

A New "We": the Bridges That Bring Us Together

Diana Eck

A new pluralism has arisen in America. It is worldwide in its origins. It builds from economic and political realities to the reality of religious traditions that are East and West, North and South. As a paradigm for working together, religious pluralism has become "An energetic engagement with diversity, an active seeking of understanding, an encounter of commitment."

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It's a pleasure to speak at a student conference, because so much of my own work in the last five years has been driven by the change in the student body at Harvard University. It happened in about the fall of 1989, when I was teaching courses in world religions and in the religious traditions of India. I began to notice that the texture, complexity, and demography of my own classroom was changing.

The children of first-generation immigrants from South and East Asia had begun to change the demography

of the Harvard classroom, and suddenly my students were Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, and Muslim, in addition to the Christians, and Jews, and ardent secularists whom I had been teaching previously. It was because of this growing religious diversity that I shifted my own focus of work in the last five years from India to what is happening in America. I think that we Americans today are witnessing the history of religions being written before our very eyes. And today interfaith encounter and a new interfaith movement is becoming part of the reality of American cities and towns. I believe that it is very important to pay attention to this movement and to become involved with it.

This interfaith gathering of students convenes here in San Francisco during the observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations. It's important to remember that later in this summer we will also observe the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bomb. Both the UN and the atomic bomb have drastically reconstituted our world. I was born, in fact, in that halcyon month between the birth of the United Nations and the birth of the atomic bomb, so in a way we've grown up together, and there are several fiftieth anniversaries being celebrated this summer, mine among them.

There are many ways of describing the world scene as it has evolved in the last fifty years. There are alarming statistics on population growth and the growth of dire poverty and illiteracy; statistics on the growth of carbon monoxide emissions, the pollution of the seas, the stripping of the forests, and the extinction of species; and statistics on the growing rate of infant mortality, disease and death in children, prostitution, the sexual enslavement

of women, and the worldwide growth of the population of refugees. Above all, there is the growing recognition that these problems are interrelated. The word that increasingly describes this complexity and relatedness of the world is the word "interdependent," of which we hear so much these days. Our problems cannot be isolated from one another, nor can the people who hope to solve them. In 1987 a report was published called "Our Common Future," which I think should be required reading for all world leaders today. It was a report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, and it made clear the

ecological and economic interdependence of the world. For example, it looked at the transnational consequences of acid rain, deforestation, nuclear testing, and flooding: things that affect us regardless of our religion or our national boundaries. This is what the word "interdependent" means: each part is related to the whole. No nation, religious group, or people can hope to go it alone in solving these problems.

The birth of the atomic bomb and the birth of the UN signal the globalization of both the world's problems and their solutions in the late twentieth century. We're all in this together. In a series of lectures given at Oxford in the 1930s, the Hindu philosopher Radhakrishnan, who later became president of India, foresaw the coming global interdependence and challenged us to a new sense of global citizenship:

Now for the first time in the history of our planet, its inhabitants have become whole, each and every part of which is affected by the fortune of the other. Science and technology, without aiming at this result, have achieved this unity. Economic and political phenomena increasingly impose on us the obligation to treat the world as a unit. Currencies are linked, commerce is international, political fortunes interdependent, and yet the sense that humankind must become a community is still a casual whim, a vague aspiration, not generally accepted as a conscious ideal or an urgent practical necessity, moving us to feel the dignity of common citizenship and the call of common duty.

He spoke of what he called the lack of adjustment between the process of life which is increasingly interdependent and the ideology of life: the old habits, loyalties, and affections that are embodied so deeply today in our religious and national institutions. He said,

"The supreme task of our generation is to give a soul to the growing world consciousness."

That was in the 1930s. Neither his generation nor mine has begun to accomplish this task. The word "interdependence" means not only the relatedness of nations and economies but also the relatedness of peoples irrespective of their different religious and cultural traditions. Since religious interdependence is a reality of our world, interreligious dialogue is today a necessity.

Interreligious dialogue not only enables us to understand one

another and enriches our self-understanding as we seek the truth, but it is also the instrument of our common work: transforming the world in which we live. That is what we are about here. We all use terms like "peace" and "justice" in our religious traditions. We speak of the peace of the Lord as we embrace one another in our Christian churches; we greet one another with "salaam"; we say "shalom"; we say "Om, shanti, shanti, shanti," "peace, peace, peace." We speak of justice; we speak of Dharma. These terms are at the heart of our traditions, but they will be nothing but meaningless slogans of well-intentioned, separate tribes if they do not involve us all in a serious common commitment to a partnership in bringing peace-practice into being.

If our world were a village of a thousand people, what would it look like? Who would we be, religiously and geographically? Who would we be if we were to raise in this village a thousand people, just five times as many people as are here at this conference today? Who would we be in terms of economic justice? Sixty people in our village of a thousand would possess half the income; 500 of us would be hungry; 600 of us would live in shanty towns; and 700 of us would be illiterate. This raises the question of who do we mean when we use this word "we"? To whom do we refer? the people of a particular religious tradition? Americans? people who are citizens of a common world whose future we share in common? Imagining ourselves to be a village of a thousand people makes some things perfectly clear. If sixty people had half the income, we would not call them successful. We would call them unjust.

How often does our use of the term "we" link us together rather than divide us? I think the most important question any of us can

ask is who do we mean when we say "we"? This "we" issue is not simply a sociological issue, though it is increasingly important in the complex "we" of the United States of America. It's also an important religious and theological issue.

One of my favorite novels is one written by Chaim Potok, a Jewish novelist, called *A Book of Lights*. In this book, a rabbi serving in Korea during the Korean War travels in Japan with a friend and together they visit a shrine. We're not told whether it is a Buddhist or a Shinto shrine, but they see a man deeply in prayer with his

hands folded and eyes closed, rocking slightly. The rabbi turns to his friend and says, "Do you think our God is listening?" The friend replies, "I don't know. I never really thought about it." And the rabbi says, "If not, why not? And if so, then what are we all about?"

This is the theological question that is before each of us today, no matter which religious tradition is ours. Is "our God" listening to the prayer of the other? Is "our God," whatever we mean by that term, listening? If not and there are many people who would give that answer why not? Do we not affirm, as Christians, Jews, or Muslims, that the one we call God created everything on Earth? How could it be that such a God would not listen to the prayer of a man so ardently and deeply in prayer? What kind of stingy God would that be? Or, if we believe "our God" is listening, then the question is thrust back upon us: who are we? Who are we who, in our various ways, in our different religious communities, have so exclusively claimed the ear of God? Who are we and what are we all about?

Something else has happened in the period since the formation of the United Nations that has deeply transformed the world in which we live: the worldwide migration of peoples, both as refugees and as immigrants. Approximately two percent of the world's population today lives outside the country of their birth, and so we can no longer imagine a color-coded map of the world locating its ethnicities and its religions as if they were to be found in separate parts of the world. The Muslim world no longer extends from Indonesia to Morocco. Today, London is part of the Muslim world. The Bay Area is today part of the Muslim world. The great fact of

late twentieth-century America, with the new migration of peoples, is the marbling of the world's peoples and religious traditions. This marbling effect is apparent at this very conference as a microcosm of the United States today.

One of the things the Pluralism Project at Harvard undertook was to document the ways in which the new immigration has changed the religious composition of the United States. We scarcely know who "we" are when we say "we the people of the United States of America." Do we mean we Buddhists, like the Buddhist astronaut who died on the Challenger, or we Muslims,

like the Muslim mayor of a small Texas town? Since 1965, America has truly become a multireligious society, and we are still racing to catch up with that reality.

In the Boston area alone, our researchers found that there are some twenty mosques in the Islamic Council of New England. There are also dozens of Buddhist centers, some of them Euro-American centers that grew up in the seventies and are vibrant expressions of a new form of American Buddhism. Others are the centers of immigrant Buddhists—the Cambodians in Lynn and Lowell, the Vietnamese in Roslindale and Revere, and the Chinese in Lexington and Quincy. There are Hindu temples like the Sri Lakshmi Temple in suburban Ashland, which was designed by Hindu temple architects, built by a Wellesley engineering firm, and consecrated with waters from the Ganges River in India and the Mississippi, Missouri, and Colorado rivers in the United States. Hindu deities are now residents of the Boston suburbs.

So who are "we"? I was thumbing through my database for the Bay Area to see what our researchers who spent two summers here had found out. They visited nearly 150 Buddhist temples, 44 Hindu temples, 80 mosques, and 14 gurdwaras, as well as centers of worship and culture for the Jains, the Taoists, the Confucians, and the Baha'is. They found Zoroastrians in San Jose; a fabulous Sikh gurdwara in El Cerrito; Hindu temples in San Leandro, Fremont, and Livermore; and Islamic centers and mosques all over Oakland.

If we look at the wider growth of these communities in the United States, we can see that Hinduism is now taking root in America with large temples in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, and Denver. Hinduism is now an American religious tradition.

Buddhist communities that scarcely know one another in Asia now come together in the Sangha Council of Southern California. Here Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Burmese Buddhists gather together to attempt to discover a new American definition of what it means to be Buddhist. If we go back more than two hundred years, between 10 and 50 percent of the Africans who were brought as captives to the United States were Muslim. America has very old Muslim roots. In Dearborn, Michigan, earlier this spring, I spent a few days in a Muslim corn-

munity, originally immigrants from Lebanon, that has been in the United States since the turn of the century. We as a people are now beginning to claim this multireligious heritage. One of the speakers at this conference, Imam W. D. Mohammed, was one of the first Muslim imams to open a session of the U.S. Congress with prayer.

Two years ago, during the centennial of the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, people from all of the world's religious traditions were brought together. What was most astounding about this Parliament was not that there were people from all over the world there. There are world gatherings at every turn today. What was most astounding about it was that it represented a public manifestation of a brand new religious America. There were Zoroastrians from Hinsdale, Illinois, leading the procession, followed by Sikhs from Palatine, Muslims from Skokie and Houston, and Hindus from Pittsburgh and San Jose. This was a new religious America manifest in Chicago, and it charges all of us with the responsibility of envisioning the creation of an interfaith infrastructure that is not simply international, but that has vibrant local and regional roots.

If we ask how "we" are doing, both worldwide and in the United States, with this new georeligious reality, there are people who would say (and you don't have to be a cynic to agree with them) that, far from giving a soul to the growing world consciousness of the twentieth century, religion has functioned to divide and splinter us. They might also say that the forces of narrow-mindedness, chauvinism, and what some call religious fundamentalism are rampant in virtually every religious tradition; that identity is being minted in smaller and smaller coins; that ethnic and religious

tribalism is on the rise; that we cling to narrower and narrower identities with tighter and tighter fists; that the fortress mentality that separates us from one another is far stronger than the creation of a wider "we" to bring us together; that we view one another with more and more fear and suspicion; and that the separation of "us" from "them" is becoming more and more prominent in virtually every corner of the world. Unfortunately, this is not a faulty analysis. There is plenty of evidence to support it. Look at the Bosnians and Serbs; the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in India; or the Hutus and the Tutsis in Central Africa.

However, you don't have to go somewhere else in the world to find a spirit of animosity and fear in the face of religious and cultural difference. You can find plenty of it right here in the United States. In Monroeville, just outside Pittsburgh, for example, a Hindu temple was built and consecrated in the early eighties by the Indian community as a whole, with sanctuaries for Hindu deities, an altar for the Jains, and an altar for the Sikhs on which they kept the Guru Granth Sahib. It was the second such temple to be built near Pittsburgh. In 1983, vandals swinging clubs and throwing buckets of paint desecrated that temple. They smashed the Hindu deities, tore up the Guru Granth Sahib, and scrawled the word "leave" across the altar. Or consider the example of the temple in Houston. While it was being built in 1987, hundreds of its little decorative spires were broken off. Or again, in the summer of 1993, in Portland, Maine, one of our Pluralism Project researchers followed the struggles of a Cambodian Buddhist community that had spent several years raising money to buy a tiny apartment to serve as its Buddhist temple. One night the apartment was vandalized by people swinging axes, chopping down the door, desecrating the Buddha hall, strewing its entire contents across the yard, and again, scrawling the words "Dirty Asian Chinks, go home." In Yuba City, California, just last summer, a nearly completed mosque was burned to the ground.

There is no shortage of hate crimes sparked by religious animosity in the U.S., the U.K., France, or Rwanda, and yet I am here to bear witness to the other side of the story as well. A careful observer of the world of religion today would have to report that there is not only a rise in religious chauvinism and fundamentalism, but on the other side of the ledger, there is a new movement toward pluralism,

interreligious dialogue, and interfaith encounter: a movement of people of various religious traditions deliberately setting out to meet one another, a movement so important that when the retrospective history of the twentieth century is written, it will surely be seen as one of the most important movements of the century.

We can see numerous examples of this. In the the early part of this century, the International Association for Religious Freedom first convened, a network of religious people who still today are

concerned with issues of religious freedom from a multireligious point of view. Another example is the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), which has made a concerted effort to bring religious people and leaders together to address peace issues. Through networks in Canada, the United States, Europe, South Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the WCRP brings an active and credible interfaith presence to the United Nations, participating in UN conferences on human rights, the rights of the child, population and the environment, and the social order. If one were to look at its possibilities for the world today, one would see that the WCRP also has a vibrant youth network. This youth network has sponsored peace busses across Canada and from London to Moscow, as well as groups of young Hindu and Muslim people who bicycle together from village to village all across India.

Perhaps even more important is the growth of local, urban, and suburban interfaith councils in virtually every major city in the United States. There are older interfaith networks like the Inter-religious Council of Southern California and the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, D.C. There are also interfaith councils in such cities as Lincoln, Nebraska; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rochester and Syracuse, New York; and in suburbs like Dupage County west of Chicago. These important networks of communication have to be deliberately constructed. After the Hebron Massacre of a year and a half ago, there was an interfaith gathering for prayer in Washington, D.C. Where? At the big Muslim Community Center in Silver Spring. The head of the Washington Board of Rabbis was able to go and speak; there were readers from the Hindu and the Sikh traditions. This interfaith gathering would simply not have been possible if the local urban

interfaith infrastructure of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington had not been in place already.

Increasingly, official bodies of different religious traditions join to make statements together at the time of incidents of violence. The joint statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the American Muslim Council after the bombing at the World Trade Center is one such example. Both Christians and Muslims joined in condemning any religious justification for vio-

lence. Intermonastic exchanges have developed between Benedictines, Tibetans, and Zen Buddhists, who meet not just for one-or two-day conferences but for weeks share spiritual life. Groups of Benedictines might spend a month with Tibetan monks and nuns in Dharmasala, India, or with Zen Buddhists in Japan, and then receive a return delegation of Buddhists to spend a month with them. Thomas Merton called this "the dialogue of those who have kept their silences."

There are also hundreds of local initiatives that provide evidence on the hopeful side of the roster. For example, in Fremont, California, in the East Bay area, St. Paul's United Methodist Church and the Islamic Society of the East Bay purchased property together. They broke the ground together, named their common frontage road "Peace Terrace," and are building a church and a mosque side by side. Last summer one of the Pluralism Project researchers studied a Sikh community in Hayward, California, that is worshipping in an Anglican Episcopal Church yet another example of two very different faiths sharing the same worship space. Last spring in Sharon, Massachusetts, a group of rabbis and Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christian clergy joined with the Muslim community to break ground for a new Islamic center.

This is the stuff of which the world we are entering must be made. The interfaith movement is worldwide. It is shallow in some places, deep in others, but it does exist. The infrastructure that will allow for effective communication, the kind of communication that we can take for granted, still needs to be strengthened, especially among young people. I've been to many interreligious conferences, and there are often the same people there, people who seem to

move around the world and attend international interfaith conferences. The energy of a worldwide, or even a nationwide, interfaith student movement is critical if all of us are to move into the next phase of interfaith cooperation. An interfaith infrastructure, like the infrastructure provided by bridges and communications networks is absolutely essential for living in a world in which we all depend upon one another as much as we do. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson has inves-

tigated the ways in which nations imagine themselves, even when citizens don't know each other personally, as most of us don't. He writes: "In the minds of each lives the image of their communion." The same kind of imagined community shapes our religious traditions. Now in the late twentieth century, the new imagined community that must come into being is an interreligious one. East and West are no more, and the borders of Christendom and the Islamic world cannot be defined by identifiable geographic borders. There are Sikh mayors in Britain and Muslim mayors in Texas. Recently, Samuel Huntington, a prominent political scientist from my own university spoke of the new geo-political reality of the world as what he called "the West and the rest." He proposed that civilizational identity will have a major role in the political realignment of the post-cold-war world. He envisions what he sees as a clash of civilizations. The Confucian, Islamic, and Hindu worlds will be forces to reckon with in the geopolitical arena in this clash of civilizations. Huntington and others are eager to reconceptualize the geopolitical world in the post-cold-war era, but are they right to see the confrontation and clash of religious-cultural blocs? I don't think so. I would ask critically: where is the Hindu world when Hindus have communities and temples in Lester, Durbin, Houston, Pittsburgh, and San Leandro? Where is the Muslim world when there are mosques in Leon, London, Chicago, Fremont, and every western city? The Islamic world is not somewhere else in some other part of the world. The Islamic world is here, in the Bay Area, in Chicago, in Houston. The proximity, the interrelation and interdependence of ancient civilizations and cultures, is the new reality of our world in the late twentieth century. This is the new georeligious reality: this

marbling of civilizations, this marbling of peoples, is creating new communities that will have to imagine themselves into being, across the lines of religion, ethnicity, and culture.

I have used this word "pluralism" several times, and in closing I would like to speak of it for a moment. What is pluralism? What does it mean to speak of pluralism as a way of characterizing our life together in the late twentieth century? I would like to make three brief points about pluralism. First, pluralism is not simply the fact of all this diversity. Diversity does not equal pluralism, but

pluralism, rather, is the energetic engagement with that diversity. Diversity doesn't have to affect me. I can sit down in Harvard Square and enjoy all the diversity that I want, but pluralism requires my participation, my energetic engagement, and my presence. Second, pluralism is not mere tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding. Tolerance is a deceptive virtue. You might even call it yesterday's virtue. If I tolerate you as a person of another faith, I don't have to know anything about you. As a basis on which to live in this village of a thousand people, a basis on which to construct a new sense of "we," tolerance is too minimal an expectation. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another by building bridges of exchange and dialogue. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for the world of religious difference in which we now live. Third and finally, pluralism is not mere relativism. In a society operating on the paradigm of pluralism, we do not have to leave our commitments to our religious traditions behind, because pluralism is the encounter of those commitments. We come to our common enterprise, all of us, with all of our angularities and with our deepest commitments. Our aim is not to reach an agreement, not to sign at the bottom of the page. Rather, our aim is to enter into relationship with one another, even if we disagree. In sum, pluralism is not an ideology, but a paradigm for working together in a world of religious difference, and the language of pluralism is the language of give and take, dialogue, encounter, traffic, criticism, and self-criticism.

The emerging interfaith infrastructure is critically in need of more energy and commitment. The political and military implications of our global interdependence have received the visible and financial attention of governments and international bodies. The world of

technology, business, and communications has put boundless energy into imagining and creating their transnational networks. MTV, Star TV, Zee TV, and CNN have formed a global information superhighway with fiber-optic cables and communications uplinked out of Hong Kong and downlinked all over Asia. But there is no sense of the soul in this growing world consciousnessno global sense of shared ethics to keep pace with the communications revolution. Our task is a revolutionary one: carefully to construct the forms of interreligious communication and coop-

eration that are the basic infrastructure we need in the world of the twenty-first century. The religious infrastructure lags far behind. It is extremely fragile compared to the infrastructure of communications and business. New patterns of interfaith cooperation still must be brought into being, not only internationally, but also regionally and locally. It is to imagine and then to create and strengthen these still fragile instruments of an interfaith infrastructure that all of us are called.