

“Encountering Difference”

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Where I grew up, religious difference meant Catholics. West Michigan was the land of the blonde descendants and immigrants of the Dutch Reformed. Sure there were also Lutherans, Baptists, and Methodists. Protestant Christians were everywhere; Catholics were the closest thing to religious diversity I thought we had.

In high school, I befriended a Mormon classmate. Admittedly, I did some reading and talked with my new friend to try and discern if he was in a cult.

I’m not sure when I first met someone who identified as Jewish. Although I read a lot of Jewish authors—Chaim Potok, Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank—so sometimes I mistook this for actual knowledge. Really, it was not until moving to Cambridge for grad school in 2013 that I began to experience religious diversity. My neighbor, Hoda, a Muslim woman, provided invaluable support to me and my then five-year-old son. And studying at Harvard Divinity School exposed me to scholars and students of multiple religions, as well as some adherents of diverse traditions.

Still, I didn’t get it. Not really. My lack of real understanding became clearer when I began working as a teaching assistant for an Introduction to Christianity class. As it turned out, the whole class was headed for conflict, not just the one small discussion section I led. On the one hand, those in charge of curriculum had decided to require the course for all first-year students in the Master of Divinity (or MDiv) program. On the other hand, the Admissions department, keeping in line with the wider vision of the school as multi-religious, had begun recruiting non-Christians to the traditionally Christian MDiv program. Combined this meant a bunch of non-Christians were suddenly required to take a class in Christianity, but the teaching staff for the class presumed (incorrectly) that their audience would be primarily Christian.

As the course proceeded with its Christian bias, the non-Christian students felt increasingly isolated, unseen, and angry. With my own Christian background and limited understanding of other traditions, including Unitarian Universalism at that point, I too failed to perceive the problem. For example, in a week about “sin”, I simply asked the Buddhist students in my discussion section how Buddhism understood “the problem of sin.” As you may know, the concept of “sin” is itself a Christian concept that doesn’t even appear as a “problem” in Buddhism. Just asking the question the way I did revealed my ignorance and my bias.

Slowly in that course and in other multi-faith contexts, I began to understand that differences in religion were not simply a matter of translating terms from one faith to another. Rather, vast differences in perceiving and relating to the nature of the universe exist between religions. Certainly there can be places of common values and even similar beliefs or practices, but sometimes there are also just *differences*.

When encountering differences in religions, the way people respond varies. Some people focus on the common ground. This can be a particularly popular approach in religious traditions that have historical or structural overlap. For example, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are referred to as “People of the Book” because of their shared reverence for written sacred scripture as well as for grounding in some of the same stories regarding Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael. Sharing belief in one God, commitment to written scriptures, and root stories creates a fertile base for interfaith dialogue in these three traditions.

While finding common ground may create a basis for bridge-building across differences, sometimes religions are just *different*. And so, another approach to encountering differences is to show tolerance for the differences. For example, this might mean supporting laws that protect the rights for religious observance or dress in the workplace or school. In short, tolerance accepts others doing their thing over there, but stops short of seeking to actively engage or understand the other. Religion Scholar Diana Eck describes such tolerance as a “necessary public virtue,” but promotes *pluralism* as another approach to encountering difference.

[Pluralism](#) is the “energetic engagement with diversity”, explains Eck. This means the “active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.” We do not simply stay in religious ghettos tolerating one another’s presence, rather we try to understand each other. Seeking to understand other religions does not, however, need not mean abandoning one’s own religious commitments. Pluralism does not mean relativism. Rather, as Eck explains,

The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.

Pluralism means the active encountering of difference through dialogue. Such dialogue may mean agreement or common ground is not always found. As Eck writes, dialogue does not mean everyone agrees, rather “pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table— with one’s commitments.”

I think how we choose to encounter differences matters greatly. Because another way that people respond to the encounter with difference is to denounce those who are different, actively seek to exclude them, and, at times, violently attack them. Indeed, how people choose to respond to those who are different is fueling major conflict in our nation. And while this conflict plays out along many lines of difference, one significant category of difference is religion.

In her 2001 book, *A New Religious America*, Eck explores the exponential growth of religious diversity in the United States. Furthermore, she connects this religious diversity to the 1965 Immigration Act which enabled new waves of immigration from across the globe. This is a connection I had not really understood before reading the book. When we argue about immigration, we are not just talking about ethnicity, race, or national origin, we are often also talking about the religious commitments immigrants bring with them.

Of course, immigration has been [hotly contested](#) in the U.S. long before our own time. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to effectively bar an entire group by race and class. In the same year, another Immigration Act excluded other categories of people including “those likely to become a public charge,” which meant excluding all manner of poor folks. Still, immigration continued at a brisk pace with a record 14.9% of the US population being foreign born in 1890. Then, amidst a culture of xenophobia and fear following WWI, Congress passed the [Immigration Act of 1924](#), which imposed severe quotas of who could immigrate while prioritizing immigrants from Europe. Immigration rates would continually fall in the coming decades so that not even 5% of the U.S. population was foreign born by 1965.

The [Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965](#) shifted this trend by opening immigration based on family reunification, employment, and refugees. Additionally, the law opened the doors to immigrants to non-European countries in unprecedented numbers. Thirty years later, when Eck wrote about the new religious diversity in America, the number of foreign born in the U.S. had more than doubled from 4.7% in 1970 to 10.4%. And in the twenty years since Eck’s book, the number of foreign born in the U.S. stood at 13.7% in 2018—more than triple the percentage from 1965 though still short of the 1890 record. However, since the overall U.S. population has grown since 1965, this means that the actual number of immigrants in the U.S. has in fact quadrupled to reach a record high 44.8 million in 2018.

These numbers are statements of statistical fact. The U.S. simply has more immigrants living here than at any other time in its history. Immigrants from Europe, Mexico, China, India, Thailand, Uganda, Afghanistan, and many, many more places. Immigrants who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian. Immigrants who worship one God, many

gods, or no God. Immigrants who gather in houses within neighborhoods that function as Buddhist monastery and temple in one. And immigrants who have constructed immense new houses of worship, such as the Hindu Sri Lakshmi Temple in Ashland dedicated in 1986.

Here in Wayland, if you drove through town in 1965, I believe that you would have only found us and Christian congregations. The Islamic Center of Boston was established in 1979. After first meeting in Cambridge, the Islamic Center moved in 1988 to a large house in Wayland before building their current center on the same site in the early 90's. Temple Shir Tikva began meeting here at First Parish in 1978 before moving to renovated space at their current site in 1981. Then, in 1991, Congregation Or 'Atid began meeting here before moving to their own religious home. For some time, Wayland has also included a Bah'ai community who actively gathers but does not own a building of their own. And, in 2016, the Christian community expanded when a [Coptic congregation](#) purchased the former Episcopal church on Rice Road. Most recently, St Luke Anglican Church of Uganda in Boston has begun renting space from the Lutheran church on Concord Road. As post-1965 immigration changed demographics in the U.S., it also changed the religious landscape of Wayland.

In other words, the story of religious diversity and immigration is both a national story and a very local story. It is also a story that continues today with tremendous implications for how the "we" of this nation gets defined. In today's context of contested immigration and racial tension, to make a commitment to religious pluralism has political implications by supporting an expanded "we." Given the inextricable overlap of immigration and religious diversity, to support a vision of a multi-religious nation is to also affirm the value and dignity of immigrants. To affirm religious pluralism in the U.S. is to soundly reject the notion of a national "we" defined narrowly as Christians of white European ancestry.

Over the course of this program year, we will consider together what it means to be committed to pluralism as a way of actively encountering difference. Each month, we will seek to actively engage a different religious tradition—starting with Christianity in October. Throughout the year we will also explore other kinds of human difference that often create divisions and conflict.

As we engage this theme, my hope is that we not only consider how to affirm pluralism in our town and nation, but also here within our own religious community. *We are* different from each other—by age, by profession, by economic resources, by family structure, and, yes, by religious beliefs and practices. *How might we actively seek understanding across lines of difference within and beyond these walls?* That is my question for us this year.

"A New Religious America" (2001)*By Diana Eck*

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 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 African 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. ... 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 next within the walls of old urban Protestant and Catholic churches.

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. ...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.