

Religious Pluralism in the United States

The apparent discrepancy between high levels of religious identity and an overwhelmingly secular popular culture in the United States can be baffling to outsiders. This paper aims to shed light on that paradox by exploring the role that the country's founding principles and history have played in forging a genuinely pluralistic environment. It will present religious pluralism as a desirable ideal in which Americans continue to place their faith.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign observers of American religion often note the paradoxical existence of both high levels of professed Christian faith and an avowedly secular, even hedonistic, popular culture. There is truth in both observations, but neither fully captures the richness and complexity of the American religious landscape. Most Americans identify themselves as Christian, but American Christianity is astonishingly diverse: hundreds of different Christian denominations coexist, and no one person or group can rightly claim to represent all Christians. Moreover, religious diversity extends well beyond Christianity: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and adherents of many other faith traditions all flourish here, making the United States one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. The United States is also widely known for its secular legal system and materialistic popular culture, yet neither of these has dampened the population's persistent religious vitality.

This paper aims to acquaint readers with both the breadth of this diversity and its historical development in order to provide a more nuanced portrait of the American religious landscape. By way of example, it will pay particular attention to the role of Islam in American society and to the unique case of the Mormons, who are formally known as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. The focus on Islam is a function of the increasing importance and visibility of the approximately three million Muslims now present in the United States. The focus on the Mormons reflects the particularly compelling insight into the religious and social consciousness of the American people that their experience provides.

The paper will also distinguish between the mere diversity of religious faiths and religious pluralism as a normative ideal. The ideal of religious pluralism becomes a reality when adherents of different faith traditions are free to

express their beliefs in ways that uphold the peace and well-being—the common good—of society. In this sense, pluralism is something that is achieved rather than simply given. It has been said that achieving such pluralism entails participating in the very “idea of America” in that the United States was founded on the constitutional ideals of religious freedom, and liberty and justice for all. But Americans have not always lived up to these ideals. Consequently, this paper describes some of the darkest moments in American history, before concluding with a brief consideration of the benefits and dangers of the United States’ commitment to religious pluralism.

Before proceeding, a few comments about the description of the United States as a “Judeo-Christian” nation—which this paper will avoid—are in order. The term “Judeo-Christian” emerged in the nineteen-thirties as a counterweight to Fascist anti-semitism and then served as moral ballast for Western democracies during the Cold War. But the term suffers from a number of shortcomings. To begin with, it too easily conflates the Jewish and Christian traditions. It is true that these traditions hold certain sacred texts in common (namely those which Christians call either the Old Testament or

the Hebrew Scriptures), worship one God, and have in recent history engaged in mutual support of one another. Nevertheless, the Jewish and Christian traditions are distinct to the extent that Christians accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Savior whereas Jews reject such claims. Referring to the United States as a Judeo-Christian nation also overstates the Jewish influence. Jews were present in the United States only in very small numbers until the late nineteenth-century, and even today amount to no more than two percent of the population. Currently about eighty-five percent of Americans identify themselves as Catholic or Protestant Christians. There is immense diversity within American Christianity—dozens of independent Protestant denominations or sects and various sub-groups within Catholicism—but the predominance of Christianity provides crucial context to any discussion of religious pluralism in the United States. Finally, viewing the United States as a Judeo-Christian country overlooks other non-Christian communities of faith experiencing growth in the United States, including Islam. Christianity may still dominate the religious landscape of the United States, but religious pluralism has now become its defining feature.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Religion in the American Colonies

It should be noted at the outset that Americans have not always promoted religious pluralism as an ideal. On the contrary, religious establishment—not religious freedom—was the norm in colonial America. (See the companion

paper on church-state separation for an extended discussion of religious establishment and religious freedom.) Some states maintained an established church even after the United States was founded (the First Amendment only forbade establishment at the federal level), and it was not until 1833 that Massachusetts forswore

establishment altogether. The Puritans, an ascetic group of Protestants, controlled the social and political life of colonial Massachusetts, and other religious practices were not tolerated. In fact, the present state of Rhode Island began as a refuge for banished religious dissidents, including Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, who in the mid-1600s advocated toleration for non-Puritan interpretations of Christianity. The Quakers, a sect many at the time considered non-Christian, were also banished from Massachusetts; those unwilling to leave were subject to the death penalty. Indeed, in what was one of the earliest instances of religious violence in colonial North America, four Quakers were hanged in Boston between 1659 and 1661. Like Massachusetts, Virginia also had an established religion during the colonial period. Virginia's original charter stipulated that its religious life was to be governed by "the ecclesiastical laws of England." Thus, the governor exercised formal jurisdiction over many aspects of church life prior to the revolutionary era.

At the same time that Massachusetts and Virginia maintained their religious establishments, settlers in the other eleven colonies practiced several versions of Protestantism as well as Catholicism. In Maryland, for instance, Catholicism was the primary Christian religion. The Quakers—unwelcome, as we have seen, in Massachusetts—moved to Pennsylvania to avoid persecution. Also in Pennsylvania, a small group of Mennonite Christians—followers of Menno Simons and descendants of the radical Anabaptist wing of the Protestant Reformation—found a safe haven from persecution in Holland in 1683. Mennonites have continued to immigrate to the United States and today constitute a small but viable community, stressing an uncompromising

discipleship of Christ that eschews violence and results in a withdrawal from the modern world. They are congregated primarily in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana.

In the southern regions, Protestant slaveholders often forced their African slaves (some of whom had been Muslims) to become Christians. Many slaves, however, mixed elements of their own spiritual heritage with the Christian faith of their captors. The Native American experience often mirrored that of the African slaves; Catholic and Protestant missionaries aggressively proselytized native peoples who held onto their own spiritual practices in spite of Christian influences. The ability of the African slaves and the Native Americans to preserve aspects of their own non-Christian traditions was a triumph in the face of forced or heavily coerced conversions, but the result was a large amount of religious syncretism. Consequently, the efforts of some colonies to encourage a uniform Christian faith were never likely to prevail in the new world. As a new and vast territory, the United States lacked historical traditions and institutions, and it also abounded in space; these factors naturally fostered religious diversity. Individuals and groups who disagreed with the prevailing religious norms in one place could simply move to another. Thus the Quakers moved to a region distant from the Puritan centers of power and the Mennonites separated themselves entirely from the broader community. When faiths collided, as they often did in Puritan New England, Puritans typically banished religious undesirables to the vast unsettled territories of the new continent. Furthermore, the colonists who arrived from England were making a new American history. Accordingly, the religious conflicts of Europe lost some of their intensity on these shores.

Early National Period

The ratification of the United States Constitution in 1788 ensured that religious diversity would continue to develop in the United States. The First Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the establishment of a national church and guaranteed the “free exercise” of religion, effectively mandating that all religions were equal before the law. (For more about the First Amendment, see the paper on church-state separation.) But as new religious movements emerged in the nineteenth century, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints and the Disciples of Christ, this commitment to “free exercise” would be tested. The forces of immigration, revivalism and denominationalism changed the religious landscape in the United States as the century progressed and strained the United States' allegiance to the idea of free exercise. The series of religious revivals that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century—particularly in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky—dramatically altered American Protestantism. These revivals prompted a great upsurge in religious fervor that later became known as the Second Great Awakening (the First Great Awakening took place in the first half of the eighteenth century). The movement was characterized by large, outdoor worship services called “camp meetings” where individuals either re-committed themselves to Christianity or accepted the faith for the first time. New religious movements such as the Disciples of Christ also emerged in the context of the revivals. Members of the Disciples broke away from the musical and liturgical traditions of Protestantism and Catholicism in the hope that the church might be “purified” and returned to the authentic faith of the earliest Christians. These reform

movements encountered criticism from “mainline” Protestants who questioned the devotion of the revivalists. The revivalists also criticized each other and splintered still further over the issue of slavery. Although the theological disputes were serious, the most enduring legacy of the Second Great Awakening was a greater focus on the individual's relationship to God and Jesus Christ. In fact, evangelical Christians of the twenty-first century who stress a personal encounter with Jesus Christ trace their roots to this nineteenth-century revivalism. (See the paper on Christian Theology for an explanation of evangelical Christianity.)

Sectional Conflict, Immigration and Industrialization

By the 1850s, with the Protestant faith undergoing revival and change, the Catholic church had become the single largest Christian community in the United States. Protestants still outnumbered Catholics, but no single Protestant denomination (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, etc.) claimed as many members as the Catholics. Catholic ranks swelled as a result of immigration in the 1830s and 1840s, as millions of German and Irish Catholics came to the United States. This growth of Catholicism intensified Protestant suspicions of Catholic loyalties and rituals. A fundamental conflict developed regarding the nature of freedom: a prevailing commitment to freedom understood as individual autonomy seemed to conflict with the Catholic view that freedom entailed obedience to eternal law as mediated through the Roman church. Thus there was concern that the primary allegiance of Catholics was to the Pope in Rome rather than to the United States government. Some Protestants

were also suspicious of Catholic rituals; in particular, the practice of venerating saints appeared idolatrous and heretical to them. Moreover, the practice of celibacy among Catholic priests and nuns spawned wild speculation about sexual indiscretions and other improper behaviors in monasteries and convents. These fears occasionally turned violent; for example, a mob burned down a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1838 because of an unfounded accusation that illegitimate babies, fathered by the priests, were buried beneath the building. Six years later, a struggle over the question of which translation of the Bible to use in schools resulted in a series of bloody riots. Anti-Catholicism persisted, but the Catholic community was bolstered by the heightened immigration of the nineteenth century and continued to grow.

The steady flow of immigrants in the late nineteenth century also impacted the practice of Protestantism and Judaism. Between 1870 and 1910, nearly 26 million people immigrated to the United States. In contrast to the immigrations before 1870 that brought mainly German, English, and Irish to the United States, this new wave of people tended to come from Italy, Austro-Hungary, Russia, and China. These immigrants brought along their ethnic expressions of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, which looked and—because of language differences— even sounded different from the usual American ways of practicing these faiths. In both urban and rural communities, Catholic and Protestant communities organized along ethnic lines in order to serve the dominant immigrant group of the neighborhood or region. Chinese immigrants also arrived in California, Oregon, and Washington during this period bringing

Buddhism and other East Asian religious traditions to American shores.

The Jewish population in the United States experienced tremendous growth as a consequence of this massive influx of immigrants. Approximately 2.3 million Russian Jews fled to the United States from 1882 to 1924 to avoid Czarist and Communist persecution, with the majority of these newcomers settling in large cities, especially New York City. Although still relatively small in comparison with Protestant and Catholic populations, the growing Jewish community in the United States stoked feelings of anti-Semitism that only increased as second-generation Jews attained positions of influence as lawyers, doctors, and businessmen. Some Americans—small in number but influential—resurrected old, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, warning of alleged Jewish plans to dominate political and economic life at home and abroad. Henry Ford, the extremely wealthy and influential founder of the Ford Motor Company, spread this sort of anti-Jewish rhetoric in his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, and through other publications committed to perpetuating the bogus idea of a Jewish takeover of American interests. Some anti-semites even blamed the Jews when the American stock market crashed in 1929, while others supported Hitler's Nazi regime in the 1930s. It was not until the end of World War II, when the tragedy of the Holocaust emerged, that such strident anti-Semitism began to subside.

Liberalism, Fundamentalism, and the Modern Era

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Protestants became engaged in a fierce debate about the relationship between religion and

society. The debate was a response not only to contemporary advances in the natural and social sciences that seemed to challenge religious beliefs on matters such as the origins of human life, but also to the improved social standing of many Christians. On the one hand were so-called “modernists” or “liberal” theologians such as Henry Ward Beecher (1831-1887), who sought to reconcile religious belief with modern science. Beecher argued that religion concerned itself with “those things which are invisible,” while science considered tangible, visible aspects of the world. As a result, science and religion were mutually compatible. More than this: the discoveries of the former suggested the truth of the latter, since better medicine or social science, for example, could be seen as reflecting God’s will and ushering in the Kingdom of God. Beecher also sought to allay the anxieties of the new urban middle class by preaching a gospel of “virtuous wealth.” Several aspects of a nascent religious liberalism thus emerge: a tendency to link the natural realm with the Kingdom of God; a tendency to find the core of Christianity in its ethical teachings rather than in its traditional beliefs; and a tendency to view the supernatural in terms of a somewhat romanticized view of Nature. On the other hand, figures such as Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) and the Princeton Seminary scholar J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) rejected these liberal efforts to re-interpret Christianity in light of modern knowledge. They held fast to what they called “the fundamentals” of biblical inerrancy (the belief that the scriptures are an absolutely reliable record of historical events and should be taken literally on matters such as the origins of human life), the authenticity of miracles, and the victory over sin attained by Jesus’ resurrection. This clash between “liberals” (or “modernists”) and “fundamentalists” (or “anti-

modernists”) illustrates the degree to which Protestants have understood their faith differently. Indeed, the disputes reached an impasse by the 1920s to the extent that the optimistic outlook of the liberals was rendered unrealistic by the tragedy of World War I (1914-1918) and the efforts of the fundamentalists to resist the teaching of evolution in the nation’s schools foundered. The latter’s initial success at the famous Scopes trial in 1924 was subsequently overturned and then ridiculed, leaving them marginalized. The issues over which these two groups disagreed still divide liberal and conservative Protestants today. (These issues also divide the Catholic community to the extent that “traditionalist” or “orthodox” Catholics seek to maintain received church teachings whereas “liberal” or “progressive” Catholics try to adapt them to the exigencies of the modern world.)

Another important Protestant movement emerged in the early twentieth century, namely Pentecostalism. (For Christians, the term “Pentecost” refers to the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles of Christ that took place on the day of Pentecost according to chapter two of the book of Acts; it is commemorated on the seventh Sunday after Easter.) The roots of this movement are traceable to the “holiness revivals” of the late nineteenth century, where it was believed that “pentecostal” outpourings marked a new age of the Holy Spirit. More specifically, it can be said the movement officially began on January 1, 1901, when speaking in tongues—the gift of speaking unintelligibly that may look to observers like drunkenness—was witnessed at a holiness revival service in Topeka, Kansas. In 1906, a black American, William J. Seymour, carried the message to the Azusa Street revivals in Los Angeles, thereby precipitating a nationwide

movement. Pentecostalism was a diffuse movement without a centralized authority, and the ideal of the spiritual equality of all people had great appeal in the American context. It is also noteworthy that the movement arose just at the moment that industrialization and technological innovation were revolutionizing the world. Once again, it is possible to discern a response on the part of Christians to the materialism and rapid change of the modern world.

Other developments further transformed the way Americans practiced religion. Rapid urbanization especially enhanced the pluralistic character of American faith traditions. By now, more Americans were living in cities and towns than in rural, agricultural areas. This population shift had the paradoxical effect of weakening churches while simultaneously enhancing them numerically. The variety of belief systems that confronted people in urban areas led many to question the traditions in which they had grown up; conversion to a different Christian denomination, or even to another religion, was not uncommon and thus carried less of a stigma than in Europe. Such diversity of belief also led to agnosticism and atheism since it invited skepticism regarding the truth claims of any one group. At the same time, churches and other religious institutions served as safe havens during a time of upheaval and uncertainty. The need for community and tradition not only among immigrants, but also among Americans in general in an age of rapid change, kept the churches full. Likewise, the severe economic depression of the 1930s known as the Great Depression (1929-1941) led some believers to cling to their religion for solace and hope, but others rejected religion entirely, viewing the suffering of the Depression as proof that God did not exist. This

curious pattern persists to this day as both the religious and the secular populations continue to increase in the United States.

Further advances in the natural and social sciences joined urbanization as another potent force engendering pluralism. By the 1930s, Darwin's theory of evolution was widely accepted among the nation's leading scientists, as were geological data that contradicted the biblical account of the earth's history. The criticism leveled at religion by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and the political theorist Karl Marx prompted a number of theologians and religious writers to engage their works and a small number of Americans to reject religion altogether.

The Post-War Period

After World War II (1939-1945), religion in the United States recovered some of the ground it had lost in the preceding decades. From the late 1940s through the late 1950s, religious affiliation increased so dramatically that by the end of that period, nearly 60% of the American population claimed membership in a Christian church. Some commentators compared the increase to the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But others criticized the content of the renewed interest in religion, arguing that Americans really practiced a "civil religion" that was less an authentic religion than a form of patriotic nationalism couched in religious terms. For these critics, American faith reflected the values of democracy and capitalism rather than the values of the Bible. Nevertheless, it could not be denied that the United States now housed a broad spectrum of religious believers, albeit one centered upon Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

Remarkably, these varied groups have mostly cooperated with one another. The last half-century in the United States has been characterized not only by few serious religious conflicts, but also by significant inter-religious cooperation. In an influential book published in 1955, Will Herberg argued that formerly marginalized Catholics and Jews had been largely assimilated into American society. Being Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish was crucial to American citizenship, but it mattered little (for civic purposes at least) which particular identity was expressed. The argument was confirmed when John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, ran for President in 1960. Kennedy assured Americans during the campaign that his faith would not interfere with his politics and he subsequently won the election, making him the only non-Protestant President to date. Accordingly, Herberg afforded further currency to the idea of an American “civil religion.” Although many critics warned that civil religion weakened specific religious commitment, others argued that civil religion was crucial to American unity. For the latter group, it was precisely the regard for democratic and economic institutions constituting the “American way of life” that enabled believers and non-believers to live together despite their religious differences.

However, this Protestant-Catholic-Jewish “consensus” did not survive long. The number of Buddhists and Hindus in the United States increased dramatically as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, which lifted bans on immigration from the near and far East. A growing counter-cultural movement that challenged the authority of established institutions in the United States also fueled interest in the religions of the East and enhanced

their status as subjects of study and as faiths to embrace. Additionally, the Islamic faith—especially the homegrown Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X—received national attention during these years. With such well-known figures as boxer Muhammad Ali (previously Cassius Clay) converting to Islam, Americans began to take notice of the Muslim presence in the United States.

Americans remained by and large Christian, as evidenced by the rapid growth of Protestant Evangelical churches beginning in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the spirit of religious experimentalism had infused the culture. Americans continued to leave the churches of their parents to attend those that suited their personal interests or lifestyles. And as the United States became an increasingly mobile society—over twenty percent of the population moved at least once a year between 1950 and 1960—Protestant believers often changed their denominational affiliation in order to join the local church in their new neighborhood. Church services also came directly into the home as television became a religious medium in the 1950s. By the 1970s and 1980s, a dozen or so popular “televangelists” reached millions of households with religious programs.

These important changes in the religious landscape solidified the fundamentally diverse character of the United States. The design of the campus chapel at the United States Air Force Academy, constructed in 1962, serves to exemplify religious diversity in the United States at this time. The chapel was built as an interfaith building, with space to host the services of a multiplicity of faiths. Different Protestant groups shared the largest space in the chapel; Catholics

and Jews shared another large room for their services; and Muslims, Buddhists, and other groups shared a small room for their devotions. While Protestants were allocated the largest space—Christians comprise about eighty-five

percent of Americans, and that Protestants constitute about seventy percent of Christians—the inclusion of so many non-Protestant religions in the academy illustrates an enduring American effort to accommodate this diversity.

ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

Until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (noted in shorthand as 9/11), American Muslims had historically received little public attention in the United States. There are three primary reasons for this. First, the low public profile reflected the fact that the American Muslim population is relatively small—about three million people in 2006, comprising approximately one percent of the total United States population. (The United States government does not track religious belief in this country, and estimates of the Muslim population range from 1.8 million to 7 million. Recent statistical survey data yields the estimate of three million. See the “Further Reading” list at the end of this document for more resources on Muslim demographics in the United States.)

Second, the quiet public presence of American Muslims is also attributable to the manner in which Muslims practice their faith. Most Christians and Jews organize themselves on a congregational basis, “joining” a particular local church or synagogue that then serves as a place of worship, religious education, community service and fellowship. The ministers, priests and rabbis who lead these congregations take on the pastoral role of caring for the spiritual health of the particular community. By contrast, Muslims have traditionally understood mosques to be prayer

spaces rather than community centers of this sort; imams accordingly have served more as prayer leaders than pastors to a congregation of “members.” A congregational form of worship is emerging among American Muslims (see the companion paper “Religious Practice in the United States” for more information), but this historic difference in religious practice has resulted in a smaller institutional presence at the local level.

Finally, and importantly, most American Muslims are first or second-generation immigrants who were deeply ambivalent (at least until 9/11) about participating in the secular, non-Muslim society that makes up the mainstream American culture. Although Muslims are more free to practice their faith in the United States than in nearly any other nation, engaging with the broader culture by running for office or organizing political movements was understood, in some sense, to entail complicity with secular values. This perspective has changed considerably in the wake of 9/11, as the last part of this section will discuss.

The Muslim population in the United States was quite small until the twentieth century. The earliest Muslims to arrive on American shores were brought as African slaves prior to the American Civil War (1861-1865); according to

some estimates, ten percent of these slaves practiced the Muslim faith before their enslavement. Because American slave owners prevented non-Christian religious practices, no lasting Islamic communities developed during that time. Near the end of the nineteenth century, however, a relatively large influx of Arab immigrants began to arrive on American shores; most were Lebanese Christians, but some Lebanese and Syrian Muslims settled here as well. By 1914, about a hundred thousand Arabic-speaking immigrants had arrived in the United States. This group was followed by a second wave of primarily Lebanese immigrants who settled in Dearborn, Michigan, and Quincy, Massachusetts after World War I. Muslim immigration increased after World War II as American universities and businesses began an unprecedented period of expansion. It was not until the immigration reform of the 1960s, however, that large numbers of Muslim immigrants settled in the United States and gained citizenship.

By this time a unique religious movement known as the Nation of Islam had risen to prominence among some African Americans. ("African American" is a term used in the United States to describe black Americans generally, many of whom are descended from slaves, not merely Americans who immigrated from Africa.) Founded in 1930 by Wallace Fard and led by Elijah Muhammad from 1934 until his death in 1975, the Nation of Islam synthesized principles and practices of Christianity, Islam, freemasonry and black separatism into a movement for black empowerment at a time when racist laws denied many civil rights to African Americans. Elijah Muhammad sought to maintain absolute control over all aspects of the movement, which

denounced white people as a devilish race and urged black Americans to shun white society. In the early 1960s Malcolm X became the Nation of Islam's most famous minister and himself an icon of black power. A pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, however, led him to convert to Sunni Islam and reject the racial intolerance that defined the Nation of Islam. He was assassinated just a year later.

After Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, his son Wallace (W.D.) Muhammad brought the majority of its members to Sunni Islam, following Malcolm X's example. He changed the organization's name to The Mosque Cares, disavowed its anti-white racism and encouraged members to join the American political mainstream. The movement persists today, with perhaps 50,000 followers. A much smaller number, led by Louis Farrakhan, has maintained the name and central teachings of the Nation of Islam. Although widely known in the United States and indeed around the world, Farrakhan is a marginal figure in American religious and political life today.

Immigrant Muslim communities have faced their own challenges and changes in the last century. Some who arrived after World War II dedicated themselves to assimilating in their new homeland. One 1950s study of the Muslim communities of Toledo, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan found that these Muslims quickly acculturated themselves to life in the United States through language, education, and lifestyle changes. The study found that mosques in these communities seemed to resemble social centers more than spaces for religious practice. One prominent example of the adaptations made in the United States during the 1960s was that

women played a greater role in the establishment and operation of mosques and rarely donned the *hijab*. In contrast, the wave of immigrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s brought with them a more conservative Islamic tradition and pressed for a return to stricter observance of Islamic ritual, prayer, and gender roles. These immigrants labored to distinguish the Islamic way of life from what they saw as the cultural and spiritual corruption of American society. The attempt to sustain Islamic tradition was difficult, as the economic, dietary, and moral guidelines of Islam created challenges for individual believers living in a democratic-capitalist society.

A robust debate over assimilation has continued even as Muslims became more prominent in American public life. In the 1990s a number of foreign Muslim leaders (including Mawlana Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, Syed Abud al-Hassan Ali Nadvi, M. Ali Kettani, Rashid Ghannushi, and Hassan Turabi) wrote for and lectured to American Muslims, urging them to safeguard their Islamic identity. Some of these figures counseled only a limited participation in the broader American culture, but all of them urged Muslims to become good citizens of their adopted country. Although Muslim criticism of American culture remained, and some organizations were created to combat assimilation, several institutional bodies were created to advance Muslim public policy concerns through the democratic process. These included the Islamic Society of North America, the American Muslim Alliance, the American Muslim Council, the Council on American Islamic Relations, and the Muslim Public Affairs Council. Also during the 1990s, the number of mosques nearly doubled, and by decade's end almost 200 Islamic schools had been established.

The deep diversity of Muslims in the United States has largely precluded political unity. Today African American Muslims (most of whom adhere to the Sunni tradition) make up about a quarter of the total Muslim population. Between sixty-five and eighty percent of Muslims in the United States are first- or second-generation immigrants who hail from more than fifty nations. South Asian immigrants make up the largest Muslim ethnic group in the United States, representing approximately thirty percent of the total; Arab Muslim immigrants represent about twenty-five percent of the total. Most American Muslims are of the Sunni tradition, but nearly every Islamic sect has a presence here: Shi'ites, Sufis, Druze, and many others. The different experiences of these groups leads to complex internal dynamics. The immigrant Muslim community in the United States, for example, is on average better-educated and more affluent than the average American; the reverse is true for African Americans as a whole (and African American Muslims as well). Yet African Americans have a long experience of struggling for civil rights in this country, something that has become centrally important to Muslim immigrants in light of the Patriot Act and other domestic policies intended to combat terrorism in the wake of 9/11.

Indeed, September 11, 2001 marked a new chapter in the American Muslim experience. Although the attack on the World Trade Center buildings provoked American anger toward Islamic extremism, the majority of Americans, including President George W. Bush, have not conflated the radical fundamentalism of Al Qaeda with mainstream Islam. Nevertheless, many American Muslims have felt alienated and even threatened since September 2001. Although the immigrant

Muslim community largely supported Bush in the 2000 presidential election because of his support for conservative social policies, since that time his foreign and domestic policies (including those that led to the mistreatment and death of Muslim prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay) have turned many Muslims away from the Republican Party. In 2006 the first Muslim—Keith Ellison, an African American convert to Sunni Islam—was elected to the United States Congress as a member of the Democratic Party from Minnesota.

While the future direction of relations between American Muslims and the rest of American society remains unclear, and while some Americans are wary of Islam, it would be a

mistake to dwell only on the negative. In the aftermath of 9/11, many Americans expressed solidarity with Muslims: some Jewish Rabbis and Christian ministers helped protect mosques, Islamic schools, and businesses; and women across the country donned scarves to show support for the Muslim veil. While far from the ideal pluralist society, the United States is still a nation where more faiths coexist in relative peace than in any other country in the world. To be sure, many challenges and much work lie ahead before Muslims feel fully included in the collage of American religion. However, given the success of the once-persecuted Catholics and Jews, there is reason to be hopeful about the future of Muslims in the United States.

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

The story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are also known as Mormons, fascinates observers of American religion both at home and abroad. From its beginnings in the 1830s, this church has existed in tension with other Christian communities. In fact, until recently the objections of other Christians to Mormonism have been constant and have occasionally turned violent. Much like Catholics and Jews, Mormons became generally accepted into mainstream American life only after World War II. At present, the Latter Day Saints boast 10 million members worldwide, half of whom are in the United States, where they outnumber Jews, Presbyterians and Episcopalians alike.

The church began with a single individual, Joseph Smith, who Mormons believe received revelations from God in western New York in the 1820s. The decisive revelation came in September 1823, when an angel named Moroni directed Smith to intricately inscribed plates of gold that had been buried in a nearby hill. In 1827, Smith began translating the plates, which chronicled the lives of exiles from ancient Israel who purportedly settled in North America during the pre-Columbian era. Smith published the translation in 1830 as *The Book of Mormon*, which Mormons accept as a third (but ultimately decisive) sacred text alongside the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible.

Any attempt to understand Smith and his church must take into account the religious situation of

his day. During the 1820s and 1830s in western New York, a wide range of Christians were participating in revivals in an effort to purify the Christian religion. Smith was very much a part of this movement: his translation of the *Book of Mormon* and his efforts at founding a new church reflected the desire to purify and renew the Christian community. Shortly after the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, Smith and his small band of followers relocated to Kirtland, Ohio. Here Smith received further revelations outlining Mormon doctrine and worship, which he outlined in *The Doctrine and the Covenants*.

Although still a small group in the 1830s, Mormons had missionary success in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. As membership grew, however, so did criticism of the group's beliefs. Most Protestant and Catholic Christians considered Mormons outside the Christian fold. Protestants objected principally to the idea that any book outside of the Bible could be the Word of God, and were suspicious of Smith's miraculous works and his visions of the angel Moroni. Protestants and Catholics alike were alienated by Mormon insistence that their new church was the true Christian church and by their use of the term "gentile" to describe non-Mormons. ("Gentile" is used primarily to describe a person who is not Jewish.) Furthermore, the early Mormon support for polygamy was simply too controversial and shocking for nineteenth century American society.

Mormons routinely suffered persecution for their beliefs. After their settlements in Missouri and Ohio were violently attacked, the Mormon population of these states relocated to Nauvoo, Illinois. Smith became Nauvoo's mayor and served as a lieutenant general in the state militia.

But even this modest degree of power in the hands of the controversial Mormon leader angered many Illinoisans. Smith further alienated the local population when he destroyed the opposition press. As tensions mounted, Smith was arrested for abuse of mayoral power in 1844; soon after, he was murdered in jail by an angry mob. Brigham Young then assumed leadership of the Mormons, and by 1846, at the request of the governor of Illinois, he and the majority of Mormons left the state. A few years later, an arsonist set fire to the Mormon Temple in Nauvoo.

Under the leadership of Brigham Young, the beleaguered Latter-Day Saints made a long westward journey to Utah, hoping to find a refuge from further persecution in that rough and remote territory. The church's teaching on polygamy continued to attract national attention and criticism, even though only a minority of Mormon men actually took multiple wives. In 1862 the United States Congress passed an anti-bigamy act and increased the penalty for those guilty of the offence. (For more on the anti-bigamy act, see the discussion of *Reynolds v. United States* in the companion paper on church-state separation.) Utah's bid for statehood was denied six times largely as a consequence, many felt, of the Mormon advocacy of polygamy. The church revoked the doctrine of polygamy in 1890, and in 1896 Utah became a state.

The Mormons entered the twentieth century determined to shed their negative reputation but not their unique way of life. Almost immediately, the church's national image improved when Reed Smoot, a Mormon Church leader, was elected to the United States Senate in 1903. Although his election stirred up a national debate about Mormon loyalty to the United States, President

Theodore Roosevelt's endorsement effectively quelled the fears over Smoot, who went on to serve thirty years in the Senate. At the same time, Mormon settlements in other Western states exposed a broader segment of the American population to the Mormon way of life, which turned out to be not so scandalous after all. Mormon support of and active participation in American efforts during World War I further improved the reputation of the church. Yet even as these trends toward assimilation continued, the Mormons held on to their identity. Tithing, dietary restrictions, genealogy, strict temple attendance, and baptism for the dead, which included the "gentile" dead, remained practices that set Mormons apart from their Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish counterparts.

By the second half of the twentieth century American suspicion of Mormonism had declined. The Mormons benefited from the highly mobile society that emerged after World War II, which saw Americans of all faiths scattering across the country. In the 1950s and 1960s, with recreational travel on the rise, many non-Mormons vacationed in Utah. American society at large also became better acquainted with the Mormons through popular culture as the acclaimed music of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Osmond

family of entertainers drew positive attention. Successful Mormon politicians such as George Romney also raised the church's profile in a favorable way. Most recently, Mormons enjoyed positive media attention during the Winter Olympics of 2002, held in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Despite these positive developments, criticism of the Mormon Church by no means disappeared. The church remained under scrutiny in the post-war era, receiving sharp criticism for practices like barring people of African descent from serving as priests, a tenet finally abandoned in 1978. In addition, both critics and supporters of the church have been preoccupied with the question of whether Mormons are in fact Christians. Although the Mormons insist they are yet another denomination of the Christian faith, many evangelical Protestants and other Christians dispute this claim. It remains to be seen how Mitt Romney, a Mormon and the former governor of Massachusetts fares in his attempt to win the forthcoming Republican nomination for President. Nevertheless, the Mormons represent a useful test case of American pluralism. The Mormon experience demonstrates how in the span of 150 years a religious group moved from ostracism to general acceptance in the United States.

GENUINE RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS

This paper has described how the ideal of religious pluralism is a continuous process rather than a simple reality in the United States. It has shown how religious establishments lingered during the colonial period. It has also elaborated on how the persecution of minorities undermined

not only the religious liberty of certain people, but the peace and well-being—the common good—of the society as a whole. More significantly, the paper has suggested problems such as the weakening of religious commitment that can come with pluralism. But it has shown finally that

the founding principles of the United States, taken together with its subsequent history, have fostered a genuine religious pluralism that has benefited the nation in no small way. In this final section, the paper will reflect briefly on these benefits and problems, and conclude with an optimistic appraisal of American religious pluralism.

The most obvious problem with religious pluralism, and arguably the most profound, is how any one of the multiple expressions of faith—whether Christian or non-Christian—in the United States can claim to profess the truth about a higher power amidst such diversity. It might appear that religious skepticism if not outright unbelief is inevitable in the American context. Yet this problem is not unique to the United States. Existence of a state-sponsored religion does not negate the fact that multiple faiths exist in the world. Perhaps the greater problem of pluralism is that it fosters a market of religious choice that sometimes leads churches to compete for members by tailoring their message to attract audiences. This situation easily degenerates into individuals “shopping” for a church that best suits their needs. Notions of self-sacrifice and devotion to God are easily lost when religion partakes of a free-market, consumerist mentality.

An approach to religion that values the needs of adherents rather than self-sacrifice and devotion to God seems to reflect the growing tendency of Americans to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” People who follow this pattern maintain belief in a “higher power,” but one not defined by organized religion. They resist joining a faith tradition for a number of reasons, often voicing frustrations with the form and doctrine of many faiths. For them, mature spirituality can

develop outside of established religious communities. While this may be true to an extent, such individualistic attitudes tend to weaken traditional norms of faith.

It is undeniable that these problems are present in the United States and that religious discrimination has been a part of American history. Nevertheless, religious freedom and tolerance have also played significant roles in that history. In other words, the nation’s founding political principles and its experience with large immigrant populations have advanced the pluralist character of the country from its founding. On the one hand, a commitment to pluralism is enshrined in the United States Constitution: the First Amendment ensures the right of “free exercise” in matters of religion. Religious pluralism is thus a reflection of the liberal democratic way of life in the United States. At the heart of modern Western liberal democracy is the idea of individual rights and duties. These rights or freedoms include the *right of conscience*, the individual’s right to make personal decisions about matters of faith, which has played a key role in nourishing religious pluralism. On the other hand, for three centuries, as peoples of various religious persuasions arrived on these shores, religious diversity became an unavoidable fact of American life. Clearly, this heritage has embedded the idea of religious pluralism within the American consciousness.

Naturally, given the liberal-democratic heritage of the United States, Americans usually argue that the benefits of pluralism outweigh the problems. Chief among these benefits is the relative lack of religious violence and the relative persistence of religious belief in the United States. Some of the bloodiest and longest conflicts in history have

occurred as a consequence of religious discord. Yet religious violence has rarely erupted in the United States. While religious disputes in the United States have indeed been bitter at times, the equal protection of all faiths before the law has fostered religious peace. Crucially, this tolerant attitude typical of Americans has not, for the most part, weakened or undermined their religious convictions. Today in the United States, the majority of believers of all faiths understand their particular traditions to truly express the religious dimension of human existence, even as they respect (or at least tolerate) alternative traditions. In other words, the religious beliefs of most Americans have not atrophied as a result of pluralism.

Civil religion has also contributed greatly to the success of pluralism in the United States. This somewhat abstract concept refers to the honor and devotion that Americans have for their country. It is perhaps helpful to think of civil religion as a form of patriotic nationalism couched in religious terms; along such lines, Americans tend to understand their civic lives as complementary to their religious lives. At its best, civil religion is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent reality as mediated through the experience of the American people. There are many examples of civil religion in American life: American currency bears the phrase “In God We Trust;” the Supreme Court begins its sessions with the invocation “God save this honorable Court;” the hymn “God Bless America” (written by Irving Berlin, a Jewish composer born in Russia) is a favored national song. This conflation of religious symbols and civil tradition has played a role in smoothing over the tensions between the

varieties of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. Furthermore, the promotion of national unity through civil religion has touched those who practice non-Western religions. Thus Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who pledge their loyalty to the American social and political system—though not necessarily uncritically—will continue to gain acceptance in society.

The contemporary reality in some Western European countries sheds further light on the American situation. While the countries of Western Europe all have long histories with established religion, their populations have very low rates of church affiliation. The point here is not to argue for a direct causal relationship between religious decline and religious establishment, although many thinkers have made just such an argument, but rather to highlight that the United States' long history of pluralism has tended to generate precisely the opposite of Western European religious apathy: a genuinely religious people.

Overall, Americans cherish their religious freedom and are committed, albeit imperfectly, to the ideal of pluralism. These attitudes stem chiefly from American historical experience. The United States was founded on the principles of liberal democracy, which value individual rights and personal freedoms, and for most of its history has been a religiously free country. In other words, Americans have always lived with religious pluralism in some form. Clearly, the American religious landscape is a dynamic and complicated one. Yet the one constant in the sea of different faith choices is that religion has never been less than vibrant in the United States.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In order to provide an accessible introduction to religion in the United States, this paper has been produced without footnotes and with few direct quotations from secondary literature. It nevertheless reflects the influence of a wide range of scholarly arguments. This annotated bibliography presents a complete list of the texts to which this paper refers, as well as a number of other resources with further information about the topics discussed. Comments following each citation indicate the nature of the text and, where applicable, the extent of the paper's reliance upon it.

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