

A NEW  
RELIGIOUS  
AMERICA



How a “Christian Country” Has Become  
the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation

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## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION TO A NEW AMERICA



The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate highway. A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. A Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery with a hint of a Southeast Asian roofline is set in the farmlands south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In suburban Fremont, California, flags fly from the golden domes of a new Sikh gurdwara on Hillside Terrace, now renamed Gurdwara Road. The religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past thirty years, but most of us have not yet begun to see the dimensions and scope of that change, so gradual has it been and yet so colossal. It began with the “new immigration,” spurred by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, as people from all over the world came to America and have become citizens. With them have come the religious traditions of the world—Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Zoroastrian, African, and Afro-Caribbean. The people of these living traditions of faith have moved into American neighborhoods, tentatively at first, their altars and prayer rooms in storefronts and office buildings, basements and garages, recreation rooms and coat closets, nearly invisible to the rest of us. But in the past decade, we have begun to see their visible presence. Not all of us have seen the Toledo mosque or the Nashville temple, but we will see places like them, if we keep our eyes open, even in our own communities. They are the architectural signs of a new religious America.

For ten years I have gone out looking for the religious neighbors of a new America. As a scholar, I have done the social equivalent of calling up and inviting myself, a stranger, to dinner. I have celebrated the Sikh New Year's festival of Baisakhi with a community in Fairfax County, Virginia. I have feasted at the Vietnamese Buddhist "Mother's Day" in a temple in Olympia, Washington, and I have delivered an impromptu speech on the occasion of Lord Ram's Birthday at a new Hindu temple in Troy, Michigan. I have been received with hospitality, invited to dinner, welcomed into homes, shown scrapbooks of family weddings, and asked to return for a sacred thread ceremony or a feast day. In the early 1990s I mapped out an ambitious plan of research that I called the Pluralism Project, enlisting my students as hometown researchers in an effort to document these remarkable changes, to investigate the striking new religious landscape of our cities, and to think about what this change will mean for all of us, now faced with the challenge of creating a cohesive society out of all this diversity.

Our first challenge in America today is simply to open our eyes to these changes, to discover America anew, and to explore the many ways in which the new immigration has changed the religious landscape of our cities and towns, our neighborhoods and schools. For many of us, this is real news. We know, of course, that immigration has been a contentious issue in the past few decades. Today the percentage of foreign-born Americans is 10.4 percent, more than doubling in the thirty years since 1970, when it was 4.7 percent. The fastest growing groups are Hispanics and Asians. Between 1990 and 1999 the Asian population grew 43 percent nationwide to some 10.8 million, and the Hispanic population grew 38.8 percent to 31.3 million, making it almost as large as the black population. The questions posed by immigration are now on the front burner of virtually every civic institution from schools and zoning boards to hospitals and the workplace. How many customs and languages can we accommodate? How much diversity is simply too much? And for whom? We know that the term *multiculturalism* has crept into our vocabulary and that this term has created such a blaze of controversy that some people mistake it for a political platform rather than a social reality. But for all this discussion about immigration, language, and culture, we Americans have not yet really thought about it in terms of religion. We are surprised to discover the religious changes America has been undergoing.

We are surprised to find that there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church

USA, and as many Muslims as there are Jews—that is, about six million. We are astonished to learn that Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world, with a Buddhist population spanning the whole range of the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to Korea, along with a multitude of native-born American Buddhists. Nationwide, this whole spectrum of Buddhists may number about four million. We know that many of our internists, surgeons, and nurses are of Indian origin, but we have not stopped to consider that they too have a religious life, that they might pause in the morning for few minutes' prayer at an altar in the family room of their home, that they might bring fruits and flowers to the local Shiva-Vishnu temple on the weekend and be part of a diverse Hindu population of more than a million. We are well aware of Latino immigration from Mexico and Central America and of the large Spanish-speaking population of our cities, and yet we may not recognize what a profound impact this is having on American Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, from hymnody to festivals.

Historians tell us that America has always been a land of many religions, and this is true. A vast, textured pluralism was already present in the lifeways of the Native peoples—even before the European settlers came to these shores. The wide diversity of Native religious practices continues today, from the Piscataway of Maryland to the Blackfeet of Montana. The people who came across the Atlantic from Europe also had diverse religious traditions—Spanish and French Catholics, British Anglicans and Quakers, Sephardic Jews and Dutch Reform Christians. As we shall see, this diversity broadened over the course of three hundred years of settlement. Many of the Africans brought to these shores with the slave trade were Muslims. The Chinese and Japanese who came to seek their fortune in the mines and fields of the West brought with them a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions. Eastern European Jews and Irish and Italian Catholics also arrived in force in the nineteenth century. Both Christian and Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East. Punjabis from northwest India came in the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of them were Sikhs who settled in the Central and Imperial Valleys of California, built America's first gurdwaras, and intermarried with Mexican women, creating a rich Sikh-Spanish subculture. The stories of all these peoples are an important part of America's immigration history.

The immigrants of the last three decades, however, have expanded the diversity of our religious life dramatically, exponentially. Buddhists have

come from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Korea; Hindus from India, East Africa, and Trinidad; Muslims from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Nigeria; Sikhs and Jains from India; and Zoroastrians from both India and Iran. Immigrants from Haiti and Cuba have brought Afro-Caribbean traditions, blending both African and Catholic symbols and images. New Jewish immigrants have come from Russia and the Ukraine, and the internal diversity of American Judaism is greater than ever before. The face of American Christianity has also changed with large Latino, Filipino, and Vietnamese Catholic communities; Chinese, Haitian, and Brazilian Pentecostal communities; Korean Presbyterians, Indian Mar Thomas, and Egyptian Copts. In every city in the land church signboards display the meeting times of Korean or Latino congregations that nest within the walls of old urban Protestant and Catholic churches. While the central chapters of this book focus on the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim streams of America's religious life, old and new, it is important to hold in mind that these are but part of a far more complex religious reality of encyclopedic dimensions.

Through these same decades since the liberalization of immigration policy in 1965, the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition have raised the public profile of fundamentalist Christianity. The language of a "Christian America" has been voluminously invoked in the public square. However, I sense in some of the most strident Christian communities little awareness of this new religious America, the one Christians now share with Muslims, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. They display a confident, unselfconscious assumption that *religion* basically means Christianity, with traditional space made for the Jews. But make no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth.

In the past thirty years massive movements of people both as migrants and refugees have reshaped the demography of our world. Immigrants around the world number over 130 million, with about 30 million in the United States, a million arriving each year. The dynamic global image of our times is not the so-called clash of civilizations but the marbling of civilizations and peoples. Just as the end of the Cold War brought about a new geopolitical situation, the global movements of people have brought about a new georeligious reality. Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims are now part of the religious landscape of Britain, mosques appear in Paris and Lyons, Buddhist temples in Toronto, and Sikh gurdwaras in Vancouver. But nowhere, even

in today's world of mass migrations, is the sheer range of religious faith as wide as it is today in the United States. Add to India's wide range of religions those of China, Latin America, and Africa. Take the diversity of Britain or Canada, and add to it the crescendo of Latino immigration along with the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Filipinos. This is an astonishing new reality. We have never been here before.

The new era of immigration is different from previous eras not only in magnitude and complexity but also in its very dynamics. Many of the migrants who come to the United States today maintain strong ties with their homelands, linked by travel and transnational communications networks, e-mails and faxes, satellite phone lines and cable television news. They manage to live both here and there in all the ways that modern communications and telecommunications have made possible. When my own grandparents and great-grandparents left Sweden, they did not return every few years and never again heard the voices of those they had left behind. Indeed, only my paternal grandmother ever returned at all. But today's globalization enables an immigrant from India to read the *Times of India* every morning on the Internet, to subscribe to Indian cable news on the satellite dish, to bring artisans from rural India to work on Hindu temples in suburban America, and to return home for a family wedding. As our own identities become increasingly multilocal, the formation of complex national identities becomes increasingly challenging.

What will the idea and vision of America become as citizens, new and old, embrace all this diversity? The questions that emerge today from the encounter of people of so many religious and cultural traditions go to the very heart of who we see ourselves to be as a people. They are not trivial questions, for they force us to ask in one way or another: Who do we mean when we invoke the first words of our Constitution, "We the people of the United States of America"? Who do we mean when we say "we"? This is a challenge of citizenship, to be sure, for it has to do with the imagined community of which we consider ourselves a part. It is also a challenge of faith, for people of every religious tradition live today with communities of faith other than their own, not only around the world but also across the street.

"We the people of the United States" now form the most profusely religious nation on earth. But many, if not most, Christian, Jewish, or secular Americans have never visited a mosque or a Hindu or Buddhist temple. Many Americans are not so sure what Sikhs or Muslims believe, let alone Jains and Zoroastrians. Similarly, Muslim or Hindu Americans may have sketchy and stereotypical views of Christians and Jews. So

where do we go from here? It's one thing to be unconcerned about or ignorant of Muslim or Buddhist neighbors on the other side of the world, but when Buddhists are our next-door neighbors, when our children are best friends with Muslim classmates, when a Hindu is running for a seat on the school committee, all of us have a new vested interest in our neighbors, both as citizens and as people of faith.

As the new century dawns, we Americans are challenged to make good on the promise of religious freedom so basic to the very idea and image of America. Religious freedom has always given rise to religious diversity, and never has our diversity been more dramatic than it is today. This will require us to reclaim the deepest meaning of the very principles we cherish and to create a truly pluralist American society in which this great diversity is not simply tolerated but becomes the very source of our strength. But to do this, we will all need to know more than we do about one another and to listen for the new ways in which new Americans articulate the "we" and contribute to the sound and spirit of America.

#### ENVISIONING THE NEW AMERICA

President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the new immigration act into law on July 4, 1965, at the base of the Statue of Liberty. America's doors were opened once again to immigrants from all over the world. Since 1924 an extremely restrictive quota system had virtually cut off all immigration. Entry from Asia had always been extremely limited, beginning with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The scope of Asian exclusion expanded decade after decade to exclude Japanese, Koreans, and other "Asiatics" as well. Asian-born immigrants could not become citizens, argued the Supreme Court in the case of *Bhagat Singh Thind*. Thind was a Sikh, a naturalized citizen, who had served in World War I. Drawing on a 1790 statute, the court declared Asians to be outside the range of "free white men" who could become citizens. In 1923 he was stripped of his citizenship. The 1924 immigration law then barred from immigration anyone ineligible for citizenship, and that meant all Asians.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was linked in spirit to the Civil Rights Act passed just a year earlier. As Americans became critically aware of our nation's deep structures of racism, we also saw that race discrimination continued to shape immigration law, excluding people from what was then called the Asia-Pacific triangle. Early in his term President John F. Kennedy prepared legislation to "eliminate discrimina-



tion between peoples and nations on a basis that is unrelated to any contribution immigrants can make and is inconsistent with our traditions of welcome.”<sup>1</sup> Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, observed, “As we are working to remove the vestiges of racism from our public life, we cannot maintain racism as the cornerstone of our immigration laws.” And so began a new era of immigration and a new, complex, and vivid chapter in America’s religious life.

The framers of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights could not possibly have envisioned the scope of religious diversity in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. When they wrote the sixteen words of the First Amendment, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” they unquestionably did not have Buddhism or the Santería tradition in mind. But the principles they articulated—the “nonestablishment” of religion and the “free exercise” of religion—have provided a sturdy rudder through the past two centuries as our religious diversity has expanded. After all, religious freedom is the fountainhead of religious diversity. The two go inextricably together. Step by step, we are beginning to claim and affirm what the framers of the Constitution did not imagine but equipped us to embrace. Even so, the road is rocky.

In November of 1998, President Clinton sent a letter to the Sikh communities of America on the occasion of the 529th birthday of the teacher who launched the Sikh movement in the sixteenth century, Guru Nanak. The president wrote, “We are grateful for the teachings of Guru Nanak, which celebrate the equality of all in the eyes of God, a message that strengthens our efforts to build one America. Religious pluralism in our nation is bringing us together in new and powerful ways.”<sup>2</sup> I am certainly among those who agree with him, for I believe that our society becomes stronger as each group’s religious freedom is exercised and as people like the Sikhs articulate principles like equality and freedom in their own voice and in their own key.

For many Americans, however, religious pluralism is not a vision that brings us together but one that tears us apart. The controversies of the public square are just beginning. “Screw the Buddhists and kill the Muslims” was the response of one public official to the issue of religious diversity in May of 1997. The context was a discussion in South Carolina on whether the Ten Commandments should be posted in the public schools. The official, a member of the state board of education, was also quoted as having spoken of Islam as a “cult,” worshipers of “Lucifer.” The

Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), an Islamic advocacy group, called for his resignation from the state board of education, saying,

American Muslims, and particularly Muslim parents in South Carolina, view these remarks with great alarm. The remarks demonstrate a level of bigotry and intolerance that is entirely inappropriate for a person charged with formulating public policy. As you may recall, when a South Carolina mosque was the target of an arson attack in October of 1995, the suspect in the case was quoted as saying he set the fire to “rid the world of evil.” [His] comments can only serve to incite further acts of violence.<sup>3</sup>

No doubt this is an extreme case. It was widely publicized and widely repudiated, although the official did not lose his job on the state board of education. Most incidents of bigotry and hatred are not so widely publicized, from the 1990 arson attack on the old Islamic center here in Quincy, Massachusetts, to the destruction of a Minneapolis mosque by arson in 1999. The final decade of the twentieth century saw dozens of attacks on Muslims and their places of worship. In June of 2000, a Memphis man opened fire with his shotgun as worshipers approached the mosque next door for prayers. A few weeks later in Boston, vandals vaulted a fence into a Vietnamese temple compound and smashed to smithereens the white image of the bodhisattva of compassion. Difference can all too easily become a license for violence, and watchdog groups have been formed by Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus to monitor and record assaults on the rights and dignity of their members. There are also more muted controversies, like the new issues that have landed on the agenda of the armed services, the public schools, the zoning board, and the workplace. Can a Sikh wear his turban on a hard-hat job or as part of his uniform in the U.S. Army? Can a practitioner of Wicca exercise his or her religion on a Texas army base? Can a Sikh high school student carry the symbolic dagger of Sikh religious initiation to school? Will the Whirlpool Corporation in Nashville find a way for Muslim employees to meet their obligations for prayer? Does a Hindu temple have to look more “Spanish” to meet the planning board standards of Norwalk, California? Will a young Jain, an observant vegetarian, find the contents of the meals in her school cafeteria clearly marked?

As we think through the challenges of a new multireligious America, we will need to take stock of the many difficult questions “we the people” encounter today, questions not fully anticipated by the framers of our

Constitution. And we will need to face squarely the fact that many of our newest immigrants have experienced some of the same kinds of prejudice and hatred that greeted Irish and Italian Catholics and Russian and Polish Jews a century ago. They have been attacked for wearing a red dot on the forehead, for observing Islamic dress with a head scarf, or for wearing a turban.

Religion is never a finished product, packaged, delivered, and passed intact from generation to generation. There are some in every religious tradition who think of their religion that way, insisting it is all contained in the sacred texts, doctrines, and rituals they themselves know and cherish. But even the most modest journey through history proves them wrong. Our religious traditions are dynamic not static, changing not fixed, more like rivers than monuments. The history of religion is an ongoing process. America today is an exciting place to study the dynamic history of living faiths, as Buddhism becomes a distinctively American religion and as Christians and Jews encounter Buddhists and articulate their faith anew in the light of that encounter or perhaps come to understand themselves part of both traditions. Even humanists, even secularists, even atheists have to rethink their worldviews in the context of a more complex religious reality. With multitheistic Hindus and nontheistic Buddhists in the picture, atheists may have to be more specific about what kind of “god” they do not believe in.

Just as our religious traditions are dynamic, so is the very idea of America. The motto of the republic, *E Pluribus Unum*, “From Many, One,” is not an accomplished fact but an ideal that Americans must continue to claim. The story of America’s many peoples and the creation of one nation is an unfinished story in which the ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are continually brought into being. Our *pluribus* is more striking than ever—our races and faces, our jazz and *qawwali* music, our Haitian drums and Bengali tablas, our hip-hop and *bhangra* dances, our mariachis and gamelans, our Islamic minarets and Hindu temple towers, our Mormon temple spires and golden gurdwara domes. Amid this plurality, the expression of our *unum*, our oneness, will require many new voices, each contributing in its own way—like the voices of Sikhs who will stand up for the “self-evident truth” of human equality not only because it is written in the Declaration of Independence but also because it is part of the teachings of Guru Nanak and a principle of their faith as Sikhs. Hearing new ways of giving expression to the idea of America is the challenge we face today.

As we enter a new millennium, Americans are in the process of discovering who “we” are anew. Each part of the composite picture of a new religious America may seem small, but each contributes to a new self-portrait of America. One word may signal a shift in consciousness. For example, as Muslims become more numerous and visible in American society, public officials have begun to shift from speaking of “churches and synagogues” to “churches, synagogues, and mosques.” The annual observance of the Ramadan month of Muslim fasting now receives public notice and becomes the occasion for portraits of the Muslims next door in the *Dallas Morning News* or the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. The fast-breaking meals called *iftar* at the close of each day have become moments of recognition. In the late 1990s there were *iftar* observances by Muslim staffers on Capitol Hill, in the Pentagon, and in the State Department. In 1996 the White House hosted the first observance of the celebration of Eid al-Fitr at the end of the month of Ramadan, a practice that has continued. The same year also saw the U.S. Navy commission its first Muslim chaplain, Lieutenant M. Malak Abd al-Muta’ Ali Noel, and in 1998 the U.S. Navy’s first mosque was opened on Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia, where Lieutenant Noel was stationed. When fifty sailors attend Friday prayers at this facility, they signal to all of us a new era of American religious life.

Hindus have begun to signal their American presence as well. For instance, on September 14, 2000, Shri Venkatachalapathi Samudrala, a priest of the Shiva Vishnu Temple of Greater Cleveland in Parma, Ohio, opened a session of the U.S. House of Representatives with the chaplain’s prayer of the day. He prayed in Hindi and English and closed with a Sanskrit hymn, all recorded on the temple’s Web site. The occasion was the visit of the prime minister of India to the United States, but the wider message was clearly that Ohio too has its Hindus, as does every state in the union. As Americans, we need to see these signs of a new religious America and begin to think about ourselves anew in terms of them.

As we shall see at the very end of the book, America’s burgeoning interfaith movement gives us another set of signals about what is happening in America today as people of different faith traditions begin to cooperate in concrete ways. One example is of interest because it was led by Buddhists. In the spring of 1998, from the dazzling white Peace Pagoda, which sits on a hilltop of maples in the rural countryside of Leverett, Massachusetts, a community of Buddhist pilgrims launched the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage. Bringing together American “pilgrims” of all races and religions, they walked fifteen to twenty miles a day for

seven months, visiting sites associated with slavery all along the coast from Boston to New Orleans. From there, some of them continued the journey by sea to the west coast of Africa. The Buddhist community sponsoring the walk, a group called the Nipponzan Myohoji, was small in size, but, like the Quakers, this group extends leadership far beyond its numbers. It was not the first time this group had walked for racial and religious harmony. It had also journeyed from Auschwitz to Hiroshima to remind the world of the atrocities of the concentration camps and the atomic bomb. On a local level, every year this group walks for three days from its hilltop pagoda to downtown Springfield, Massachusetts, to observe Juneteenth, the annual celebration of black liberation from slavery. In each case, members walk to remind the rest of us of our deepest commitments.

Envisioning the new America in the twenty-first century requires an imaginative leap. It means seeing the religious landscape of America, from sea to shining sea, in all its beautiful complexity. Between the white New England churches and the Crystal Cathedral of southern California, we see the sacred mountains and the homelands of the Native peoples, the Peace Pagoda amid maples in Massachusetts, the mosque in the cornfields outside Toledo, the Hindu temples pitched atop the hills of Pittsburgh and Chicago, the old and new Buddhist temples of Minneapolis. Most of us have seen too little of this new religious America. But having seen what I have seen, with my own eyes and through the eyes of my students and colleagues, this is the landscape I now call home. This is the America I find rich and full of promise precisely because of all it embraces.

“Let’s go for the gold!” said a city councilwoman in San Diego in the fall of 1998. The issue before them was whether the Sikhs could build a temple with three gold domes along the West Valley Parkway in Escondido. The planning commission wanted the new building to have a red tile roof in order to fit in with the Mediterranean style of the area, but the city council overturned their recommendations, allowing the Sikhs to proceed with their traditional design—and the gold domes. Here, in the language of architecture, is the issue we Americans face. Do we, whoever “we” are, demand conformity, or do we “go for the gold” and open our eyes and hearts to the new differences that are ours?

## PASSAGE TO AMERICA

Let me tell the story of the new religious America another way, beginning here at Harvard University, where I have taught for more than twenty

years. I first came to Harvard as a graduate student at the end of the 1960s. I studied comparative religion, focusing on India, where the texture of religious life is so complex that a comparative approach is essential. I had already spent a year in India as a college student, in the days before satellite telecommunications and e-mail, when it took a whole afternoon to place a phone call and more than a month to send a letter home and receive a response. I was fascinated by India's many religious communities and their interrelations, tensions, and movements over many centuries. India became a kind of second home for me as I moved back and forth between Boston and Banaras, doing my fieldwork on the other side of the world and then returning to Harvard Square, which seemed by comparison a quiet village, moving at a leisurely pace.

When I began teaching comparative religion at Harvard in the mid-1970s, the challenge was to get my students to take seriously what we then called the "other," to begin to glimpse what the world might look like from the perspective of a Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh, those people whose lives and families I had come to know on the other side of the world. My students held all the usual preconceptions and misconceptions afloat in mainstream American culture; these religions were seen as exotic, deeply spiritual, perhaps seductive, even dangerous. In any case, they were far away, at least until the gurus of the "new age" brought them to America. But never did I imagine as I started teaching at Harvard in the 1970s that by the 1990s there would be scores of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh students in my classes—not just international students from India, but second-generation Americans, the children of what we have come to call the new immigration. Never did I imagine that by the 1990s I would be taking my students to Hindu temples, Islamic centers, and Sikh gurdwaras right here in Boston. Or that by the 1990s the very interest that had drawn me to India—the study of a complex, multireligious society—would lead me to study the world's religions in my own country.

My return passage from India to America started right here at Harvard. I remember the moment it began in the spring of 1990. A bright young freshman named Mukesh showed up at my office door. He had enrolled in my class called Hindu Myth and Image and had a thousand questions for me, trying to relate what he was learning in class to what the swami had taught him at a Hindu summer camp in Pennsylvania. I had no idea there was a Hindu summer camp in the Poconos, and I had never had a Hindu student engaged in the tumultuous searching I had known so often among Christian or Jewish students, trying to

relate the critical study of religion to their own faith. In fact, it had never occurred to me that one of my roles as a professor would be to teach American-born Hindus about their own religious tradition.

I had always had a few students from India in my classes, but that year marked the beginning of a new era of students like Mukesh. They were Indian Americans, born and raised in San Antonio, Baltimore, or Cleveland. They were the children of the first generation of immigrants who had settled in America after 1965. From the perspective of India, I knew all about the effects of the new immigration. We called it the “brain drain,” as thousands of Indian engineers, doctors, and scientists left India for the United States. But I had never stopped to think what the new immigration would mean for the United States, at least not until Mukesh and his classmates reached college age and enrolled in my classes. Some of them came from secular families and had learned little of their Indian heritage; their parents were professionals who had gained their own cultural and religious knowledge by osmosis in India or Pakistan but could pass it on in only a very diluted form to their children. Others had grown up in the new Hindu or Muslim institutions their parents had begun to create here in the U.S. Some had been to a Muslim youth leadership camp organized by the Islamic Society of North America or to a Hindu family camp at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Saylorsberg, Pennsylvania. There were young Jains who had been founding members of the Jain Youth of North America. Straddling two worlds, critically appropriating two cultures, they lived in perpetual tension between the distinctive cultures of their parents and grandparents and the forceful assimilative currents of American culture. In their own struggles with identity lay the very issues that were beginning to torment the soul of a newly multicultural America.

The questions that emerged in my classes were not only those that underlay the foreign cultures requirement of Harvard’s core curriculum, such as, How might we understand some “other” civilization so different from our own? New questions pushed themselves to the front of the agenda: What does it mean to speak of “our own” culture? What does it mean to find different streams of culture within ourselves? How are *difference* and *otherness* defined, and by whom? The word *multicultural* found a new place in our vocabulary, signaling the fact that every dimension of American culture had become more complex as a result of immigration and increasing globalization. Racial issues took on many sides, with Hispanic and Latino, Korean and Filipino, Chinese and Indian perspectives. Religious diversity was greater than ever before. In the 1950s the

sociologist Will Herberg had confidently described America as a “three religion country”—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. By the 1990s it was Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh, and our collective consciousness of the wide and deep presence of America’s Native peoples was greater than ever before.

During the first few years of the 1990s, the sons and daughters of the first generation from South Asia alone grew in numbers to become about 5 percent of the Harvard undergraduate population. In the spring of 1993, during the graduation ceremonies for Mukesh’s class, I happily discovered in the balcony of The Memorial Church the families of both Mukesh and his classmate Moitri. Mukesh’s family had immigrated to the U.S. from Bihar and Moitri’s family from the neighboring state of Bengal. Mukesh and Moitri were the first marshals of the Harvard and Radcliffe graduating classes that year, meaning their classmates had elected them to lead in the commencement activities. Both were Hindus. In the baccalaureate ceremonies Moitri recited a hymn from the Rig Veda in ancient Sanskrit, while Mukesh told a devotional story from his family tradition. Other members of the graduating class read from the sources of their own traditions—the Qur’an, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament. A year or two earlier, the ceremonies enacted beneath the white steeple were carefully constructed in the Catholic-Protestant-Jewish framework, but this was a new Harvard. It had happened in four years, and it had changed the university forever.

Harvard is hardly a bellwether of American culture. Having myself come east from the Rocky Mountains in Montana with an eye trained in the vastness of the West, I know how easy it is to lose perspective among the bricks, maples, and hills of New England. Nonetheless, Harvard *is* old, and its history as a place of higher education spans the history of our nation, from the time of the first European settlement to today. Like many of America’s private colleges, Harvard College began as a religious school with a normative, Christian vision of itself. In 1636 the Puritans of New England founded it to educate Christian clergy. In their own words, so often quoted from *New England’s First Fruits*, published in 1643, “After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God’s worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.”



Harvard was a Christian college, as exclusively and unapologetically as Massachusetts was a Christian commonwealth. In 1649 a Sephardic Jewish merchant named Solomon Franco was “warned out” of the town of Boston, which is to say he was invited to leave. In 1720, however, another Sephardic Jew, an Italian named Judah Monis, managed to get an M.A. from Harvard and eventually published *A Grammar of the Hebrew Tongue*, a text for the young would-be clerics who were then required to learn Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. But before Monis was hired to teach Hebrew in 1722, he publicly converted to Christianity. Over three and a half centuries, the small homogeneous college of young men faced the struggles of our wider culture. In the late nineteenth century, as the numbers of Catholics grew, so did prejudice against them. As the numbers of Jews mushroomed in the first two decades of the twentieth century, from 7 percent in 1900 to 21.5 percent in 1922, some voiced concern, including President Abbott Lawrence Lowell, who suggested a quota for Jewish students. The faculty wisely rejected the idea but began to cast a new and wider net for admissions in urban centers beyond the East Coast.<sup>4</sup>

Both the Puritan founders of Harvard and our first Jewish instructor, Judah Monis, would be astounded at the Harvard of today. Harvard’s Christians now flock to a vibrant Catholic student center, to ecumenical, evangelical, and mainline Christian groups, and to energetic Chinese and Korean Christian fellowships. The new Rosovsky Center for the Jewish community is named after a beloved dean, Henry Rosovsky, often referred to as the “rabbi” of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. It is already bursting at the seams with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox congregations. The building has a glass exterior, making its busy life of study, mealtime fellowship, and prayer completely transparent to the passing motorist or pedestrian, signaling the visible presence Jews now have at the university.

The Harvard Islamic Society, launched in the 1950s, has moved time and again to larger, but still temporary, quarters as the numbers of Islamic students in the university has grown. While the organization has a designated prayer room in the basement of one of the freshman dormitories, Friday prayers need a larger space and are held in the Lowell Lecture Hall. Symbolically, the Islamic presence gained public recognition when, in June of 1997, Imam Talal Eid stood on the platform of The Memorial Church before twenty-five thousand people assembled for commencement and opened the ceremonies with prayer. This was the first time in Harvard’s history that the preacher of the day had been Muslim. One Friday in the fall of 1998, I climbed the steps of Widener Library to hear

a young African American from the Harvard Islamic Society recite the call to noontime prayer. It was the conclusion of the annual Islam Awareness Week, and those who heard the lilting Arabic broadcast across Harvard Yard were hearing a call sounded for the first time in this space at the heart of America's oldest university.

In December of 1994, I attended the ceremony of the Buddha's Enlightenment Day. It was the first public event of the newly founded Harvard Buddhist Community. In a stately, wood-paneled room at the Divinity School, beneath august portraits of a long lineage of Divinity deans, some fifty Harvard students from a dozen Buddhist lineages sat on rows of square *zabutons*, listening to Pali, Tibetan, and Vietnamese chanting. One by one, they rose to bow to the Buddha and to make offerings of incense. The Divinity School eventually purchased a dozen *zafus* and *zabutons* for sitting meditation, and by the Buddha's Enlightenment Day of 1998 there were six Buddhist sitting groups. The fixed pews of the Divinity School chapel had been removed in favor of chairs to accommodate Buddhist meditators.

For most of the 1990s, there was no specifically Hindu organization at Harvard. Swami Sarvagatananda of Boston's old Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in the Back Bay had a place on Harvard's United Ministry, but Harvard Hindus did not gravitate to the downtown center or to Vedanta. In 1997 they organized a Hindu student group called Dharma—the first in Harvard's 360 years. One Sunday afternoon a month, they now gather in a common room to sing devotional songs called *bhajans* and study the Bhagavad Gita together. They also organize observances of Hindu festivals. That first year the Festival of Lights, or Diwali, a domestic celebration of the goddess Lakshmi, took place in the suite of a Harvard senior named Kavita and her roommates. There was a makeshift altar to which everyone contributed the images of the gods they had brought from home; there were strings of electric lights, flowers, fruits, sweets, incense, and candles. "When I came to college," said Kavita, "I didn't realize how much I would miss Diwali. At home, Diwali was our favorite holiday, but I never had to *do* anything for Diwali to happen at home. It just happened. But here at Harvard I realized that Diwali would not just happen. There would be no Diwali celebration unless I made one. So I called home and found out what to do."

In the fall of 1998 my partner, Dorothy Austin, and I moved onto campus to be house masters in one of the student houses. It had not been an easy decision. On the plus side, it meant having the opportunity to help create a pluralist community in a living context. On the downside, it

meant giving up my planned sabbatical leave in India and missing the festival of the Goddess, called Navaratri, which I had not been able to attend for over twenty years. But the first week in October, I received an invitation to a Navaratri festival organized by Dharma. The group had booked the common room in the house for a worship service, called a *puja*, to be followed by a *ras garbha* dance, the traditional stick dance now all the rage in the South Asian American subculture, across the way in the dining hall.

That night, I put on my black-mirrored *selvar kamiz* and went to the common room. There at the far end of the room, under the stern portraits of Harvard dignitaries, they had arranged an altar. Students were swirling about the room in their holiday best—the young women in a rainbow of silk saris and *selvar kamizes* and the young men in pressed *kurtas*. They had brought a range of deities for the altar, the ones they ordinarily kept on their dorm room bureaus or bookshelves in the makeshift altars of college life. Manish and Monica, the chief organizers, sat at the altar and began the ceremonies. Manish led the *puja*, reciting Sanskrit verses and explaining the steps of worship as he performed them. Monica encouraged the assembled students to share in singing their favorite *bhajans*, and they did, occasionally apologizing for the parts they could not remember. Finally, they stood for the lamp offering called *arati* and sang the traditional Hindi verses, which many of the students knew by heart. It was a simple celebration, but in the life of an American institution like Harvard, even such a simple celebration is truly a revolution. With a happy heart, I stayed for the *ras garbha* and danced till I dropped.

What has happened here has also happened at colleges and universities throughout the country. Our campuses have become the laboratories of a new multicultural and multireligious America. The interreligious issues we face here are not just Harvard's issues or America's issues. They have become our own distinctive recasting of the world's issues—the issues of India and South Africa, Bosnia and Sierra Leone, China and Indonesia. Will all these differences of race, culture, ethnicity, and religion fracture our communities, or will they lead us toward the common purpose of an informed, energetic, and even joyous pluralism?

### THE PLURALISM PROJECT

When I first met these new students—Muslims from Providence, Hindus from Baltimore, Sikhs from Chicago, Jains from New Jersey—they signaled to me the emergence in America of a new cultural and religious

reality about which I knew next to nothing. At that point I had not been to an American mosque, I had never visited a Sikh community in my own country, and I could imagine a Hindu summer camp only by analogy with my Methodist camp experience. I felt the very ground under my feet as a teacher and scholar begin to shift. My researcher's eye began to refocus—from Banaras to Detroit, from Delhi to Boston.

It became clear to me that the very shape of our traditional fields of study was inadequate to this new world. In the field of religious studies, those of us who study Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism traditionally earn our academic stripes by intensive study in Japan, Egypt, or India, doing language studies, textual editions and translations, and fieldwork. Now it became clear that to teach a course on Hinduism, I would also have to know something about Hinduism in America. Something similar was happening to my colleagues in the field of American religion. For decades they had focused largely on the Protestant mainstream, or perhaps on American Catholicism or Judaism. But what about the many submerged histories—the old Islamic traditions of the African slaves, the old Chinese temple communities in Montana and Idaho, or the early Sikh communities in California's Imperial Valley? And what about the immigrant religious histories just now unfolding—the Korean Buddhists and Christians, the Tamil Hindus, the Indian and Pakistani Muslims? Didn't these also belong in a course on American religion? Other colleagues were on the front lines of the developing fields of multicultural studies or ethnic studies. Reading their works, I was astonished to find a strong normative, ideological secularism that seemed studiously to avoid thinking about religion at all. For them, the religious traditions of America's ethnic minorities were simply not on the screen. Their lively discussions of Asian immigrants, for example, proceeded as if Asian Americans had no religious lives, built no religious institutions, gathered in no religious communities.

I scarcely had time to undertake new research, so I decided on a makeshift strategy: teaching a class on a subject I knew nothing about. I announced a research seminar called *World Religions in New England*. In the company of twenty-five students, I set out to study multireligious America, beginning here in Boston. I had lived in the city for twenty-five years, and I was amazed. Yes, the imagined New England landscape of white steeples and colonial town greens was still here, almost picture perfect, but what a range of other communities had settled right next door!

We visited the spectacular new Sri Lakshmi temple in Ashland, not far from the starting point of the Boston marathon, a temple designed by

Hindu ritual architects, its ornate tall towers decorated with images of Hindu deities and consecrated with the waters of the Ganges mingled with the waters of the Mississippi, Colorado, and Merrimac Rivers. We joined weekend worshipers for the weekly Saturday morning liturgies as the tall granite image of Lord Vishnu was bathed in gallons of milk and royally dressed to receive the offerings of the faithful and dispense his gifts of grace—sanctified fruits and water. The next week we split into teams to visit half a dozen other Hindu communities in the Boston area—from the older Vedanta Society and the Hare Krishna temple to the Swaminarayan temples of Lowell and Stow.

One Friday we took the subway down to Quincy, where New England's first mosque was built in the 1950s in the shadow of the great cranes of the Quincy shipyards. Back then, the community consisted of Lebanese who immigrated early in the century, but the hundreds of Muslims who come today for Friday prayers are from all over the world. We discovered that some twenty other mosques and Islamic centers are members of the Islamic Council of New England. On a quiet residential street in Norwood, we visited the Jain community gathered in what was formerly a Swedish Lutheran church. The Jains of New England are heirs of an ancient religious tradition going back to the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. in India. Now, halfway around the world, they were celebrating the end of their yearly season of fasting with songs, dancing, and feasting. We found Boston's Sikhs, also from India, gathered in what was formerly a Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Milford, and in nearby Millis was a community of American-born Sikhs of the Sikh Dharma movement.

There were more Buddhist communities than we could readily visit, even in teams. Down the street from the university we all spent an hour sitting in silence at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. Then we heard about the history of Insight meditation in the West from the resident teacher, Larry Rosenberg, who had taught psychology before heading for Southeast Asia to study Buddhist meditation practice. The next week we fanned out to see the Korean Kwan Um Zen Center and the old Cambridge Zen Center, the Dharmadhatu Tibetan center, and the Korean Zen Martial Arts Center. North of Boston, in the old industrial city of Lynn, one of our seminar members attended the monastic ordination of a young Cambodian man who had come to the U.S. as a refugee. He kneeled, his head shaved, to receive his robes, amid a Cambodian community that by then had three temples in the northern outskirts of Boston. Some of us visited the Vietnamese temple in Roslindale, the

Chinese Buddhist temple in Lexington, and the new Thousand Buddha Temple built by Chinese nuns in Quincy. The variety was breathtaking. While some, like the Insight Meditation Center, were exclusively devoted to meditation practice, others, like those in the Chinese communities, practiced the chanting and recitations of Pure Land Buddhism. One fine day, the Thousand Buddha Temple community chartered a harbor cruise boat and took hundreds of live lobsters out into Boston Harbor to release them into the sea as an act of compassion.

This is Boston today, a city that would astonish its Puritan founders—as it astonished us. That semester the reading list took a backseat to our citywide forays, which resulted in animated and serious discussion like I had never before experienced in a seminar. Eventually we published *World Religions in Boston*, a documentary guide to a city whose Asian population had doubled in ten years, a city that gave us our first glimpse of the new religious America.

This was the genesis of the Pluralism Project. I was sure that what had happened here in Boston was happening also in many other American cities. What about Houston, Denver, Detroit? With foundation funding, I hired students to spend the summer in their own hometowns and find out what changes were under way there. For three summers students fanned out across the United States, staying with parents, grandparents, and roommates, visiting mosques, Sikh gurdwaras, and Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples. It was a fascinating summer job and not always easy. All these students—no matter what race or religion—had to become strangers in their own homes. As Jonathan, a religion major from Minneapolis, put it, “I grew up in the Twin Cities, so I have lived here all my life. But the city I discovered this summer was something I had never imagined.” Minneapolis and St. Paul, traditionally 34 percent Lutheran, are now home to more than 80,000 Asians and Pacific Islanders, approximately half of whom are refugees, including 14,000 Hmong, 10,000 Vietnamese, 8,000 Lao Buddhists, and 7,000 Cambodians. Their temples are an important part of the religious texture of the cities today—along with Islamic Centers, Baha’i communities, and the temples of Minnesota Hindus and Jains.

Like Jonathan, all of our Pluralism Project researchers found a religious landscape they had not known before. Of course, this new religious reality is most visible in the sprawling cosmopolitan cities of America, in world cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Houston. But even in the heartland of America, the new multireligious reality is becoming a Main

Street phenomenon. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists live in the heavily Mormon neighborhoods of Salt Lake City and in the Bible Belt of Dallas. One of America's most spectacular new mosques is in the suburbs of Cleveland. One of the most beautiful Hindu temples sits on a hilltop south of Chicago. There are Cambodian and Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Iowa and Oklahoma, Tibetan Buddhist retreat centers in the mountains of Vermont and Colorado, and Sikh gurdwaras in the wooded suburban countryside of Fairfax County, Virginia.

These changes to the American landscape have only recently become visible at least architecturally. The first generation of American mosques could be found in places like a former watch factory in Queens, a U-Haul dealership in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, a gymnasium in Oklahoma City, and a former mattress showroom in Northridge, California. You could easily drive right on by the warehouse, the storefront, or gymnasium and not notice anything new at all. Because the meeting places were invisible, many Americans, understandably, remained unaware of the new communities. The 1980s and 1990s, however, saw a crescendo of construction. Dozens of new mosques were built, such as the mosque on 96th Street and Third Avenue in New York, the Bridgeview and Villa Park mosques in Chicago, or the Southwest Zone mosque in Houston, to name but a few. There are now multimillion-dollar Hindu temples, like the Bharatiya Temple in the wealthy northern suburbs of Detroit and the spectacular Sri Meenakshi Temple rising from the flats south of Houston. The Buddhists have also made a striking architectural imprint, with the huge Hsi Lai temple in Hacienda Heights, California, a construction project resisted at every step by the community and now so beautiful that "temple view" real estate is coveted—and expensive. In the western Chicago suburb of Bartlett, the Jains have built a large new temple, and to the north in Palatine lies the visually striking hexagonal gurdwara of the Sikhs.

Driving out New Hampshire Avenue, one of the great spokes of the nation's capital, just beyond the Beltway is a stretch of road only a few miles long where one can glimpse in brief compass the new landscape of religious America. Set back from the road on a grassy slope is a new Cambodian Buddhist temple with its graceful, sloping tiled roof. Then one sees the new copper-domed mosque of the Muslim Community Center, set between an onion-domed Ukrainian Orthodox Church and a Disciples of Christ church. Farther along is a new brick Gujarati Hindu temple called Mangal Mandir, and just off New Hampshire Avenue is a Jain temple. The many churches along the way also reveal the new

dimensions of America's Christian landscape, with Hispanic Pentecostal, Vietnamese Catholic, and Korean evangelical congregations sharing facilities with more traditional English-speaking mainline churches.

We must be clear about the fact that this diversity alone does not constitute pluralism. It is plain evidence of the new religious America, but whether we are able to work together across the lines of religious difference to create a society in which we actually know one another remains to be seen. On New Hampshire Avenue, that process is just beginning. Schoolchildren come for visits to the mosque and the Cambodian temple; the two churches that flank the Islamic center lend their parking lots for the two large Eid prayers; and all these communities have a growing awareness of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington.

Beyond the changing landscape of our cities, the Pluralism Project is interested in how these religious traditions are changing as they take root in American soil. When Tristan, one of our summer researchers, interviewed a Vietnamese monk in Phoenix, the monk said, "We have to take the plant of Buddhism out of its Asian pot and plant it in the soil of Arizona." The monk's observation could apply to any of the new religious communities. What does Buddhism look like as it begins to grow in its new soil? What will Islam become as it spreads into the suburban life of Houston? What will Hinduism look like as it takes root in central Minneapolis, where Hindu young people take ski trips together and celebrate their high school graduation at the temple with a *puja*? Religions are not like stones passed from hand to hand through the ages. They are dynamic movements, more like rivers—flowing, raging, creative, splitting, converging. The history of religions is unfolding before our eyes. Perhaps nowhere in the world is it more interesting to study the process of dynamic religious change in this new century than in America.

Not only is America changing these religions, but these religions are also changing America. This too is an important question for ongoing study. What does this new religious diversity mean for American electoral politics, for the continuing interpretation of church-state issues by the Supreme Court? What does it mean for American public education and the controversies of school boards? What will it mean for colleges and universities with an increasingly multireligious student body? What about hospitals and health care programs with an increasingly diverse patient population? While many people are just beginning to become aware of the changing religious landscape, the issues it has begun to raise



for the American pluralist experiment are already on the agenda of virtually every public institution.

Our new questions are not only civic, however, but also spiritual and theological. How will Christians and Jews, long dominant in America, respond to this new diversity? Churches, synagogues, and theological schools have barely begun to take notice of this new religious reality. Yet, with the changing landscape, the entire context of ministry has begun to change. Adherents of other faiths are no longer distant metaphorical neighbors in some other part of the world but next-door neighbors. A block down the street from a United Church of Christ congregation in Garden Grove, California, is the Lien Hoa Buddhist temple, the home of several Vietnamese Buddhist monks. Next door to the Atonement Lutheran Church in San Diego is San Diego's largest Islamic Center. In Flushing, New York, a synagogue stands next door to a storefront Sikh gurdwara, across the street from Swaminarayan Hindu temple, and down the street from the Ganesha Hindu Temple. And yet few theological schools are able to equip Christian or Jewish clergy for their changing educational roles in this new ministerial context. The issue of living in a pluralist society and thinking theologically about the questions it poses is important today for every community of faith. How do we think about our own faith as we come into deeper relationship with people of other faiths and as we gain a clearer understanding of their religious lives?

As a Christian, a Montana-born, lifelong Methodist who has lived and studied in India, I too have asked this question. How do I articulate my faith in a world in which neighbors, colleagues, and students live deeply religious lives in other communities of faith? When I began my studies of the Hindu tradition, living in the sacred city of Banaras, I tried to articulate, in *Banaras, City of Light*, what this holy city and all it represents means for Hindus. Further along life's journey, I wrote *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, which tackled another equally difficult question: What does Banaras and all it represents mean for me, as a Christian? Through the years I have found my own faith not threatened, but broadened and deepened by the study of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh traditions of faith. And I have found that only as a Christian pluralist could I be faithful to the mystery and the presence of the one I call God. Being a Christian pluralist means daring to encounter people of very different faith traditions and defining my faith not by its borders, but by its roots.

Many Christians would not agree with me. In the fall of 1999 the Southern Baptist Convention published a prayer guide to enable

Christians to pray for Hindus during Diwali, their fall festival of lights. It spoke of the 900 million Hindus who are “lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism . . . who worship gods which are not God.”<sup>5</sup> Many Christians have no trouble at all speaking of “our God” in exclusivist terms as if God had no dealings with Hindus. The problem with such a response, however, is that it misunderstands both Hindu worship and Hindu experience of God. The American Hindus who carried placards protesting the Southern Baptist prayer guide before Second Baptist Church in Houston did so not because they were averse to being the focus of Christian prayers, but because the characterization of their religious tradition was so ill-informed and ignorant. As I would put it in the language of my own tradition, it is fine for Baptists to witness to their faith; indeed, it is incumbent upon Christians to do so. But it is not fine for us to bear false witness against neighbors of other faiths.

Articulating one’s own faith anew in a world of many faiths is a task for people of every religious tradition today, and in every tradition there are thinkers and movements taking up this task. We cannot live in a world in which our economies and markets are global, our political awareness is global, our business relationships take us to every continent, and the Internet connects us with colleagues half a world away and yet live on Friday, or Saturday, or Sunday with ideas of God that are essentially provincial, imagining that somehow the one we call God has been primarily concerned with us and our tribe. No one would dream of operating in the business or political world with ideas about Russia, India, or China that were formed fifty, a hundred, or five hundred years ago. I might sing “Give me that old-time religion! It’s good enough for me!” with as much gusto as anyone, but in my heart I know that the old-time religion is not “good enough” unless those of us who claim it are able to grapple honestly and faithfully with the new questions, challenges, and knowledge posed to us by the vibrant world of many living faiths. To be good enough, the old-time religion has to be up to the challenges of an intricately interdependent world.

Theological questions and civic questions are different, however. And it is important that we understand the difference. No matter how we evaluate religions that are different from our own, no matter how we think about religion if we are atheists or secularists, the covenants of citizenship to which we adhere place us on common ground. The Southern Baptists who pray for Hindus who are “lost” are perfectly free to do so. Their theological ideas are not governed by our Constitution, but their

commitment to the free exercise of religion, even for Hindus, is. For a moment in September of 2000, the conservative Family Research Council became confused about this distinction. When the first-ever Hindu invocation was given at the U.S. House of Representatives, the council denounced it as a move toward “ethical chaos,” saying it was “one more indication that our nation is drifting from its Judeo-Christian roots. . . .” On second thought, the council issued a much-needed clarification: “We affirm the truth of Christianity, but it is not our position that America’s Constitution forbids representatives of religions other than Christianity from praying before Congress.”<sup>6</sup>

Today all of us are challenged to claim for a new age the very principles of religious freedom that shaped our nation. We must find ways to articulate them anew, whether we are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or secular Americans. We must embrace the religious diversity that comes with our commitment to religious freedom, and as we move into the new millennium we must find ways to make the differences that have divided people the world over the very source of our strength here in the U.S. It will require moving beyond *laissez-faire* inattention to religion to a vigorous attempt to understand the religions of our neighbors. And it will require the engagement of our religious traditions in the common tasks of our civil society. Today, right here in the U.S., we have an opportunity to create a vibrant and hopeful pluralism, in a world of increasing fragmentation where there are few models for a truly pluralistic, multireligious society.

#### NOTES

1. John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 107.
2. *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 13, 1998.
3. Council on American Islamic Relations press release, “CAIR Calls for Removal of South Carolina Office Who Said ‘Kill the Muslims’” (Washington, DC, May 19, 1997).
4. The complexity of these proceedings is recorded in Nitzza Rosovsky, *The Jewish Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 8–25.
5. *Divali: Festival of Lights Prayer for Hindus* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1999); see [www.imb.org](http://www.imb.org).
6. Stephen Koff, “Criticism of Hindu Plucked from the Web,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 23, 2000.