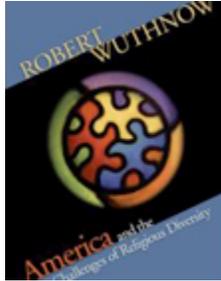




America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: I would like to welcome you to the third program in our series on the Resurgence of Religion in Politics. Today it is with great pleasure that we welcome Professor Wuthnow who will be discussing his book [America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity](#).

For some time now, America has prided itself on being one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. Recent waves of immigrants from Asia and Africa have added millions of adherents of non-western faiths to the traditional American religious mix, making our nation stand out among all others as a truly religious melting pot.

In our public discourse, we embrace religious liberty and espouse respect for our cultural differences, yet there are times when we speak of our country in very narrow terms and describe it as being a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles and beliefs. At those times, we neglect to acknowledge that other beliefs and practices that differ from those embraced by Christianity also had a profound impact on American culture and our national identity. It is this concern that our speaker will address this afternoon.

In *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, Professor Wuthnow draws on his own research—including hundreds of in-depth interviews—to take the reader on a journey through the history of religious traditions, practices, and ideals in America. As religious fervor is reshaping the identities and actions of an increasingly large number of people, how we think about these religious differences, how we respond to it and whether we embrace it, ignore it or merely cope with it, is one of the more important challenges facing America today.

Our guest will be particularly helpful in clarifying these issues and in suggesting ways we might meet these challenges. He is a distinguished scholar who has conducted groundbreaking research on religion in America, including religion's influence on economics, politics, and the arts and even in psychology. It is his aim to have each religion come to know itself as one among many and thereby to better appreciate what it shares with all others.

He has published extensively—almost 200 articles documenting the religious landscape in America—and has written or contributed to at least 34 books, including [Saving America—Faith based Services and the Future of Civil Society](#); and [Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities](#). He has also edited the recent [Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion](#). As you can imagine, his resume is extensive and impressive.

Professor Wuthnow serves as the president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and chairs several other notable sociological and religious associations. Among the editorial boards that he serves on are [Contexts](#), A journal of the American Sociological Association, and [Journal for the Scientific Study of](#)

Religion. In addition, he has acted as principal investigator for numerous studies funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, the Ford Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation and the Aspen Institute.

Most recently he has been involved in directing a Lilly-funded project on "The Public Role of Mainline Protestantism in America since the 1960s." Currently he is Princeton University's Gerhard R. Andlinger Professor of Sociology and director of Princeton's Center for the Study of Religion. Please join me in welcoming our very distinguished guest, Robert Wuthnow.

Remarks

ROBERT WUTHNOW:

Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to be here this afternoon and look forward to your comments and questions.

On this anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World, it is well to remember that questions about religious diversity have been with us for a long time. Columbus was keenly aware of conflicts among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Europe at the time he set sail and believed himself to be carrying out a mission foretold in biblical prophecy. He could not imagine that the people who came out to meet the *Pinta* when it approached land on October 11, 1492, already had religious beliefs and practices of their own. He thought they were devoid of religion and would easily become part of a new Christian nation in the New World. He saw through the lens of his own convictions.

We have, as we would like to think, come a long way since then, but there is still a fundamental tension about religion and religious diversity. On the one hand, the United States has once again become religiously diverse, at least more so than it was for most of the past century and a half. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists are all more prominent in America than ever before. On the other hand, many people in the United States believe that only Christianity is true and that America is—or should be—a Christian nation. Let me give just one example.

A few days after the attacks of 9/11, President Bush visited the Islamic Center in Washington and in a speech to a joint session of Congress said to Muslims everywhere, "We respect your faith." A year and a half earlier, presidential *candidate* George Bush was reported to have said that only Christians have a place in heaven. Now, that comment got him into trouble not only with Jewish leaders but also with his mother. Barbara Bush thought differently. But this is an example that points clearly to the tension in our culture about religion and religious diversity. For Muslims—in the United States or abroad—what would be a reasonable conclusion? That American Christians respect their faith? That American Christians think only Christianity is true? Or, possibly, that Americans aren't quite sure what they believe?

What do we believe? I have been studying American religion for thirty years. I conduct surveys, do interviews in which people talk for several hours about what they believe, read history, talk to clergy, and visit places of worship. In 1998 my research turned to the question of religious diversity.

Other scholars were studying immigrant groups and mapping the stories of people at mosques and temples and meditation centers. I was interested in how the majority population—the Christian population—was responding to the new diversity. I realized at the start that not everyone has an occasion to meet a Muslim or think much about Hinduism or Buddhism.

For that reason, I decided to start by talking with people who were, so to speak, in harm's way. I selected 14 cities, including ones in the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, and in each city selected one mosque, one Hindu temple, one Buddhist temple or meditation center, and for comparison purposes one synagogue. I secured a research grant that made it possible to send researchers to each of those 56 sites and to conduct interviews with clergy and some of the lay members. We then identified the church that was closest to each of these sites—sometimes right next door, never more than a few blocks away—and interviewed people at those churches.

We supplemented this information by conducting interviews with people who may have had other kinds of

interreligious dealings: people who said they were religiously eclectic, community leaders, civil liberties lawyers, judges, teachers and professors, leaders of interfaith organizations, and people who were married to a spouse of a different faith. In all, we conducted more than 300 indepth interviews. Then in 2003, we conducted a national survey—a random sample survey of nearly 3,000 people. We asked people about their contacts with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists; about their perceptions of these people and their religions; and about Christianity and America.

What did we find? Let me begin by mentioning some of the more straightforward results and then move to some of the larger conclusions that I write about in my book.

Most Americans are, at one level, *tolerant* of people who may belong to religions quite different from their own, such as immigrants or people living in other countries who may be Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists. Whatever their own religious beliefs and practices may be, most Americans, for instance, think that Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists should have the right to worship freely in the United States. In this way, they are like President Bush when he said to Muslims, "We respect your faith."

Most Americans even believe that religions other than their own probably contain truth. For instance, in the national survey, 74 percent of the public (about three people in four) agreed with the statement, "All major religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, contain some truth about God." Respect and tolerance of this kind expresses itself in many ways. For instance, people may pray a generic, ecumenical prayer over a meal they are sharing with someone of another faith so as not to offend that person. Or they hedge what they say about their own faith, so that it sounds more like a personal opinion than an item of truth. They may follow the old adage that religion and politics are things you just don't talk about at all in polite company.

These efforts to be respectful and tolerant, incidentally, come into play especially around questions of proselytizing. Among the Christian population, nearly everybody thinks it is important to share one's faith. But this usually means living a good life and being nice, rather than actually talking to somebody with the aim of converting them to Christianity.

Conservative evangelical Protestants of course are more likely than other Christians to say they have talked to somebody to convert them. But when asked who they talked to, they very rarely say it was a Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist. It's usually someone they know who just doesn't go to church, like their brother-in-law.

This isn't to say that proselytization never happens. Most of the Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists we talked to said they had been proselytized at least once. They remembered it vividly, and it sometimes left them deeply suspicious of Christians, at least if deception was involved or if it violated their sense of trust. Still, the dominant picture is that not much proselytizing is happening. The inclination to do so is muted by norms of tolerance and civility. The inclination is also muted by a kind of grassroots theology among Christians that says, in effect, if God wants this person to be saved, God will somehow figure it out.

Having stressed the pervasiveness of tolerance, I hasten to add, though, that there is also a chilling reservoir of *intolerance* toward Muslims and even toward Hindus and Buddhists. In the survey, 23 percent of the public said they would be in favor of "making it illegal for Muslim groups to meet in the United States." Almost that many (20 percent) said it should be illegal for Hindu or Buddhist groups to meet in the United States. Religious freedom apparently has its limits.

A larger percentage say it should be "harder for Muslims to settle in the United States"—38 percent say that. And when it comes to surveillance—to supporting some of the activities that have become common under the [Patriot Act](#)—the proportions are even higher. For instance, 60 percent say they favor the U.S. government collecting information about Muslim religious groups in the United States. About 50 percent say they favor the government collecting information on Hindu or Buddhist groups in the United States.

A large proportion of Americans also hold negative stereotypes about non-Western religions. Fifty-seven percent of the public thinks the Muslim religion is closed minded, 47 percent think Islam is fanatical, 40

percent say it is violent, and 34 percent say it is backward. Public attitudes toward Hinduism and Buddhism, though somewhat more favorable, are nevertheless quite mixed. For instance, 53 percent of the public thinks Hinduism is peace loving and 63 percent say this about Buddhism. However, about a third of the public thinks these religions are closed minded. Almost as many think these religions are backward. And about a quarter regard them as fanatical.

Negative stereotypes may not result in discrimination, but they heighten that possibility. When asked, "Suppose you had a child who wanted to marry a Muslim who had a good education and came from a good family," 52 percent of the public said they would object, with 22 percent saying they would object strongly. When the same question was asked about a child marrying a Hindu, 47 percent said they would object, with 15 percent saying they would object strongly.

Another question asked, "Suppose some Muslims wanted to build a large Muslim mosque in your community"; 41 percent of the public said this would bother them, with 18 percent saying it would bother them a lot. Thirty-five percent said it would bother them if Hindus wanted to build a large Hindu temple in their community. Overall, 42 percent of the public said they would not welcome Muslims becoming a stronger presence in the United States. About a third said this about Hindus and Buddhists.

What accounts for these negative responses toward Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists? We might suppose that the responses to Muslims at least are fueled by fears of terrorism. That, however, appears not to be as much of a factor as one might have guessed. When people who said they were very worried about the threat of another terrorist attack were compared with those who were less worried or not worried, hardly any differences were evident in their attitudes toward Muslims and Islam. That result is also consistent with conclusions drawn from polls conducted before and after 9/11.

Some of the negative responses toward Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists are rooted in simple old-fashioned American nativism. For instance, 70 percent of the public agrees with the statement, "Nothing in other countries can beat the American way of life." Forty-six percent agree that "Foreigners who come to live in America should give up their foreign ways and learn to be like other Americans." Thirty-five percent said they specifically see these new religious groups as a "threat to our traditional values." Nativism also comes through in comments about immigrants being bad for our society and, among white Anglos, in negative attitudes toward Latinos and Asian Americans.

But responses to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists also reflect the fact that these are, after all, *religious* identities, and not simply matters of ethnicity. Religious differences evoke responses that are deeply rooted in religious convictions themselves.

Grassroots theology matters. Within Christianity, there is a long tradition of theological exclusivism—the kind illustrated in the comment I mentioned earlier about only Christians having a place in heaven. In the survey, for instance, 44 percent of the public agreed that "Christianity is the only way to have a true personal relationship with God." Some of the people we talked to modified that view by saying that Christianity was the best or only way for them, but wasn't necessarily best for everyone.

My estimate is that about a third of the American public can be classified as Christian exclusivists. They hold that only Christianity is true, that the Christian Bible is uniquely the word of God, and that eternal salvation comes only to those who believe in Jesus. We should not assume that all Christian exclusivists are bigots. But Christian exclusivism does greatly increase the chances of holding negative views about Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Statistically, Christian exclusivism has more of an effect on these negative views than nativism does, or where one lives, or any other standard demographic characteristic.

Of course Christian exclusivism is also a significant source of anti-Semitism. One of the women I write about in the book was a Christian exclusivist and her best friend was Jewish. She said her friend was a lovely woman, but then she broke into tears talking about how sad it was that her friend wasn't saved. The Bible says there's only one way, she said. "It's written a million times—one way, one way, one way."

The other source of Islamophobia and similar negative views is the idea that America is—always has been and should remain—a Christian nation. This is what we sometimes refer to as American civil religion. It

closely identifies America with Christianity. For instance, in the survey, 78 percent of the public agreed that "the United States was founded on Christian principles." Seventy-nine percent agreed that "America has been strong because of its faith in God." Seventy-four percent agreed that "in the 21st century, the United States is still basically a Christian society." And 55 percent agreed that "our democratic form of government is based on Christianity." Of course a person might agree with some of these statements simply as descriptive assertions. But there also appears to be a *prescriptive* element in these views—one that says in effect, "Christianity is good for America; let's keep it that way."

I want to move on now to some broader conclusions. My main argument is that we need to take religion much more seriously in discussions of diversity than we often do. This is not to say that race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are not important. But religious diversity needs to be included in the conversation.

There are several reasons. One is simply that religious diversity raises practical issues. Which religious holidays should become school holidays for our children? What kind of clothing are school children or employees allowed to wear? Do we serve halal as well as kosher in the cafeteria? Do we amend zoning ordinances to allow for Muslim prayers or divali celebrations?

Religious diversity also raises constitutional and other legal issues. In the past, we have considered religion so private that we prohibited the government from collecting information about it in the U.S. Census (unlike the practice in England and in many other countries). Since 9/11, we apparently feel it is okay for the FBI to eavesdrop on what takes place in mosques and temples and even in churches. Religious diversity certainly becomes a factor in determining how we think about displaying the Ten Commandments in public places or saying "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

In addition to the practical and legal issues, and perhaps even more importantly, religious diversity poses very significant theological issues. For instance, about a third of the American public are what we might call Christian *inclusivists*. They are deeply committed to Christianity, but they also think other religions are true. But what exactly does this mean? If all religions are true, does one's own become merely an accident of biography, a matter of convenience? Does one know enough about other religions to have a considered judgment about their similarities and differences? And, if all religions are true, what does that imply about nonreligious people? Should everyone be religious? Or does it really matter?

One would think that the nation's churches might be doing something to address these questions. In the survey, nearly everybody thought it would be a good idea to learn more about other religions, and churches might be a safe place for this to happen. In 99 out of 100 instances, though, churches are doing nothing. Hardly any of the Christians we interviewed had been in a class or study group at their church where they tried to learn something about other religions. At churches located just down the block from a mosque or Hindu temple, there was hardly ever any contact at all. It was as if everybody was standing in an elevator politely pretending that the others didn't exist.

All of this raises an important consideration for discussions of American pluralism. The typical discussion goes like this: Teach people to respect civil liberties in their roles as citizens, but then let them think whatever they want about religion as long as they keep it to themselves. In short, the argument is that people should become bi-level. Which brings us back to the example I mentioned earlier. Tell Muslims in public that you respect their faith, but think whatever you want about them not being saved as long as you keep quiet about it. Unfortunately, that solution just doesn't work. People are never totally silent about their faith, and, if they were, something about their faith would be diminished. Yet their private religious convictions, as we have seen, also deeply affect how likely they are to be tolerant and respectful of others.

The solution is not to be bi-level, but to become more reflective about the relationship between the two levels. Whether one is a Christian exclusivist, an inclusivist, a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, or something else, there are aspects of one's faith that can actually cultivate tolerance, and not only tolerance, but understanding of the other. In interview after interview, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists said that was what they wanted. Not a thin veneer of tolerance, not even respect, but understanding. That, in my view,

is the challenge we all face—as people of faith, as citizens, as Americans.

Thank you.

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