.

Indeed, we would have been surprised if gaining a new friend from a particular social group did *not* lead you to reevaluate members of that group more generally. There is a more intriguing possibility, however. Can becoming friends with Al the beekeeping evangelist mean a higher regard for people of still other religious backgrounds? Perhaps upon realizing that you can be friends with Al, a member of a religious group you once viewed with suspicion, you come to reevaluate your perception of other religious groups too. Call this spillover effect.

To find out if spillover occurs, we can once again turn to comparing the same people at two different times. In this case, we examined whether an increase in the overall religious diversity among one's close friends leads to a more positive assessment of various religious groups. The more religious groups that are represented among your close friends, the more religious bridging within your friendship network. An evangelical with an evangelical friend does not count as bridging; a Catholic with an evangelical friend does count. Compare that same Catholic to another who has an evangelical friend and a second friend who is not religious. The friendship network of the second is more religiously diverse than that of the first. With such an index of religious bridging we can again see what happens when change occurs over time.

What happens when someone's friendship network becomes more religiously diverse? Does more bridging lead to a more positive assessment of other religious groups, even those that were not added to the friendship network? In other words, can becoming friends with evangelical Al mean warmer feelings toward Mormons or people without religious faith at all? Is there spillover?<sup>21</sup>

In a word, the answer is "yes." We find convincing evidence in favor of a spillover effect. For example, increased religious bridging leads to greater warmth toward "people who are not religious." The increase is 3 degrees on the feeling thermometer, a modest but nonnegligible gain. We also find that greater religious bridging corresponds to an increase in warmth toward Mormons. An increase of one more religiously bridging friendship leads to an increase in

warmth toward Mormons of 2 degrees. Again this is admittedly not a huge gain, but it is a gain nonetheless. The gain is all the more notable because our index of religious diversity does not include Mormons.<sup>22</sup> In other words, bridging to friends of other religions corresponds to positive feelings toward two of the most unpopular religious groups in America: the nonreligious and Mormons.

The waters are muddied when we examine whether an increase in bridging leads to more positive feelings toward Muslims. Recall that one of the categories included in the religious diversity index is someone of a "non-Christian religion," of which Islam is an example. So it is possible that the increase in religious diversity results from adding a Muslim friend; we are unable to be sure that this is a true spillover effect. With that caveat in mind, we note that more religious diversity within an individual's social network has an impact on the perception of Muslims that resembles the increase in warmth toward Mormons—roughly 2 degrees.<sup>23</sup>

As a parallel with our earlier analysis, we also tested for the possibility of reverse causation: whether warmth toward the group at time 1 in question leads to religious bridging at time 2. It does not.

In sum, we have reasonably firm evidence that as people build more religious bridges they become warmer toward people of many different religions, not just those religions represented within their social network. The increases in thermometer ratings are modest, but then the elapsed time between surveys is short. Social networks do not change much over a single year, so it is amazing that we find any effects at all. Based on these short-term results, it seems reasonable to expect that, over time, an increase in interpersonal religious bridging will continue to have a similar effect, smoothing tensions among people of different religions.

Furthermore, if we can see the effects of interreligious friendships, and over only a single year at that, it is also reasonable to assume that interreligious marriages have a far more potent effect. And, as we saw in Chapter 5, the rates of interreligious marriage have increased dramatically over the last century. Rising interreligious marriage almost certainly means rising acceptance for people

of other religions, not only among the spouses themselves but also for their extended family members.

These results can also illuminate why, in Chapter 14, we saw that some religious groups are viewed unfavorably, specifically Muslims, Buddhists, and Mormons. While religious bridging appears to foster more acceptance of all religions that may seem exotic or unusual, there is even greater acceptance when a bridge is built to a member of that specific group. Thus, groups viewed coldly are those with which most Americans have little or no personal exposure. Given the small size of their respective populations, this would help to explain why Muslims and Buddhists are viewed in relatively negative terms. And, when we remember that Mormons have a high degree of religious homogeneity within their own familial and social networks, it also helps to explain why they are perceived negatively as well. All three groups are also concentrated in particular parts of the United States, which further limits the prospects for religious bridging and thus greater acceptance. While greater bridging over all is likely, over the long haul, to boost approval of these groups, we would expect their image problem to disappear even more rapidly as more and more Americans count a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a Mormon among their friends and family.

## WHO GOES TO HEAVEN?

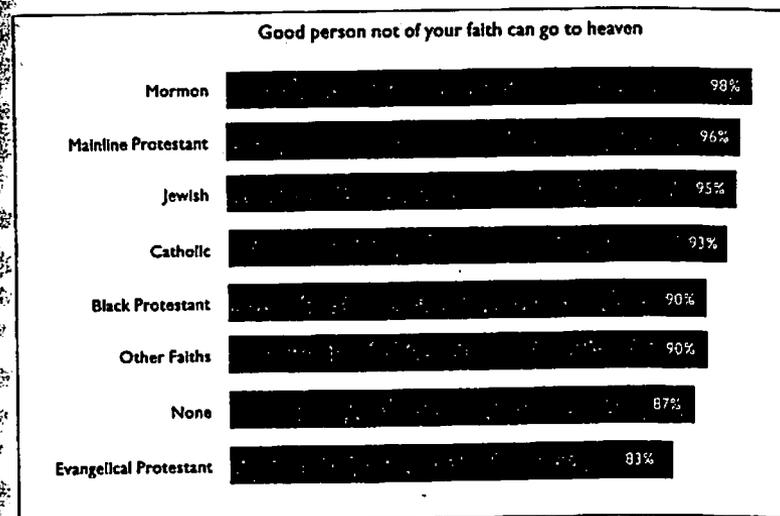
Americans, we have seen, affirm that religious diversity is a good thing, and confirm that belief with their religiously diverse social networks. Along with the value they place on religious diversity is a widespread belief that there are many paths to heaven. In the Faith Matters surveys we asked "can a person who is not of your faith go to heaven or attain salvation, or not?"<sup>24</sup> A whopping 89 percent of Americans believe that heaven is not reserved for those who share their religious faith. Americans are reluctant to claim that they have a monopoly on truth. Their hesitation to adopt a "members only" perspective on who goes to heaven illuminates their positive attitude toward religious diversity. It is not just that they have adopted Jew-

person's minimal standard of avoiding picked pockets and broken legs. Rather, they endorse the legitimacy of others' religious beliefs. Large majorities of even the stricter religious traditions believe in an equal opportunity heaven. Eighty-three percent of evangelicals, for example, say that other religions can bring salvation; eighty-seven percent of Black Protestants believe so (see Figure 15.5).

Wait, a skeptic might reasonably ask, what do people think of when they hear a question about "someone not of your faith"? Are members of the numerically dominant Christian faiths just thinking of other Christians? Are Baptists merely telling us that Methodists can go to heaven too? If so, their belief that other religions lead to heaven would still be meaningful—disputes among Christians have historically been fierce—but would nonetheless mean something other than the belief that even non-Christians have a place in heaven. If Baptists are thinking of Methodists, that is one thing, but if they are thinking of Muslims, that is quite another.

Figure 15.5

AMERICANS OVERWHELMINGLY BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE OF OTHER RELIGIONS CAN GO TO HEAVEN



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2007.

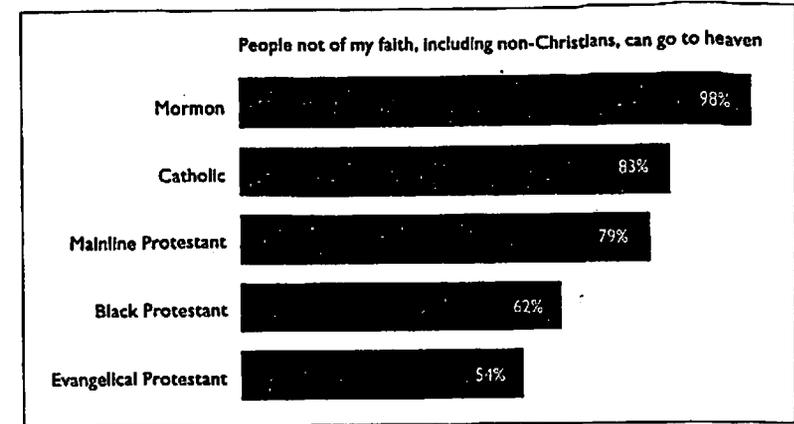
To determine the limits of Christians' ecumenism, in 2007 we asked a second question of those who said that people of different religions could go to heaven.<sup>25</sup> "Does that include non-Christians or only Christians?" Before we report the results, we pause to note that Christian scripture does not appear to leave much room for doubt on whether non-Christians can be saved. For example, the New Testament records Jesus as saying that "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."<sup>26</sup>

Notwithstanding this scriptural injunction (and many more like it), most Americans who belong to Christian faiths told us that they believe non-Christians can go to heaven. Of those who said that people of other faiths could attain salvation, 89 percent of Catholics, 82 percent of mainline Protestants, and 100 percent of Mormons say that salvation extends to non-Christians. The percentages are noticeably lower for Black Protestants and evangelicals, at 69 and 65 percent respectively, but still constitute a clear majority.

We can put the two questions together—can anyone of a different faith go to heaven? Does that include non-Christians?—to determine the overall percentage of members of Christian faiths who believe that non-Christians can go to heaven. As displayed in Figure 15.6, for Mormons it is 98 percent; for Catholics, 83 percent; for mainline Protestants, 79 percent; for Black Protestants, 62 percent; and for evangelicals it is 54 percent. Clearly, Mormons, Catholics, and mainline Protestants all have an expansive view of heaven. The numbers are more ambiguous for evangelicals and Black Protestants. Once more, we have a glass-half-full vs. glass-half-empty conclusion. Glass-half-empty people would point out that these latter two groups are considerably less likely than the other traditions to believe that heaven takes all good people regardless of religion. On the other hand, glass-half-full people would note that, in both groups, a majority see heaven as welcoming non-Christians. Whether the glass is half full or half empty, one cannot deny that a large number of Americans, even in the religious traditions that have historically stressed that theirs is the only way to heaven, instead see

Figure 15.6

EVEN WHEN THOSE OTHER RELIGIONS ARE NOT CHRISTIAN



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2007.

many roads to salvation. By any standard, this bodes well for inter-religious relations.

Lest our hypothetical critic be concerned that the Faith Matters surveys have somehow produced idiosyncratic conclusions, other researchers have asked similar questions about Americans' acceptance of faiths other than their own and found similar results. The most comprehensive of these surveys is a recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which concluded that "most American Christians, including evangelicals, have more than just other Christian denominations in mind when they say that there are many paths to salvation."<sup>27</sup> The Pew results, however, also reveal that, in the eyes of most Christians, not all non-Christian faiths are equally likely to lead to salvation. For example, when asked specifically whether Islam leads to eternal life, only 35 percent of evangelicals agreed.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, in a rare example of divergence from evangelicals, a much higher percentage—58 percent—of Black Protestants believe that Islam is a path to heaven, perhaps because the number of Black Muslims in America means that many Black

Protestants are personally acquainted with someone of the Islamic faith.<sup>29</sup>

A similar picture is painted by a question asked in the 2007 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, whether one's religion is "the one true faith leading to eternal life." Once again, only a minority of Americans agree. Only about 40 percent of evangelicals and Black Protestants, a little under 20 percent of Catholics, and a little over 10 percent of mainline Protestants believe that theirs is the one true faith.<sup>30</sup>

Still further confirmation of Americans' ecumenism arises from the studies of "Middletown," arguably the most studied city in America. In 1977, all high school students in Middletown (Muncie, Indiana) were asked whether they agreed that "Christianity is the one true religion and all people should be converted to it." Thirty-eight percent agreed—roughly consistent with the more recent data we have reported above. Because this community was the subject of intensive research by sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920s and 1930s, it is possible to make comparisons across the decades. The change is dramatic. When the identical question about Christianity was asked of all Middletown high school students in 1924, 94 percent agreed that Christianity is the one true religion. In other words, over fifty years there was a precipitous decline in the belief that Christianity is the one and only true religion. Significantly, this decline in religious chauvinism came not because of diminishing religiosity. To the contrary, by every possible indicator Middletowners were far more religious in the late 1970s than in the 1920s.<sup>31</sup> These data from Middletown also highlight the generational differences in religious tolerance. Young people today are even more accepting of other religions than their parents and grandparents. According to the 2007 Faith Matters survey, nearly nine in ten (87 percent) Christians under age thirty-five believe that non-Christians can go to heaven, compared to 70 percent of people sixty-five and older.

The expansive—if not total—ecumenism of Americans is all the more notable in light of what clergy believe. In many faiths there is a wide gulf between the beliefs of clergy and laity with regard to

who is eligible for heaven. We can say this because of a survey conducted by political scientist Corwin Smidt and his colleagues. They asked clergy in different Christian denominations whether they agreed that "there is no way to salvation but through belief in Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup> In sharp contrast to the ecumenical views of the American public, clergy are far more likely to see a single road to heaven. Even in denominations generally thought to be fairly liberal, a high proportion of clergy endorse belief in Jesus as the sole source of salvation. For example, 63 percent of clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America agree that Jesus is the only way (in spite of its name, the theology of the ELCA puts it in the mainline Protestant camp). This was also true for 59 percent of United Methodist clergy and 57 percent of clergy from the Presbyterian Church, USA.

These numbers for mainline Protestants, however, are dwarfed by those from the clergy in evangelical and Black Protestant denominations. The statement that salvation comes only through Jesus is endorsed by:

- 100 percent of clergy from the Church of God in Christ, and 98 percent of leaders in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, two historically black denominations.
- 100 percent of clergy from the Presbyterian Church in America (not to be confused with the Presbyterian Church, USA), 98 percent from the Missouri Synod Lutherans, 98 percent from the Church of Christ, 97 percent of Southern Baptist pastors, 96 percent of Christian Reformed leaders, and 92 percent of clergy from nondenominational but evangelical-leaning congregations (i.e., megachurches).

Across this range of Christian denominations we see a disconnect between the leaders at the pulpits and the people in the pews. Most Christian clergy see salvation as exclusively Christian, while most Christians have a more—if not completely—inclusive view of who will be saved in the hereafter.

The clergy-laity disconnect was made clear to us more vividly

than is possible with a dry statistical report on who believes what. Early in our research for this book, one of us (Putnam) spoke about our work to a group of Lutheran theologians from the Missouri Synod, one of the evangelically inclined denominations within Lutheranism (the denomination of Our Savior Lutheran, featured in Chapter 7). They were shocked that such a high percentage of Americans believe that there are many ways to get to heaven. One theologian spoke up firmly that those who believe that are simply *wrong*. And judging from murmurs of approval from the group, he was not alone in his opinion. In an attempt to reconcile this apparent heresy, another member of the audience proposed that, surely, Missouri Synod Lutherans do not take such a casual view toward salvation. What ensued was social science research in real time, as an on-the-spot analysis of the 2006 Faith Matters data stored on Putnam's laptop revealed that 86 percent of Missouri Synod Lutherans said that a good person who is not of their faith could indeed go to heaven. Upon hearing this news, these theologians were stunned into silence. One wanly said that as teachers of the Word, they had failed.

We claim no qualifications to assess the theological implications of believing in a heaven that is not an exclusive club. The sociological implications of our findings are clear, however. A leading, perhaps even the primary, reason that America manages to be both highly religious and highly religiously diverse is that most Americans do not believe that those with a different religious faith are damned. Devotion plus diversity, minus damnation, equals comity.

The explanation for the fact that so many Americans appear to disregard the theology of their religions rests in the religious bridging within their personal social networks. If you are highly religious, your Aunt Susan and your pal Al both produce a form of cognitive dissonance. You know you are supposed to believe that only people who believe as you do will enter heaven. However, Susan and Al are both the salt of the earth, and so surely heaven has a place for them. Most Americans, it appears, resolve this discrepancy in favor of believing that Susan and Al can go to heaven after all.

## WHO IS A GOOD AMERICAN?

Asking about eligibility for heaven is an important indicator of how Americans view the eternal prospects of those who believe differently than they do, which in turn sheds light on the level of religious tolerance in America. What, though, about tolerance of the irreligious? And what if we ask not about the hereafter, but the here and now? Do Americans think that being religious is a prerequisite for being a "good American"?

There are many reasons to think that they do. Americans have long merged patriotism and religion, as evidenced by the vestigial examples of religious symbolism at many moments of nationalistic ceremony. Examples of America's civil religion, discussed above, only reinforce the symbiosis between God and country. Since the 1950s, the Pledge of Allegiance has contained the words "under God." Similarly, this was the decade when "In God We Trust" was inscribed on American coins and currency. And, as noted in Chapter 1, it was in the 1950s that public monuments with the Ten Commandments were placed all around the country. During this period of conflict with an expansionist and officially atheist Soviet Union, these public expressions of religion reminded Americans that theirs was a godly nation facing a godless foe. More recently, in the immediate wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, members of Congress from both parties linked arms on the steps of the Capitol and sang not the National Anthem but "God Bless America."

Even though religion and patriotism seemingly fit hand in glove, the 2006 Faith Matters survey reveals that Americans are nonetheless willing to include people who are not religious in their conception of an upstanding citizen. Eighty-seven percent of Americans agree that people "without a religious faith" can be "good Americans." So, in spite of Americans' own high degree of religiosity, and the enduring legacy of America's civil religion, the nonreligious are welcomed as full members of the national community. Interestingly, this is nearly the same percentage of Americans (89 percent) who believe that people of a different faith can go to heaven.

We see a further parallel between religious tolerance and the acceptance of the nonreligious as full Americans. If interreligious relations are enhanced by religious bridging, it seems reasonable to think that religious bridging would also lead people to accept the patriotic bona fides of people without religious faith. In other words, just as we found that an increase in religious bridging corresponds to warmer feelings toward religious outgroups, we might expect more bridging to lead to the full acceptance of an outgroup—those without a religion—into the national community. This is a high bar to clear, since so many of our respondents had already told us that even the non-religious could be good Americans. Just as a helium-filled balloon cannot ascend any higher than the ceiling, so is there a ceiling expanding on the acceptance of the non-religious as good citizens.

Although a high percentage of Americans already see secularists as patriots, this percentage climbs higher with more religious bridging. That is, when we use the same test we described above—testing the impact of increasing religious diversity among one's friends over roughly a one-year time span—we see that more bridging means a small but statistically significant increase in the likelihood of agreeing that religious faith is not essential to good Americanness. (See Appendix 2 for methodological details.)

This finding suggests that interreligious contact can lead to a redefined social boundary. Rather than being dismissed as unpatriotic, people without a religious faith are instead viewed as full-fledged members of the national community. In other words, having a religiously diverse group of friends seems to lead to widening the circle of "we." *E pluribus unum.*

### THE LESS TOLERANT TENTH: A MINORITY OF "TRUE BELIEVERS"

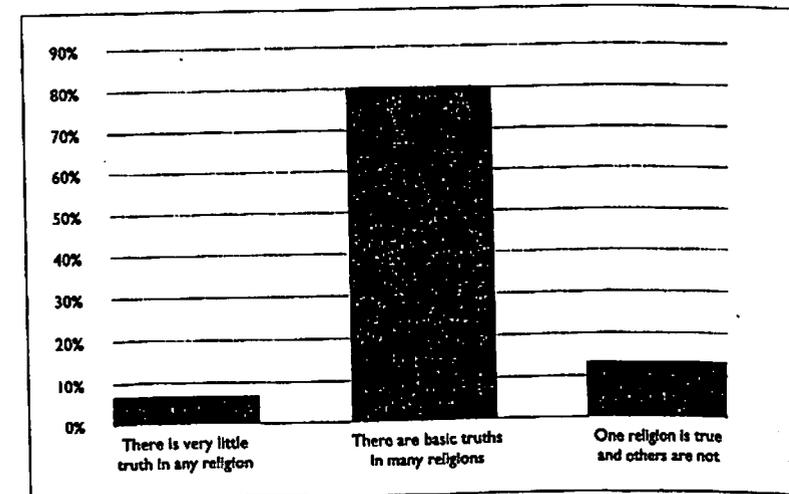
The vast majority of Americans seem entirely comfortable in a religiously pluralist world, but several indicators point to a small minority (roughly one in ten of all adults) who are "true believers." As we have seen, 11 percent of believers say that people of other faiths

cannot reach heaven. Similarly, as Figure 15.7 shows, approximately 13 percent of all adults say that "one religion is true and others are not."<sup>33</sup> It is worth looking more closely at this group, especially since they seem to represent the worst fears of secular Americans. In many respects those Americans who say there is only "one true religion" are distinctive, even compared to highly religious evangelicals. (Table 15.1 summarizes the statistical evidence.)<sup>34</sup>

First, even in an America that is more religiously observant than any other advanced nation, this group of true believers is yet more intensely religious. They are, virtually without exception, absolutely sure about God's existence. Religion is fundamental to their personal identity and daily life. They are twice as likely as other Americans to attend church every week (many of them more than once). And because they are passionate about their faith, they are much more active in personal evangelism, sharply dissenting from the more common view among other Americans that in terms of religion "everyone should leave everyone else alone."

Figure 15.7

FEW AMERICANS ARE "TRUE BELIEVERS"



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

Table 15.1

**WHO ARE THE MINORITY OF "TRUE BELIEVERS" IN THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE?**

	One true religion
	Yes
<b>Highly religious (even compared to other Americans)</b>	
Religion is "very important" to my sense of who I am	83%
Attend church every week	60%
Absolutely sure I believe in God	96%
Okay to try to convert other people (vs. "everyone should leave everyone else alone")	71%
Have tried to convert someone	54%
<b>Highly deferential to religious authority</b>	
There are absolutely clear guidelines of what is good and evil	88%
It's better to follow leaders and teachings of religion rather than one's own conscience	54%
Scripture is actual word of God and is to be taken literally	63%
"Absolutely sure" belief in hell	71%
Avoiding sin in everyday life decisions is "extremely important"	47%
The world is soon coming to an end	63%
It is more important for a child to be taught obedience than self-reliance	69%
<b>Very conservative, especially on moral issues</b>	
Premarital sex is always morally wrong	72%
Make abortion illegal even in case of rape/incest	34%
Gambling is always morally wrong	55%
Oppose both gay marriage and civil unions	60%
Self-described "conservative"	70%
<b>Somewhat less comfortable with religious pluralism</b>	
Religion is a private matter that should be kept out of public debates over social and political issues	45%
Morality is a personal matter, and society should not force everyone to follow one standard	54%
Religious diversity has been good for America	70%
My values are "very" threatened in America today	34%
Trust "deeply religious people" more than "nonreligious people"	42%
A book that most people disapprove of should be kept out of my local public library	44%
<b>Live in religiously homogeneous environment with fewer Aunt Susans and pal Als</b>	
Spouse currently in same religious tradition as me	83%
All five closest friends in same religion as me	38%
All members of extended family in same religion as me	39%
"Very important" that my children marry someone of my own faith	60%

SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

Second, compared to most Americans they have a very clear, religiously derived sense of good and evil. Whereas 80 percent of other Americans say they follow their own conscience in matters of right and wrong, more than half of the "true believers" give precedence instead to religious leaders and teachings. They are roughly twice as likely as other Americans to be strict biblical literalists, to be certain about the reality of hell, to anticipate Judgment Day anytime now, and be wary of sin and evil in everyday life. Not surprisingly, they think that obedience, rather than self-reliance, is the cardinal virtue to be imparted to children. They are, in short, moral absolutists.

Third, religious true believers in America today are deeply conservative, especially on moral issues, above all on questions of sexual morality. They wholeheartedly condemn premarital sex and homosexuality, at a time when most other Americans are coming to terms with those two sexual revolutions. They overwhelmingly oppose abortion, one third favoring a legal ban even in the case of rape and incest. They are more than twice as likely as other Americans to condemn gambling as "always morally wrong." It is hardly surprising that most true believers describe themselves as "conservative," 32 percent as "very conservative," compared to only 10 percent of other Americans who say they are "very conservative."

Fourth, true believers are (compared to other Americans) somewhat less comfortable with religious pluralism and with the idea that religion and morality are primarily private and personal matters. They are less convinced that religious diversity is a good thing, and probably for that reason they are more bothered by an alien religion, even one as mild-mannered as Buddhism. (True believers are half again as likely to object to the construction of a Buddhist temple in their community, 33 percent to 21 percent for other Americans.) They feel that their own values are especially threatened by the modern world, and they are somewhat readier to rid library collections of unpopular books. They are slightly less trusting of other people, drawing an especially sharp distinction between deeply religious people (whom they trust) and nonreligious people (whom they don't). To be sure, even these true believers have been visibly influenced

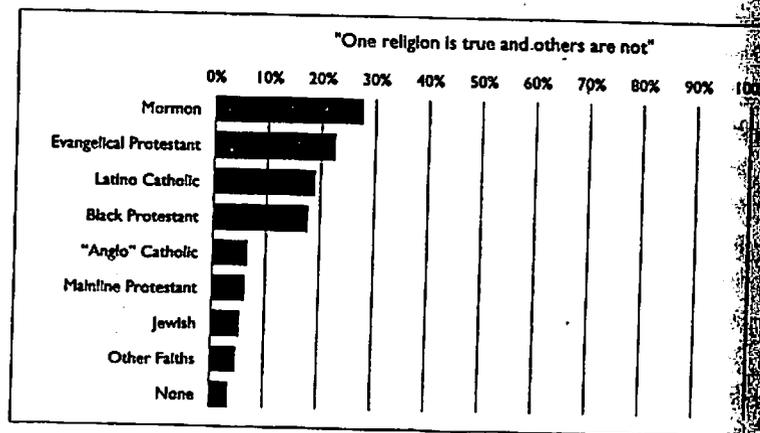
by the American tradition of religious and civil toleration, and on all these indicators a substantial number join the national consensus in favor of pluralism and tolerance, but that consensus is narrower among this less tolerant tenth of the population.

Finally and most significantly, these true believers live in more religiously monochromatic social environments. They are less likely to have married outside their faith, and they are much more insistent than other Americans that their children remain inside that faith. (If it is, as they believe, the one true faith, that is hardly surprising.) They are less likely than other Americans to have ties of kinship or friendship outside their own faith. In short, true believers are much less likely to have an Aunt Susan or pal Al to perturb their unquestioning faith.

The vast majority of Americans belong to religions (above all Christianity) that claim unique status as the one true religion. Most of us recite creeds that embody that claim. From a sociological point of view, however, what is remarkable is how few of us really are "true believers" in this sense. For these few Americans, religious faith is serious enough to suggest fanaticism, and Figure 15.8 shows how

Figure 15.8

ONE TRUE RELIGION?



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

they are distributed among our major religious traditions. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, they are somewhat more common among religious traditions (especially the Mormon and evangelical traditions, both black and white) that are more sectlike, using nomenclature introduced by Max Weber and recently revived by Laurence Iannaccone, Roger Finke, and Rodney Stark, among other scholars.<sup>35</sup> Otherwise, in their age, gender, education, region, and other demographic traits, true believers seem a perfect mirror of America. Moreover, the incidence of true believers seems to be highly stable over time, since the responses represented in Figure 15.8 are virtually identical to responses to the same question in the General Social Surveys of 1988 and 2008. This hard-core, deeply moralistic less tolerant tenth of the population gives us a glimpse of what a highly religious America might look like without Aunt Susan and my pal Al.

In today's America, however, true believers constitute only a small fraction of the faithful in every religious tradition. More specifically, while a majority (52 percent) of true believers as identified here are evangelicals, the great majority (75 percent) of evangelicals are not true believers. "Faith without fanaticism" accurately describes most Americans.

## CONSEQUENCES OF BRIDGING

Multiple strands of evidence point in the same direction. When Americans associate with people of religions other than their own—or people with no religion at all—they become more accepting of other religions. Religious intermarriage is perhaps the most profound example. Over the course of the last century, there has been a steady rise in the frequency of marriage across religious lines, which we argue is closely tied to the widespread ecumenism within the American population. Husbands and wives are presumably willing to believe that the other can go to heaven (who would marry someone on their way to hell?), even if they have different religions. However, this first-order effect is not the only way that interreligious marriage can affect interreligious relations. Second-order effects rip-

ple through an extended family. Even if you and your own spouse do not have different religious backgrounds, most Americans have an Aunt Susan in the family.

Religious bridging is not limited to intermarriage. Interfaith friendship is even more common than marriages across religious boundaries. Most Americans have at least one close friend of another religion, and many have multiple friends of other faiths. Even over a short period of time, we have seen that a small increase in such religious bridging corresponds to warmer feelings toward at least two relatively unpopular religious groups (Mormons and the non-religious). Furthermore, we have seen that religious bridging can expand Americans' sense of who is fully a member of the national community.

Individually, each of these findings and observations might be considered intriguing. Taken together they form a convincing pattern. Interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America's religious melting pot from boiling over.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter began with a puzzle. How can Americans combine high levels of both religious diversity and devotion? America's religious comity is even more puzzling given the recent state of religious polarization described throughout this book. Recall the story of the shock and two aftershocks that we recounted in Chapter 4. In the wake of the sexually libertine Sixties, conservative religion grew in both size and prominence—including political prominence. And then, in response to that growth and presence in partisan politics, there has been a second backlash in which increasing numbers of Americans, especially young people, have turned away from religion. These seismic events have reverberated throughout American society, and so the moderate religious middle—the once thriving segment of the religious spectrum—has shrunk.

Given this state of affairs, there would appear to be considerable potential for religious tension. As we have seen, religious and

secular Americans have differing worldviews, and see each other in starkly different terms. There are also latent tensions between members of some religious traditions—while some religions are viewed negatively across the board. Furthermore, history provides many examples of such tension turning to violence. For example, in 1834 anti-Catholic riots in Charlestown, Massachusetts, destroyed the Ursuline convent; in 1844 there were deadly riots in Philadelphia over rumors that Catholics were going to remove the Bible from the public schools.<sup>36</sup> Nor are Catholics the only group to face such animus. In the face of growing hostilities between Mormons and non-Mormons, in 1838 the governor of Missouri issued an order that all Mormons were to leave his state or be killed. This extermination order actually remained on the books until 1976.<sup>37</sup>

Such examples of religiously inspired violence are tragic, but fortunately they also are rare. America has had sporadic religious riots, but no sustained religious wars. From its founding, America has had religious toleration encoded in its national DNA. In saying this, we must recognize that at the time of the Founding magnanimity toward different religions was contained to various Protestant sects—Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and certainly atheists were not included. Nonetheless, the early years of the republic were informed by John Locke's conception of religious toleration. Locke spoke of the "necessity and advantage" of religious toleration, justifying it as a means of keeping the civil peace. From Locke, it is a small step to Thomas Jefferson's acceptance of different faiths so long as they do not infringe on his freedoms.

Over time, however, that minimal conception of toleration on practical grounds has evolved into an explicit embrace of religious diversity for its own sake. There were bumps in the road along the way, as evidenced by outbreaks of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-Mormonism, and any number of other anti-isms. Eventually, though, the national sentiment moved from grudging acceptance of other faiths to a way station of tacit approval to an outright embrace of religious differences as ecumenism took hold in the mid- to late twentieth century. And even if the religious diversity of today is

not completely inclusive, it still is far more expansive than anything imagined by the Founders. Catholics are squarely in the American mainstream, while Jews are the best liked religious group in the country. Religious pluralism is embraced, as shown by the extremely high percentage of Americans who say such diversity is good for the country.

In tracing the evolution and expansion of religious pluralism, we acknowledge the important role of the nation's constitutional infrastructure. The U.S. Constitution's prohibitions on both an established religion—which eventually came to mean any public support for religious entities by government at any level—and religious tests for public office helped to create a flourishing religious ecosphere. In a never-ending process, many different variants of religion emerge, adapt, evolve, and innovate. In America, religion is not static but fluid. Not only are religions changing, but individual Americans themselves frequently undergo religious change—finding religion, dropping out of religion, or switching from one religion to another.

This fluidity has contributed to the steady growth of interreligious mingling and marrying. Geographic segregation by religion has largely ended, while social segregation along religious lines is also mostly a thing of the past. As Americans have come to live by, make friends with, and wed people of other religions, their overlapping social relationships have made it difficult to sustain interreligious hostility. While not every religion escapes hostility, interreligious tensions are far more muted today than in the America of yesterday or in many other nations today.

How has America solved the puzzle of religious pluralism—the coexistence of religious diversity and devotion? And how has it done so in the wake of growing religious polarization? By creating a web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths.

This is America's grace.

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Other able researchers were members of our "moveable feast" research seminar over the five years of this project, analyzing data and reviewing far-flung literatures in sociology, psychology, political science, history, constitutional law, philosophy, theology, and yet more. They included Lydia Bean, Nick Carnes, Jill Goldenziel, Erin Graves, Matt Greenfield, Eitan Hersh, Sarah Hinkfuss, Ridhi Kashyap, James Laurence, Rebecca McCumbers, Shelby Meyerhoff, Byron Pacheco Miller, Nan Ransohoff, Amy Reynolds, and Nate Schwartz. Several colleagues on the project should be singled out because of the depth of their engagement: Valerie Lewis, Chaeyoon Lim, Sean McGraw, Carol Ann McGregor, Matt Pehl, and Danny Schlozman. Our team was notably diverse in the religious orientations of its members, for it included a Catholic priest (along with several lay Catholics), a Unitarian minister, a Muslim, a Quaker, two Mormons, several Jews (Reform to Orthodox), several conservative

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## THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM

Diana L. Eck

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In May of 1990 in a suburb of Boston not far from the starting point of the Boston marathon, the Hindu community of New England dedicated a temple to the goddess Lakshmi, pouring the consecrated waters of the Ganges over the temple towers, along with the waters of the Colorado, the Mississippi and the Ohio Rivers. In April of 1993 in Sharon, the Islamic community of New England broke ground for a major new Islamic center to provide an anchor for the nearly 20 mosques in the Islamic Council of New England.

These events are increasingly typical of the religious life of New England. Indeed, the religious landscape of much of America is changing -- slowly, but in dramatic ways that test the pluralist foundations of American public life.

The Jain community celebrates the end of its season of fasting with a great feast held under a bright yellow and white striped tent in the backyard of its temple in Norwood, formerly a Swedish Lutheran Church. A young man being ordained as a monk kneels shaven-headed amidst the Cambodian Buddhist community in its temple in Lynn -- one of three Cambodian Buddhist temples in the northern suburbs of Boston. Sikhs come to their gurdwara in Milford for the celebration of Vaishaki. African American Muslims gather in Malcolm X Park in Dorchester to celebrate Id Al Adha during the month of the pilgrimage to Makkah. Buddhist dignitaries from a dozen monastic lineages assemble in Cumberland, Rhode Island, where a Korean Zen Master for the first time in history formally transmits his lineage of teaching to three American teachers, one of them a woman. This is New England in the 1990's. The whole world of religious diversity is here.

This new reality is not a New York-California phenomenon of the

cosmopolitan coasts of America. This is a Main Street phenomenon. There are Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists in Salt Lake City, in Toledo and in Jackson, Mississippi.

The questions raised for America are far-reaching and will be important questions for journalists to follow -- not only those who write explicitly on religion, but those who write about education and the controversies of school boards, about politics and the influence of religiously based political action committees, about the courts and the continuing reinterpretation of the foundations of religious freedom by the Supreme Court, about hospitals, health care and medical ethics in a multireligious environment. Over the next decade, this new multireligious reality will have an impact on virtually every aspect of American public life.

One hundred years ago this summer the World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago as part of the Chicago World's Fair. Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians came from around the world to join with the Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Unitarians who organized the 17-day event. In 1893, India's Swami Vivekananda dazzled audiences with his eloquent statement of Vedanta philosophy and Dharmapala, the energetic Buddhist reformer from Sri Lanka, berated his listeners on their relative ignorance of Buddhism. They were new and exotic figures for most of the Americans at the Parliament who had never before heard a Hindu or a Buddhist speak. What is most striking in 1993 as Chicago prepares for a gala centennial of the Parliament of Religions late this summer is the fact that today the diversity of the 1893 Parliament is the reality of the neighborhoods of Chicago.

The Chicago metropolitan Yellow Pages list dozens of entries under the unusual headings "Churches: Buddhist" or "Churches: Islamic." There are nearly 70 mosques and Islamic centers in the Chicago metropolitan area. According to the Chicago-based Islamic Information Service there are half a million Muslims. The suburbs of the city boast two sizable and elaborate Hindu temples in Lemont and Aurora, to say nothing of the 18 smaller places of Hindu worship. There are at least 25 Buddhist temples in the Buddhist Council of the Midwest -- Japanese Jodo Shinshu, the Thai Wat Dhammaram, the Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotian Buddhist refugee communities and homegrown American Zen communities. There are Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Jains, Sikhs and Afro-Caribbean Santeria practitioners. The local planning committee convened to plan the centennial of the Parliament is far more diverse than the Parliament had been.

One need not go back 100 years to document the dramatic rise in America's Asian population. Most of it has taken place in the last 25 years. It is important to remember, however, that 100 years ago at the time of the Parliament, U.S. immigration policy toward Asia was a policy of exclusion. The Statue of Liberty stood in New York harbor facing the Atlantic and not in San Francisco facing the Pacific. Chinese workers had built the railways of the West, were industrious miners, and had built Buddhist temples and celebrated Chinese festivals in seemingly unlikely places like Helena and Butte, Montana. In 1882, however, the first Exclusion Act was passed, aimed specifically at the Chinese. In the decades that followed, the exclusion policy was reaffirmed and gradually extended to other "Asiatics." In the 1923 Supreme Court case "Hindus," which in this case meant a Sikh named Mr. Thind, were excluded from U.S. citizenship. Through the first half of the 20th Century Asian immigration was tightly constricted.

The 1965 immigration act proposed by John F. Kennedy and signed into law by Lyndon Johnson set immigration on a new footing, eliminating the national origins quotas that had linked immigration to the national origins of groups already established in the U.S. It is to this legislation that one can attribute the modern burst of Asian immigration -- from about 1 million Asian Americans in 1965 to 7.3 million in 1990. The 1990 census shows how rapidly the "Asian and Pacific Islander" population is growing. In one state after another the percentage of Asian American population growth from 1980 to 1990 is by far the highest of any ethnic group -- in Minnesota up 194 percent from 1980, in Georgia up 208 percent, in Rhode Island up 245 percent. Nationwide, the Asian population rose 79.5 percent in the same decade. New immigration, not only from Asia, but also from the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe, has begun to change the cultural landscape of many parts of the U.S. in ways that are dramatic and yet so subtle we have scarcely begun to see them.

What does this mean in terms of religion? One can make an educated guess from statistics on ethnic composition, but the truth is we do not know. The one recent statistical study done by the City University of New York as an ancillary project of the National Jewish Population Survey has been widely disputed, especially in its projection of the numbers of Muslims in the U.S. as 1.4 million. This contrasts with a minimum of 8 million estimated by the Islamic Society of North America and a figure of at least 5 million estimated by responsible scholars. Even a conservative estimate would mean there are more

Muslims that Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the United Church of Christ. The more highly charged question is whether there are more Muslims than Jews. However uncertain the response to that question may now be, it is clear that within a few years Islam will have become the second largest religious community in the U.S. Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh communities may be small statistically, but the news of the 1990's is that they are very much present and their presence is not that of the passing gurus of the Seventies, but that of new American immigrants who have brought their faith with them to this country and are about the business of building the institutions to perpetuate it.

The Pluralism Project is a three year study project which has engaged Harvard students at all levels -- undergraduates, masters students and doctoral students -- in what is basically "hometown" research on this changing religious landscape of America. Our research is guided by three questions. The first is a more focused version of the demographic question: What do specific American cities now look like, religiously? How many mosques, temples and gurdwaras are there in Denver, in Houston, in Oklahoma City, in Minneapolis? Our second question is how are these traditions changing as they take root in the American context? Are there emerging some distinctively American adaptations of Buddhism or Islam? Finally, how is the United States changing as this new multireligious reality begins to be visibly present in our public life? How are schools, hospitals, and councils of churches engaging with this new multi-sided religious life?

One of the cities we have studied is Houston. The remarkable fact about Houston is not its Texas glitter, its NASA space-age image, or its huge Southern Baptist churches, but its substantial Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu populations. Houston is the only city in the country with a comprehensive Islamic plan for the zones and neighborhoods of the city. The Islamic Society of Greater Houston has divided the city into eight zones, with a main mosque and satellite mosques in the various regions of this sprawling city. The southwest zone has dedicated a new mosque, which is the showpiece of Islamic Houston, accommodating 900 for Friday prayers. Not all the mosques in Houston are part of the I.S.G.H. regional plan, for there are about two dozen mosques in all -- Sunni, Shi'a, Ismaili, African-American. Over 10,000 Muslims crowd into the George Brown Convention center for prayers on the Id festival days. In 1970 there were fewer than 1000 Muslims in Houston; today there are estimated to be 60,000.

The Buddhist population of Houston is almost as large, with an estimated 50,000 Buddhists and 19 Buddhist temples at last count, nine of them Vietnamese. There are 14 Hindu temples and organizations including the spectacular Meenakshi Temple in the southern suburb of Pearland. The Hindu population of Houston is estimated to be 40,000, with an annual summer camp sponsored by the Vishva Hindu Parishad and a city-wide celebration of the birthday of Krishna in the George Brown Convention Center attracting 6,000 to 10,000 people.

Houston, like Los Angeles, New York and Chicago, may be unusual, but smaller cities have a share in this diversity as well. In Oklahoma City there are five mosques, none with an exterior sign indicating the presence of an Islamic community. There are four Hindu temples, one Sikh gurdwara, two Vietnamese Buddhist temples, a Thai Buddhist temple, and a Japanese Buddhist Soka Gakkai International group. In Denver there are 11 Buddhist temples serving an immigrant Asian population that includes fourth- and fifth- generation Japanese Americans along with newer Thai, Cambodian, Korean, Laotian and Vietnamese immigrants. Indeed there are six Vietnamese temples in Denver. In addition there are three mosques, two Sikh gurdwaras, two Hindu temples and a Taoist temple. In Portland, Oregon there are four mosques and 18 Buddhist centers. Buddhism is said to be the city's fastest growing religion, with both recent immigrants and home-grown Euro-American Buddhists.

If one were to visit American cities and towns, as my student researchers have in the last two years, much of this changing landscape would still be invisible, which is one reason most of this comes as a surprise to many Americans. The prayer room of a newly forming Muslim community is in the garage of a home purchased by the community, in a commercial office building, or in a shopping plaza. One of the Shiite mosques in Houston is in a former athletic club, given to the community by a donor; its Qur'an classes on Sundays are held in the squash courts. The Kwan Um Sa Buddhist Temple, one of the oldest of the Korean Buddhist temples in Los Angeles, is in the spacious second floor quarters of an old Masonic Hall with its plush red chairs and, now, its golden images of the Buddha. The Hindu Satsang Mandali in Stockton, California meets in the hallways and rooms of a suite in a commercial building. The enormous Muslim Community Center in Chicago where over 1,000 Muslims gather weekly for the Jum'ah prayers is a former movie theatre.

This is the invisible change. There are thousands of small communities of immigrants that gather, trying to maintain for themselves and preserve for their children the traditions of faith that link them together culturally. They meet at first in living rooms or rented Knights of Columbus Halls, then perhaps in a building acquired for the specifically religious and cultural use of the community. A church may be ideal because it is already zoned for religious use. The Richmond Hill Sikh gurdwara in Queens meets in a former Methodist church. In Allston, Massachusetts, a Korean Zen community with martial arts as part of its meditation practice, has created a spacious zendo in the sanctuary of what was formerly a Baptist church. In Lynn, the Cambodian Buddhist community has acquired a Methodist church for its first home. An African American Muslim community in Dorchester meets in a building that was a church, then a synagogue and is now the Masjid al Qur'an. On the whole, a passerby would not notice 90 percent of the thousands of Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim religious centers in our cities and towns.

In the last decade, however, the new religious landscape has started to become visible. Hindus began building traditional Hindu temples, sited on hills like the Sri Venkatesvara temple in Penn Hills outside Pittsburgh, the Rama temple on a hill in the Chicago suburb of Lemont, or the Balaji Temple in the Malibu Hills of California. They built suburban temples in Boston, Atlanta and Albany, in Lanham, Maryland, and San Antonio, Texas. The white temple towers are covered with the images of the gods and goddesses. Buddhist temples are also being built and therefore becoming visible in a new way: the Providence Zen Center in Cumberland, R.I. the Chuang Yen monastery in Kent, New York; Wat Thai in North Hollywood, California. The most spectacular is the Hsi Lai Temple, the largest temple in the western hemisphere, built by the Chinese Pure Land community on a hilltop in Hacienda Heights, California. It covers 1.4 acres of land and includes a monastery, an educational wing, a conference center and a huge main shrine room with thousands of Buddhas set in niches around the walls.

The first mosque built as such in the United States was dedicated by Lebanese and Syrian immigrants in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1934. The Muslim population then was very small. When President Eisenhower attended the dedication of the National Mosque on Embassy Row in Washington in 1957, he spoke of the mosque as an expression of the important relation of the U.S. with the Muslim world. Today the U.S. is part of the Muslim world. There are new mosques in the United States designed and built by American architects, like the Islamic Center at

96th Street and Third Avenue in New York designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. In Toledo a mosque rises from the cornfield just off an Interstate highway. In New Orleans, Tempe, Houston and Portland there are examples of American Islamic architecture.

The second question of the Pluralism Project serves to remind all of us that the history of religions is not over -- it is still happening before our very eyes. What is Hinduism becoming in the U.S., in Pittsburgh and suburban Chicago? Religions are not fixed entities that are passed intact from generation to generation, culture to culture. On the contrary, religions are more like rivers -- dynamic, ever changing, splitting, converging. How these traditions are changing in the U.S. is fascinating research, making the comparative study of religion in 20th Century America a field of study in itself.

A Vietnamese monk in Phoenix told one of our researchers, "We must take the plant of Buddhism out of the pot and plant it in the soil of Arizona." What will Buddhism become as it takes root in American soil? As laity take over many of the roles of monks? As monks adapt their lives and monastic rules to demands of a Thai American congregation in North Hollywood? As women take on roles of teachers, roshis, Zen masters? We pose these as research questions, but the answers are still tentative, still in the making.

What will Islam become in the U.S. with so many Muslim cultures converging in Houston -- Pakistanis, Indians, Trinidadis and Syrians -- all now Americans and all Muslim? How will the emergence of pan-Islamic organizations like the Islamic Society of North America influence the history of American Islam? Will there be a more "ecumenical" Reformed Islam, somewhat like the Reform Judaism that developed so distinctively in the U.S.? What will Hinduism become in the U.S., where an ancient, complex tradition now has to develop means of transmission that are brand new, such as weekend classes or youth summer camps? Hindus from India who were never asked, "What do Hindus believe?" are now having to answer that question -- in their neighborhoods and offices, in schools and P.T.A. meetings. The Northern California Hindu Businessmen's Association has published a simple reference card to "The Ten Commandments of Hinduism" -- a real innovation in a tradition that has never been codified or formulated in such a way. In some countries of Asia, temples and mosques may have state or royal patronage; one did not belong to a particular temple as a "member." In the U.S., however, these religious communities need to recreate themselves with a network of voluntarism, with membership

lists for tax-exempt status, with newsletters and fund-raising dinners. In short, many of these communities have begun to generate the whole infrastructure of denominationalism.

Finally, with this new multireligious landscape, the United States is changing too. What will this wider range of cultures and religions mean to American life? This is our third question. The national identity crisis of the last five years, taking the form of the so-called "culture wars" and the current multiculturalism debate is about this question of our complex identity. Who do we mean when we say "we"? It is the most important question any people can ask. "We the people" of the United States is an increasingly diverse "we." In a world in which the "we" is being defined in ever more narrow ethnic or religious terms, the experiment of America is well worth watching.

There are public emblems of the changes that are happening. One of the U.S. astronauts on the Challenger was a Buddhist American. The newly elected mayor of Kuntz, Texas, not far from Houston, is a Muslim American. The senior vice-president of a major Boston technology think-tank is a Hindu American. On June 26, 1991, a Muslim imam, Siraj Wahhaj of Brooklyn, opened a session of the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time. In February of 1992, Imam W. Deen Mohammed of the Chicago-based American Muslim Mission opened a session of the U.S. Senate with prayer, again the first Muslim ever to do so.

We may be Christians in the majority, Jews and Muslims next, then Buddhists and Hindus, but the majority is pledged to preserve the foundational liberties, of all minorities. There are many, however, who do not recognize this wider and more complex "we." There are still advocates of prayer in the public schools, like the Christian Coalition and Catholic Alliance in New York City, who imagine that the prayer would be a generic JudeoChristian prayer -- not a prayer from the Rig Veda, the Qur'an, or the Pure Land school of Buddhism. And those who insist on teaching "creationism" as the view of the divine origin of creation imagine unthinkingly that this means teaching the God-centered creation story of Genesis. But what about the unfolding of creation from the lotus which grows from the navel of Lord Vishnu in the Hindu creation account? The new complexity of American religion sets these persistent old agendas in a brand new context.

In April of 1990 the city council of Savannah, Georgia issued a proclamation in which Islam is recognized to have been " a vital part of

the development of the United States of America and the city of Savannah." The proclamation acknowledges that "many of the African slaves brought to our country were followers of the religion of AlIslam." In light of this, the mayor and the city council of Savannah proclaimed that "the Religion of Al Islam be given equal acknowledgment and recognition as other religious bodies of our great city."

Festivals are also ready markers of a culture's presence. The Chinese New Year parade in New York is an old institution, but the Sikh Vaisakhi Day parade is new. The city that measures its official holidays by the suspension of alternate side of the street parking has added the two Islamic feast days -- Id al Fitr and Id al Adha -- to the official list. In San Francisco, the city issued a proclamation marking the end of the annual festival honoring the deity Ganesha. The article in *India Abroad* on September 6, 1991 read, "Mayor Art Agnos has issued a proclamation declaring September 22 Golden Gate Ganesha Visarjana Day. It is believed to be the first time that the mayor of a city in the United States had honored the Hindu deity."

Americans all carry coins with the motto *E Pluribus Unum* -- Out of many One. But given the more complex landscape of America -- culturally and religiously --America now has the opportunity and challenge to think anew about what that might mean. What is meant by this term pluralism?

First, I would want to insist that pluralism is not the sheer fact of this plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality. Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple -- splendid, colorful, maybe even threatening. Such diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe diversity. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to *participate* in pluralism. In the Elmhurst area of Queens, for example, a New York Times reporter found people from 11 countries on a single floor of an apartment building on Justice Avenue -- all living in isolation and fear -- each certain that they were the only immigrants there. This is diversity to be sure, but it is not pluralism.

Pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another. Where are those public spaces? Certainly universities where the curricular and non-curricular issues of multiculturalism are boiling on the front burner. Public schools and school boards have also become the venue of this encounter with the discussion of the new Houghton Mifflin social studies texts in California

and the publication of the "Declaration of Cultural Interdependence" in New York. Hospitals as well have had to confront critical issues of cultural and religious diversity in the face of crisis and death. Every one of these public institutions is experiencing the new tensions in appropriating a more complex multicultural sense of who the "American people" now are.

But where is the encounter that takes explicit account of the deep differences of religion? Religion is the unspoken "rword" in the multicultural discussion. It is present just beneath the surface in the heated multicultural debate. It is often in interfaith councils that religious issues can be raised to the surface and interreligious relations discussed as such. The last 10 years have seen the genesis of a few effective interfaith councils at the local and metropolitan level -- in Los Angeles and Washington, in Rochester, Wichita, Tulsa and San Antonio. Councils of churches have become councils of churches and synagogues. Then the Muslims joined, or the Buddhists and Hindus. Yet the process of developing this interfaith infrastructure is just now beginning in many cities. When a Hindu temple in Pittsburgh was vandalized and its sacred images smashed, or when a mosque in Quincy, Mass. was set ablaze by arson, or when a Vietnamese monk in Dallas found a cross burning in his front yard there was no infrastructure of relationships in place to respond.

Second, I would ask whether pluralism does not ask more of the encounter with one another than simply tolerance. Tolerance is a deceptive virtue. In fact, tolerance often stands in the way of engagement. Tolerance does not require us to attempt to understand one another or to know anything about one another. Sometimes tolerance may be all that can be expected. It is a step forward from active hostility, but it is a long way from pluralism.

Part of the problem is recognizing how little we do understand one another and how much our mutual perception is shaped by common stereotypes. Americans as a whole have a high degree of religious identification, according to every indication by George Gallup, and yet a very low level of religious literacy. Every high school graduate is required to dissect a frog, but every high school graduate is not required to know something about Islam -- the religion of a fifth of humankind. Few school systems have academic study of world religions built into the social studies curriculum. Few seminaries training leaders for churches and rabbinate have any required courses in the basics of other faiths -- even though the local context of ministry in the U.S. today will surely

require such fundamental literacy. One of our researchers working in Oklahoma City in the summer of 1991 spoke with a city official about her survey for the Pluralism Project. His interest aroused by her effort, he offered, "You know, there's a Jewish mosque right down the street!" It turned out to be a Greek Orthodox church.

Finally, pluralism is not simply relativism, but makes room for real commitment. In the public square or in the interfaith council, commitments are not left at the door. On the contrary, the encounter of a multicultural society must be the encounter of commitments, the encounter of each other with all our particularities and angularities. This is a critical point to see plainly, because through a cynical intellectual sleight of hand, some critics have linked pluralism with a valueless relativism -- an indiscriminating twilight in which "all cats are gray," all perspectives equally viable, and as a result, equally unconvincing.

The encounter of a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement, but achieving relationship. *Unum* does not mean uniformity. Perhaps the most valuable thing we have in common is commitment to a society based on the give and take of civil dialogue at a common table. Dialogue does not mean we will like what everyone at the table says. The process of public discussion will inevitably reveal much that various participants do not like. But it is a commitment to being at the table -- with one's commitments.

The United States is in the process of negotiating the meaning of its pluralism anew. In this new struggle to understand the American "we," the role of religion in our multicultural society will inevitably be discussed. The new religious communities of the U.S. are presently finding their own ways of participation in the public square. The American Muslim Council has been formed to be a focal point for the discussion of Muslim participation in the political process. At its meeting in February the issue of what a Muslim political action committee in a non-Muslim country might be was hotly discussed. The Islamic Medical Association brings the concerns of American Muslim doctors to bear on medical ethics. African American Islam -- both in its orthodox Sunni stream and in the Nation of Islam -- brings Islamic moral values to the crisis of drugs and violence. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists seeks to bring the insights of Buddhism and its philosophy of the interdependence of all things to bear on the environmental debate. The Jaina Association of North America considers the issues of animal rights and the extinction of species in

light of the long Jaina tradition of non-violence toward all creatures. As the questions and the answers of the new American religious communities are brought to the table in the various forums of public life, the meaning of "pluralism" reaching beyond the sheer fact of our plurality will be tested for its strength again and again.

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To contact the Pluralism Project, email [staff@pluralism.org](mailto:staff@pluralism.org). Please write to us with suggestions about new books, articles, or sites to include, with announcements of conferences or special events, or with corrections.

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# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## The Chronicle Review

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June 27, 2010

### Wrestling With One God or Another

*By Stephen Prothero*

Every year I tell my Boston University undergraduates that there are two worthy pursuits for college students. One is preprofessional: preparing for a career that will put food on the table and a roof overhead. The other is more personal: finding big questions worth asking, which is to say, questions that cannot be answered in one lecture, one semester, or even a lifetime. What is my purpose in life? What will happen to me when I die? How do things come into being? How do they cease to be?

Students bring into college classrooms big questions of that sort. Just as predictably, many professors try to steer them toward smaller questions, which can be asked and answered on a final exam. But the students have it right: In this case, bigger is better.

When I was younger, I thought I had the answers to the big questions. I now know I didn't even have the questions right. If, as Muhammad once said, "Asking good questions is half of learning," I was at best a half-wit. Today I try to follow the advice of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke to "love the questions themselves," not least those from the American mystic Walt Whitman:

*What saw you to tell us?*

*What stays with you latest and deepest? Of curious panics,*

*Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains?*

There are all sorts of reasons to wrestle with the big questions of

the world's religions. One is civic. It is impossible today to make sense of either nation or world without reckoning with the extraordinary influence, for good and ill, of religious ideas and institutions. But there are also personal reasons for cultivating religious literacy, including the fact that such learning empowers you to enter into a wonderful multimillennial conversation about birth and death, faith and doubt, meaning and confusion.

The philosopher Richard Rorty has called religion a conversation stopper, and who hasn't had a conversation run aground on the rocks of dogma? For many of my students, however, religion serves as a conversation starter. We human beings ask questions. We want to know why. Our happiness depends upon it (and, of course, our misery). To explore the great religions is to stand alongside Jesus and the Buddha, Moses and Muhammad, and to look out at a whole universe of questions with curiosity and awe. It is to meander, as all good conversations do, from topic to topic, question to question. Does God exist? Does evil? Do we? Why are we here? Where are we going? How are we to live?

When people ask me how I became a professor of religious studies, I usually say that I discovered the study of religion just as I was losing the Christian faith of my youth, and that the discipline gave me a way to hang in with religious questions (which continued to fascinate me) without any presumption that the answers were close at hand. When, to paraphrase St. Augustine, I became "a question to myself," even bigger questions called out to me, and my conversation with the great religions began.

One of the most common misconceptions about those religions is that they plumb the same depths and ask the same questions. They do not. Only religions that see God as all good ask how a good God can allow thousands to die in earthquakes and tsunamis. Only religions that believe in souls ask whether your soul exists before you are born and what happens to it after you die. And only religions that think we have one soul ask after "the soul" in the

singular.

Every religion, however, asks after the human condition. Each seeks to answer the sorts of questions that lie at the heart of the humanities. Here we are in human bodies. What now? What next? How to become a human being?

It is easy to imagine that the task of the great religions is not to make us human but to make us something else. This world is not our true home; being human is not our true calling. So it is religion's job to transport us to heaven or nirvana or *moksha*; Christianity will transfigure us into saints, Buddhism into bodhisattvas, Hinduism into gods.

But the metamorphosis offered by the great religions is often less dramatic than spinning golden gods out of human straw. Even in traditions of escape from the sin and suffering of this world, religion works not so much to help us flee from our humanity as to bring us home to it. "The glory of God," wrote the second-century Roman Catholic bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons, "is a human being fully alive." Or, as the modern Confucian scholar Tu Weiming puts it, "We need not depart from our selfhood and our humanity to become fully realized."

Of course, we are born human beings, but only in the most trivial sense. Often our humanity lies ahead of us—an achievement rather than an inheritance, and a far-from-trivial achievement at that. Yes, Christianity tells us we are sinners and calls us to be something else. But Christians have not typically affirmed that Jesus took on a human body only to save us from our sins. Among the purposes of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is to show us how to inhabit a human body, and to demonstrate that being human, too, is sacred. Other religions can also be understood in this light. In Islam the fact that Muhammad is emphatically not divine does not prevent him from serving as the model for humanity par excellence. In Taoism, the sages show us how to act as we really are, which is

natural, spontaneous, and free.

One of the greatest stories ever told is also one of the oldest: the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Gilgamesh is a god/man, king of Uruk, a city dweller and guardian of civilization. Enkidu is an animal/man, dressed in animal skins, a forest dweller and threat to civilization who runs with wild beasts. The story of these two men—a sort of *On the Road* for the third millennium BC—gets going when, during their initial encounter, they wrestle to a draw and become fast friends. Soon they are casting themselves into the sorts of adventures that virile young men have forever imagined, tales that only forests and monsters can bring. And when one of those monsters comes bearing death, Gilgamesh goes on a quest for immortality.

Like any classic, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is many tales tucked into one, but among other things it is a meditation on how to become a human being. As the story opens, Gilgamesh the god/man thinks himself superior to other humans, while Enkidu the animal/man thinks himself inferior. As the story progresses, each becomes a human being. Enkidu seems to become human by having sex with a woman, who then washes and shaves his hairy body, while Gilgamesh seems to become human by watching his friend die and grieving his passing. Eros and Thanatos, as Freud might say: the sex urge and the death urge, two sides of being human.

A few years ago, when "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets were colonizing evangelical wrists across America, a friend of mine started making "What Would You Do?" bracelets. Forget what Jesus would do. What would Joseph or Katie do? Inside the packing boxes for the bracelets, my friend tucked sayings from various thinkers about finding and following your own path. Almost all religions intimate that what God or Heaven wants for us is simply to become ourselves: The 18th-century Hasidic rabbi Zusya believed that when he reached the next world, God would not ask him, "Why were you not Moses?" but "Why were you not Zusya?" Kristofer

Marinus Schipper wrote in *The Taoist Body*, "'The Tao has ten thousand gates,' say the masters, and it is up to each of us to find our own."

To explore the great religions is to wander through those gates. It is to enter into Hindu conversations on the logic of karma and rebirth, Christian conversations on the mechanics of sin and resurrection, and Taoist conversations on flourishing here and now (and perhaps forever). It is also to encounter rivalries between Hindus and Muslims in India, between Jews and Muslims in Israel, and between Christians and Yoruba practitioners in Nigeria.

Each of those religious rivals offers a different vision of "a human being fully alive." Each offers its own distinctive diagnosis of the human problem and its own prescription for a cure. Each offers its own techniques for reaching its religious goal, and its own exemplars for emulation. Muslims say pride is the problem; Christians say salvation is the solution; Confucians emphasize education and ritual; Buddhism's exemplars are the *arhat* (for Theravadins), the bodhisattva (for Mahayanists), and the lama (for Tibetan Buddhists).

I do not believe that Islam and Christianity are fated for battle in a "clash of civilizations." But it is fantasy to pretend that they are in essence the same, or that their disagreements with Judaism are trivial. God may be one to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but their G-d, their Christ, and their Allah make very different demands on their followers.

It is of course possible to overemphasize these differences, and the great religions do converge at points. Some of the questions they ask overlap, as do some of the answers. And all their adherents are human beings with human bodies and human failings, so each of the great religions needs to attend to our embodiment and to the human predicament, not least by defining what it is to be fully alive.

But religious folk go about this task in very different ways. Confucians believe that we become fully human by entwining ourselves in intricate networks of social relations. Taoists believe we become fully human by disentangling ourselves from social relations. Muhammad's three core human qualities, according to the Islam scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, are piety, combativeness, and magnanimity. The Buddha may have been magnanimous, but he was far from pious. In fact, he didn't even believe in God. And Jesus may have been magnanimous, too, but when combat called, he turned the other cheek. If the Tao has ten thousand gates, so do the great religions.

In *The World's Religions*, the best-selling course book in the history of religious studies (at 2.5 million sold), Huston Smith speaks of the great religions as different paths up the same mountain. "It is possible to climb life's mountain from any side, but when the top is reached the trails converge," he writes. "At base, in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organizational structure, the religions are distinct. ... But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons." Today's so-called new atheists also look beyond religious differences. For Christopher Hitchens and friends, however, the great religions share not the same truth and beauty but the same idiocy and ugliness. What the new atheists and the old liberal universalists share is a refusal to wrestle with religious diversity. Rather than ten thousand gates, they see only one.

Such thinking is ideological rather than analytical. In the case of the new atheists, it starts with the desire to denounce the worst in religion. In the case of the perennialists, it starts with the desire to praise the best in religion. Neither of those desires serves our understanding of a world in which religious traditions are at least as diverse as political, economic, and social arrangements. It does not serve diplomats or entrepreneurs working in India or China to be told that Hindus and Confucians are equally idiotic. It does not serve soldiers in the Middle East to be told that the Shia Islam of Iran is essentially the same as the Sunni Islam of Saudi Arabia, or

that Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Israel do not disagree fundamentally on matters of faith or practice.

At the dawn of the 20th century, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. DuBois prophesied that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line." In the wake of September 11, Eboo Patel, of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, suggested that religion is the problem of the 21st century. Whether we are Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, or nonbelievers, we need to reckon with our religion problem, not least by listening to the big questions that adherents are asking.

When Americans began to wrestle with the challenges of race and ethnicity, many suggested that the only way forward was to create a colorblind society, in which all human beings are one. Today it is widely recognized that a firmer foundation for interracial and interethnic civility is a robust understanding of, and respect for, racial and ethnic differences. The realm of religion requires no less understanding of diversity, and no less respect.

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## Christianity and Religious Pluralism - Are There Multiple Ways to Heaven?

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Written by Rick Wade

*Rick Wade takes a hard look at the inconsistencies of religious pluralism. He concludes that if Christ is a way to heaven there cannot be other ways to heaven. Whether Christianity is true or not, pluralism does not make rational sense as it considers all religious traditions to be essentially the same.*

### **Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?**

In a humorous short article in which he highlighted some of the silly beliefs people hold today, Steve Turner wrote, "We believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation sin heaven hell God and salvation."[1](#)

It is the common belief today that all religions are basically the same. They may *look* different—they may differ with respect to holy books or forms of worship or specific ideas about God—but at the root they're pretty much the same. That idea has become so deeply rooted that it is considered common knowledge. To express doubt about it draws an incredulous stare. Obviously, anyone who thinks one religion is the true one is close-minded and benighted! More than that, the person is clearly a bigot who probably even hates people of other religions (or people with no religion at all). Now, this way of thinking is very seldom formed by serious consideration of the issues, I believe (although there are knowledgeable scholars who hold to it), but that doesn't matter. It is part of our cultural currency and is held with the same conviction as the belief that planets in the solar system revolve around the Sun and not Earth.

On the surface at least, it's clear enough that the various religions of the world are different. Theists believe in one personal God; Hindus believe in many gods; atheists deny any God exists. Just on that issue alone, the differences are obvious. Add to that the many beliefs about the dilemma of the human race and how it is to be solved. Why don't people understand the significance of these differences? On the scholarly level, the fundamental objection is this. It is believed that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) is too different from us for us to know him (or her or it). Because of our limitations, he couldn't possibly reveal himself to us. Religious writings, then, are merely human attempts at explaining religious experience without actually being objectively true.

Philosopher John Hick wrote that this is really a problem of language. Statements about God don't have the same truth value as ones about, say, the weather, because "there is no . . . agreement about how to determine the truth value of statements about God."[2](#) We use religious language because it is meaningful to us, but there is really no way to confirm the truth of such talk. Because we can't really know what the truth is about God, we do our best to guess at it. For this reason, we are not to suggest that our beliefs are true and others false.

On the more popular level, the loss of confidence in being able to know religious and moral truths which comes

from academia and filters through the media, is teamed up with an inclusivist attitude that doesn't want anyone left out—that is, if there are any truths to be known.

I want to take a look at the issue of religious pluralism, the belief that there are many valid ways to God. We'll start with some definitions and a reminder of what historical Christianity teaches about God and us and how we can be reconciled to Him.

## Starting Points

There are three basic positions on the question of the relation of Christianity to other religions. The historic view is called *exclusivism*. That word can be a real turn-off to people because we live in an inclusivistic era. What it means in this context is that the claim of Christianity that Jesus is the only way means that all other ways to God are excluded. If Jesus is the only way to the one true God, then no other claims can be true.

Another view on the matter is *inclusivism*. This is the belief that, while salvation is made possible only by the cross of Christ, it can be obtained without hearing the gospel. Even people who are externally part of other religions traditions can be saved. This is a temptation for Christians who are convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but don't like the idea that there are people who haven't heard the gospel who thus cannot be saved.

By religious *pluralism*, we mean the belief that all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) are valid as ways to relate to God. There is nothing unique about Christ; He was one of many influential religious teachers and leaders. This is the position I'll be considering in this article.

Before looking at pluralism, it would be good to review the historic Christian understanding of salvation to bring the contrast into bold relief.

## One God

The Bible is clear that there is one God. Through Isaiah the prophet God said, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God" (Is. 45:5a; see also 43:10; 44:6).

Beyond this, it's important to note that, philosophically speaking, it is impossible that there could be two (or more) "Gods" like the God of the Bible. Scripture is clear that God is everywhere present at once, so there can't be a truly competing presence (Ps. 139:7-12). God is capable of doing whatever He wills. There can be no ultimate interference by another deity. "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths," says the Psalmist (135:6). Or more succinctly, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:3; see also Dan. 4:35). How could there be two Gods like this? They would have to be absolutely identical, since neither one could be interfered with. And if so, they would be the same God!

## One Savior

The Bible is also clear that there is only one Savior. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (Jn. 14:6). To the rulers and elders and scribes in Jerusalem, Peter declared, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

## Theological necessity

In addition, it was theologically necessary for salvation to come through Christ alone. In Hebrews chapter 9 we read that the death of the sacrifice was necessary. According to Hebrews chapter 7, the Savior had to be divine (see also 2 Cor. 5:21). And Hebrews 2:17 says the Savior had to be human. Jesus is the only one who fulfills those requirements.

## One more consideration

To this we can add the fact that the apostles never even hinted that people could be saved any other way than through Christ. It is this belief that has fueled evangelistic endeavors all over the world.

## Religious Pluralism Can't Accomplish Its Goal

Even on the surface of it, the notion of religious pluralism is contradictory. If we can't know that particular religions are true, how can we know that *any* are valid ways to God? The pluralist has to know that we can't know (which is an interesting idea in itself!), while also having confidence that somehow we'll be able to reach our goal through our particular beliefs and practices.

But that brings serious questions to the surface. Do all religions even *have* the same goal? That's an important issue. In fact, it's the first of three problems with religious pluralism I'd like to consider.

Can religious pluralism accomplish its goal? What do I mean by that? Two ideas are at work here. First, it is believed that we can't really know what is true about God; our religions are only approximations of truth. Second, if that is so, aren't we being high-handed if we tell a people that their religion isn't true? How can any religion claim to have *the* truth? To be intellectually honest, we need to consider all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) as equally valid. There is a personal element here, too. The pluralist wants to take the *people* of all religions seriously. Telling anyone his or her religion is false doesn't seem to signal that kind of respect. So the goal of which I speak is taking people seriously with respect to their religious beliefs.

I can explain this best by introducing a British scholar named John Hick and tell a little of his story.<sup>{3}</sup> Hick was once a self-declared evangelical who says he underwent a genuine conversion experience as a college student. He immediately began to associate with members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in England. Over time, however, his philosophical training and reading of certain New Testament scholars made him begin to have doubts about doctrinal matters. He also saw that, on the one hand, there were adherents of other religions who were good people, while, on the other, there were some Christians who were not very nice people but were sure of their seat in heaven. How could it be, he thought, that God would send these good Sikhs and Muslims and Buddhists to hell while saving those not-so-good Christians just because they believed in Jesus? Hick went on to develop his own understanding of religious pluralism and became probably the best-known pluralist in the scholarly world.

I relate all this to you to point out that, at least as far as the eye of man can see, Hick's motivation was a good one: he wanted to believe that all people, no matter what religious stripe, can be saved. Harold Netland, who studied under Hick and wrote a book on his pluralism, speaks very highly of Hick's personal character.<sup>{4}</sup> And isn't there something appealing about his view (again, from our standpoint)? Wouldn't we like everyone to be saved? And having heard about (or experienced directly) the violence fueled by religious fanaticism, it's easy to see why many people recoil against the idea that only one religion has the truth. We want everyone included! We want everyone to feel like his or her religious beliefs are respected and even affirmed!

The problem is that we are supposed to view our beliefs as *approximations* of truth, as somehow meaningful to us but not really true. All people are to be welcomed into the universal family of faith—but they are to leave at the door the belief that what they believe is true. It's as though the pluralist is saying, "It is really noble of you to be so committed to your faith. Of course, we know that little of what you believe can be taken as truth, but that's okay. It gives meaning to your life." Or in other words, "We want you to feel validated in your religion, even though your religious doctrines aren't literally true."

To be quite honest, I don't feel affirmed by that. My religious belief is completely undermined by this idea. If Jesus isn't the only way to God, Christianity is a complete lie, and I am believing in vain.

My belief is that salvation—the reconciliation of persons to the one, true trinitarian God—has been made possible by Jesus, *and* that I *know* this to be the case. In his first epistle, John wrote: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). If I can't know this to be true, the promises of Scripture are only wishes. In that case, my hope for eternity is no more

secure than crossing my fingers and saying I hope it won't rain this weekend. We are all, in short, forced to abandon our notions of the validity of our religious beliefs and accept the skepticism of the pluralist. And I don't feel affirmed by that.

For my money, to be told I might be very sincere but sincerely wrong if I take my beliefs as true in any literal sense is like being condescendingly patted on the head. To be honest, I take such a notion as arrogance.

So my first objection to religious pluralism is that it does not accomplish its goal of making me feel affirmed with respect to my religious beliefs beyond whatever emotional fulfillment I might get from pretending the beliefs are true.

### **Religious Pluralism Doesn't Make Sense**

My second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. Let me explain.

Christianity is a confessional religion. In other words, there are particular beliefs we confess to be true, and it is partly through confessing them that we are saved. Is that surprising? Aren't we saved by faith, by putting our trust in Christ? Yes, but there are specific things we are supposed to believe. It isn't just believing *in*; it's also believing *that*. For example, Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe *that I am he* you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:23-24). And then there's Paul's clear statement that "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). So what we believe is very important despite what some are saying now about how Christianity is a relationship and how doctrine isn't all that important.

Back to my point. Christians who know what the Bible teaches and the basics of other religions find themselves staring open-mouthed at people who say that all religions are basically the same. How could anyone who knows anything about the major religions of the world even think such a thing? I suspect that most people who say this do *not* know the teachings of the various religions. They have some vague notions about religion in general, so they reduce these great bodies of belief to a few essentials. Don't all religions believe in a higher power or powers? Isn't their function just to give meaning to our lives? Don't they all typically include such things as prayer, rituals of one kind or another in public and private worship, standards for moral living, holy books, and the like?

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has said something like this: Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different, but just the opposite is true. People believe there are some core beliefs and practices such as those I just named which are common to all religions, and that religions are different only on the surface. Muslims have the Koran; Christians have the Bible; Jews have the Torah; Hindus have the Bhagavad Gita. Muslims pray five times a day; Christians pray at church on Sundays and most anytime they want during the week. Buddhists have their shrines; Jews their synagogues; Hindus their temples; Muslims their mosques; and Christians their churches. So at the core, the same; on the surface, different.

But just the opposite is true! It is on the *surface* that there is similarity; that is why we can immediately look at certain bodies of beliefs and practices and label them "religion." They aren't identical, but they are similar enough to be under the same category, "religion." On the surface we see prayers, rituals, holy books, etc. It's when we dig down to the *essential* beliefs that we find contradictory differences!

For example, Islam is theistic but is unitarian while Christianity is trinitarian. Hindus believe we are not true individual selves but are parts of the All, while orthodox Jews believe we are individuals created in the image of God. Muslims believe salvation comes through obedience to Allah, while Buddhists believe "salvation" consists of spinning out of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into nirvana.

No, religions are *not* essentially the same and only superficially different. At their very core they are drastically

different. So while pluralists might take the religious person seriously, they don't take his or her *beliefs* seriously. How can all these different beliefs be true in any meaningful sense? How can the end of human existence be *both* nirvana *and* heaven or hell? Pluralists have to reduce all these beliefs to some vague possibility of an afterlife of some kind; they have to empty them of any significant content.

So what we believe to be true, pluralists know isn't. Isn't it interesting that the pluralist is insightful enough to know what millions of religious adherents don't! That's a strange position to take given that the heart of pluralism is the belief that we can't know what is ultimately true about God!

It is for this reason that my second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. It claims that our different beliefs are essentially the same, which is false on the surface of it. And it claims that the differences result from the fact that we can't know what is true, while the pluralist acts like he or she *can* know what is true.

### **Pluralism Is Incompatible with Christianity**

Religious pluralism may well be *the* most common attitude about religion in America. You might be wondering, Aren't there a lot of Christians in America? According to the polls, one would think so. But I dare say that if you polled people in your church, especially young people, you would find more than a few who are religious pluralists. They believe that, while Christianity is true for them, it isn't necessarily true for other people. Is pluralism a legitimate option for Christians? In short, no.

This, then, is my third objection to religious pluralism, namely, that religious pluralism is incompatible with Christianity because it demands that Christians deny the central truths of Scripture. If religious pluralism is true, Jesus' claims to deity and biblical teaching about His atoning death and resurrection cannot be true.

The Bible is clear that salvation comes through accepting by faith the finished work of Jesus who is the only way to salvation. Paul told the Ephesians that at one time they "were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (2:12). Without Christ they were without God. He told the Romans that righteousness came through Jesus and the atoning sacrifice He made (5:6-10, 17). Jesus said plainly that "no one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:6). Because pluralism denies these specifics about salvation, it is clearly at odds with Christianity.

There is a more general truth that separates Christianity and pluralism, namely, that Christianity is grounded in specific historical events, not abstract religious ideas. Pluralists, as it were, line up all the major, enduring religions in front of them and look for similarities such as those we have already noted: prayers, rituals, holy books, and so on. They *abstract* these characteristics and say, "Look. They're all really the same because they do and have the same kinds of things." But that won't do for Christianity. It is not just some set of abstract "religious" beliefs and practices. It is grounded in specific historical events.

This is a crucial point. The historicity of Christianity is critical to its truth or falsity. God's project of salvation is inextricably connected with particular historical events such as the fall, the flood, the obedience of Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the Law, the fall of Israel and Judah, the return to Israel—all events leading to Jesus, a historical person who accomplished our salvation through a historical event. It is through these events that God declared and carried out His plans, and nowhere do we read that He would do so with other people through other events and teachings. The truth of Christianity stands or falls with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and their meaning revealed by God. If the resurrection is historically false, "we are to be pitied more than all men," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:19). If this *was* God's way, and Jesus declared Himself to be the *only* way, then no other way is available.

One thing the church must *not* do is let any of its members think that their way is only one way. This isn't to condone elitism or condescension or discrimination against others, even though that's what a lot of people believe today. That believing in the exclusivity of Christ does *not* necessarily result in an attitude of elitism is seen in Jesus

Himself. His belief that He was and is the only way to the Father is clear, but few people will criticize Him for having the attitudes just mentioned. It is a strange thing, isn't it? Christians who say Jesus is the only way are condemned as self-righteous bigots, while the One who boldly declared not His religion but *Himself* as the only way is considered a good man!

To sum up, then. Pluralism falls under its own weight, for it cannot affirm all religious beliefs as it seems to desire, and its belief that religions are all pretty much the same, even though their core teachings are contradictory, doesn't make sense. It also is certainly incompatible with Christianity which declares that the truth of its teachings stand or fall with specific historical events. And frankly, its claim to know that no religion really has the truth because such truth can't be known, comes off as a rather hollow declaration in light of the knowledge pluralists think they possess.

### Notes

1. Steve Turner, *Nice and Nasty* (Marshall and Scott, 1980).
2. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 3.
3. See John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralist World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chap. 1.
4. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1991), ix.

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