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**Robert Wuthnow: America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity**

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## INTRODUCTION

### Confronting Diversity

ON SATURDAY, September 13, 1997, millions of Americans viewed the funeral of a diminutive Catholic nun who had served India's neediest people for four decades. The internationally televised service was for Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the colorful "Saint of the Gutters" who for years ranked among America's "most admired women" and had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. The funeral followed by only a week that of Britain's Princess Diana, whose tragic death in a speeding automobile pursued by paparazzi in the Pont de l'Alma tunnel in Paris evoked an extraordinary international outpouring of grief.

Both of these events conveyed messages about religious diversity. The 15,000 mourners who packed Netaji stadium for Mother Teresa's funeral included representatives of the world's major faiths: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Catholics, and other Christians. The assembled dignitaries eulogized Mother Teresa's life of compassion, calling it an ideal to which the followers of all religions could aspire. Her words, "I see God in every human being," were repeated like a mantra, as if to affirm the impression, so vividly communicated by religious leaders in a kaleidoscope of traditional robes laying garlands around her casket, that all faiths worship the same God. The religious messages accompanying Diana's death were more ambiguous. Journalists conscientiously included the quiet Islamic burial of her companion, Dodi Al-Fayed, in their coverage, but for a time rumors also circulated that an interfaith romance of such high-profile possibilities had simply been too much, causing some black conspiracy to forever halt it from maturing.

In the following weeks, neither event was remembered especially for its images of religious diversity. Public attention moved on, looking back occasionally to the sad faces of Diana's young sons, William and Harry,

or to new revelations about the clouded circumstances of her hasty departure from the Ritz hotel. It moved on, remembering Mother Teresa's goodness, savoring the thought that humans can indeed aspire to noble achievements, but including questions about public welfare policy and whether charity can be successful in alleviating the suffering of the world's poor. And yet it would have been hard to watch either event without absorbing the message that the larger world, the world that encompasses so many different beliefs and faiths, is becoming smaller, crowding in on itself, forcing a new awareness of its diversity.

These are but two examples illustrating how common exposure to the leaders and followers of non-Western religions has become. News coverage from around the world includes images of religious leaders, adherents, and their places of worship. The nation's expansive economic and military activities render these images more newsworthy than they would have been in the past. Apart from media, exposure to the world's religions comes increasingly through first-hand encounters. During the last third of the twentieth century, approximately twenty-two million immigrants came to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Like the surge of immigration that occurred between 1890 and 1920, most of these immigrants came from countries in which Christians are the dominant religion. Yet, in contrast to that earlier period, the recent immigration included millions of people from countries in which Christians are only a small minority. Thus, in little more than a generation, the United States has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the diversity of major religious traditions represented among its population. More Americans belong to religions outside of the Christian tradition than ever before. The new immigrants include large numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of other traditions and spiritual practices. Their presence greatly increases the likelihood of personal interaction across these religious lines.

Recent immigrants and their descendants generally do not live isolated from other Americans in homogeneous enclaves. They frequently work in middle-class occupations and live in the same neighborhoods as other Americans do. Their mosques, temples, and meditation centers are often located in close proximity to churches and synagogues. The typical American, therefore, can more readily encounter people of other religions as neighbors, friends, and coworkers.<sup>2</sup>

Diversity is always challenging, whether it is manifest in language differences or in modes of dress, eating, and socializing. Seeing people with different habits and lifestyles makes it harder to practice our own unreflectively. When religion is involved, these challenges are multiplied. Religious differences are instantiated in dress, food, holidays, and family rituals; they also reflect historic teachings and deeply held patterns of belief and practice. These beliefs and practices may be personal and private, but they cannot easily be divorced from questions about truth and morality. Believing that one's faith is correct and behaving in ways that reflect this belief may well be different in the presence of diversity than in its absence.

How have we responded to the religious diversity that increasingly characterizes our neighborhoods, schools, and places of work? Has it sunk into our awareness that the temple or mosque down the street is not just another church? Does it matter that our coworkers have radically different ideas of the sacred than we do? Or do we perceive these ideas as so different from our own? Are our views of America affected by having neighbors whose beliefs and lifestyles may run counter to our own? Does it bother us to read about hate crimes directed at Muslims or Hindus?

Historic interpretations of Christian teachings encourage Christians to practice the acceptance and love exhibited by Mother Teresa. Stories about Jesus' willingness to violate social boundaries separating Jews and Gentiles exemplify how Christianity may encourage openness to racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Yet Christianity has also taught that only by accepting Jesus as their savior can believers overcome sinfulness and gain divine redemption. According to some interpretations of this teaching, the followers of other religions must convert to Christianity if they are to know God.

Throughout America's history, our sense of who we are has been profoundly influenced by our religious beliefs and practices. Christianity's claim to be the unique representative of divine truth has been one of these influences. We have thought of ourselves as a chosen people, a city on a hill, and a new Israel. We have considered ourselves defenders of the faith, a God-fearing people, and a Christian nation. At present, we remain one of the most religiously committed of all nations, at least if religious commitment is measured in numbers professing belief in God and attending services at houses of worship. Our identity is still marked by this fact. Many Americans take for granted that we are a Christian society, even if

they implicitly make a place in this notion for Jews and unbelievers. Others take pride in our national accomplishments, our democratic traditions, and our extensive voluntary associations, assuming that these reflect Christian values.

If our understanding of what it means to be American reflects our religious heritage, our collective identity is also influenced by how we think about religious diversity. Until recently, we were able to think of ourselves as a Christian civilization, divided by the historic cleavages separating Protestants from Catholics and, among Protestants, Methodists from Baptists, Presbyterians from Episcopalians, Congregationalists from Quakers, and so on. We were a diverse nation because of the national origins from which the various denominational groups had come and because of racial, ethnic, and regional divisions in which religious disunity was embedded.<sup>3</sup> We took pride in this diversity. It seemed like a mark of distinction.

We clearly do have a long history of religious diversity. This history has affected our laws, encouraging us to avoid governmental intrusion in religious affairs that might lead to an establishment of one tradition in favor of others. And it has taught us a kind of civic decorum that discourages blatant expressions of racist, ethnocentric, and nativist ideas. Yet it will not do, now in the face of new diversity, simply to rewrite our nation's history as a story of diversity and pluralism.

The reality of large numbers of Americans who are Muslims, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Hindus, and followers of other non-Western religions poses a new challenge to American self-understandings. When Christian leaders and their followers think about it, they will have more trouble knowing what exactly to think about their neighbors who belong to these other religions than they ever did simply thinking about the differences between Methodists and Baptists or Protestants and Catholics. That is, *if* they stop to think about it.

But the truth is, we know very little at this point about how ordinary Americans are responding to religious diversity. And, for that matter, we know little more about how religious leaders are dealing with diversity. We do know, for example, that religious leaders occasionally form interfaith alliances that include representatives of the world's major religious traditions, and we know that other leaders are sometimes quoted in newspapers as saying that the followers of a particular religion other than their own are condemned to hell. Such headlines, however, seldom tell us much

about how things are going in local communities or what people really believe and think.

To examine how we are responding to religious diversity and the cultural challenges that go with it, I draw on the results of a three-year research project that included more than three hundred in-depth personal interviews and a new national survey. Most of the interviews were conducted in fourteen metropolitan areas, selected to represent the several regions of the country as well as larger and smaller cities with varying experiences of immigration and diversity. The cities were New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., in the East; Charlotte, Atlanta, and Houston in the South; Columbus, Saint Louis, Kansas City, and Chicago in the Midwest; and Denver, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Portland in the West.

In any part of the country, including cities like these, it is possible for people to go about their daily lives without thinking about religion or religious diversity. To increase the chances of finding people who had thought about these issues, I selected a Muslim mosque, a Hindu temple, a Buddhist temple or meditation center, and (for purposes of comparison) a Jewish synagogue in each city, taking care to choose ones belonging to different traditions and varying in size and location. I then identified a church in the immediate vicinity of each of these fifty-six organizations—often right next door or across the street and never more than a few blocks away.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were then conducted with the pastors at each of these churches and with at least one of the members.<sup>5</sup> Interviews were also conducted with the religious leaders at forty of the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish organizations, and with forty of the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Buddhist members. These interviews were supplemented with thirty-two interviews conducted among people who were either Christians married to non-Christians or non-Christians married to Christians and with forty interviews conducted among people who were eclectic in their religious beliefs and practices.<sup>6</sup> Forty-five interviews were also conducted with local and national leaders experienced in dealing with interreligious issues through work in law and government, public education, chaplaincies, theological education, and interfaith organizations.<sup>7</sup>

The survey—which I will refer to as the Religion and Diversity Survey—was conducted with a national sample of 2,910 adults, selected to be representative of the adult population of the United States. It was conducted by telephone and each set of questions lasted approximately thirty-

five minutes. Each person in the survey was asked questions about his or her contacts with people of religions other than Christianity, attitudes toward these religions, personal religious beliefs and practices, and a variety of other social and demographic characteristics.<sup>8</sup> After the survey, we contacted two hundred of the respondents who were church members and asked them twenty to thirty minutes of open-ended questions about their beliefs and the activities of their churches. We also contacted the pastors at fifty of their churches to find out from them what their churches had been doing vis-à-vis followers of other faiths.

To put this contemporary evidence in historical perspective, I examined hundreds of primary and secondary documents from the past, ranging from books and letters to journal articles and statements issued by religious organizations. The historical material provides information with which to see how Americans at key moments in the past, beginning with the first European explorers and settlers and moving through subsequent phases of American history, made sense of the religious diversity with which they were confronted.

In sorting through the historical and contemporary material, I have focused on the following questions: How have Americans been able to maintain their conviction that Christianity is uniquely true and that theirs is a special nation with a distinctive (even divine) destiny? How has this been possible, given our frequent and now increasing encounters with other religions? And as we do face increasing diversity, how are our beliefs and identities changing to accommodate this diversity?

Behind these empirical questions is an important normative concern: How well are we managing to face the new challenges of religious and cultural diversity? Are we merely managing in the sense of making do, muddling our way by avoiding the issues whenever possible and responding superficially whenever we must? Or are we managing better than that? Are we taking advantage of the opportunities that diversity provides and moving toward a more mature pluralism than we have known in the past?

These are, in my view, among the most serious questions we currently face as a nation. In our public discourse about religion we seem to be a society of schizophrenics. On the one hand, we say casually that we are tolerant and have respect for people whose religious traditions happen to be different from our own. On the other hand, we continue to speak as if

our nation is (or should be) a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles, and characterized by public references to the trappings of this tradition. That kind of schizophrenia encourages behavior that no well-meaning people would want if they stopped to think about it for very long. It allows the most open-minded among us to get by without taking religion very seriously at all. It permits religious hate crimes to occur without much public attention or outcry. The members of new minority religions experience little in the way of genuine understanding. The churchgoing majority seldom hear anything to shake up their comforting convictions. The situation is rife with misunderstanding and, as such, holds little to prevent outbreaks of religious conflict and bigotry. It is little wonder that many Americans retreat into their private worlds whenever spirituality is mentioned. It is just easier to do that than to confront the hard questions about religious truth and our national identity.