

A Question for Christians

How Do We Relate to People of Other Faiths?

BY ANNA BEDFORD

“I do what I love,” says Damayanthi Niles. “This is what I know how to do best!” Dr. Niles is an assistant professor of systematic theology at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. Granddaughter of the revered Sri Lankan Christian theologian, D.T. Niles, she says, “No one culture is mine. I have called Singapore, Switzerland and London home.”

Damayanthi’s background has led her to become a passionate advocate of reshaping the dialogue between Christianity and other faiths. In her classes, she invites her students to think deeply about the people they are reading about in their studies. “I try to show my students another way of thinking,” she says. “I ask them, ‘What if you did this, or tried something this way?’ I want them to learn from others and apply what they learn to their own lives.”

Last October, in Louisville, Kentucky, Dr. Niles applied these same principles to a presentation on religious pluralism. Titled “Christian Participation in a Pluralistic World,” the event was part of an ecumenical Festival of Faiths, sponsored by the Cathedral Heritage Foundation*



and held at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Following is a summation of her remarks.

Immigrants No Longer Leave Themselves Behind

When Leif Ericsson of Norway found his way to the North American coast centuries ago, he and his

little encampment were completely shut off from their past. This was also true for succeeding waves of immigrants until the mid-twentieth century. They left behind almost everything that had been dear to them back home. No more. Immigrants no longer have to give up their old world. They stay in touch through television; they communicate by Internet and telephone; they fly back for family celebrations and religious holidays. They remain who they are, even after they become U.S. citizens.

In her book, *A New Religious America*, Diana Eck reminds us that the United States changed dramatically in 1965 when amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act were put into place. Before that, what was thought of as a moral barrier was in place. Strict quotas barred Asians from immigrating because Westerners could not envision other ways to be an American besides Western, Christian ones. But today, 10.7 percent of Americans are foreign born; of these, 43 percent are Asian and 38.8 percent are Latin American. And they are, indeed, showing us other ways to be American people of faith.

*The Cathedral Heritage Foundation is a nonprofit organization based at the Cathedral of the Assumption, Louisville, Kentucky. Its mission is to promote interreligious understanding and create a spiritual center for the whole community. Visit cathedral-heritage.org for more information.

True theology, after all, is not so much what you think, but how you act. Belief is about behavior; we are judged by the passion by which we love.

—Damayanthi Niles



Susan Jackson Dowd

So no wonder established immigrants are asking, how many languages and customs can we absorb? How much *pluribus* is too much? How do we live with those who are of us, but not like us? In the United States, since all are immigrants, accepting diversity is fundamental to our self-understanding. We must resist the paradigm that says, “Unless we hate that which we are not, we cannot love who we are.”

True, Christians have constructed the theological landscape in this country. We have claimed, “He is our God, and we are his people.” We’ve enjoyed the luxury of having the most power, which automatically allowed us to speak for everyone. We forgot that there were Christians around the world long before there was an American understanding of Christianity. Now, God’s gift is to take the privilege of dominance away from us. Erasmus once said to Martin Luther, “Are you alone wise?” In other words, “Does God speak only to you?” It’s a fair question. And new voices are saying, “Do not presume to talk for us.” In response, we Christians must ask ourselves, “How do we participate in the new world God is creating around us?”

Pluralism: A Fact of Life and Faith

I propose that we need to dismantle all absolute claims and become intolerant of intolerance.

We can begin by re-visioning our understanding of mission. We can begin by learning to listen. Pluralism is a fact of American life—catalyst for dialogue. It may be hard for us to accept it. An old Tamil proverb says: Just because a father gives birth to a daughter, he may not be the best judge of her beauty! So with us. We need to become vulnerable to those all around us who are worshiping God in their way, not ours. We must learn from them.

This means more than inviting international students to eat Thanksgiving dinner at your house. Open yourself up to your Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim neighbors. Eat their food in their home. Lose control. Let them lead you into a new way of relating to people of other faiths. As Christians, we believe that God’s self is multiple, a Trinity. It takes all three to be God because God is, in the deepest sense, relational. Therefore, we are called to embrace God’s function in creating a pluralistic world. A wasteful abundance is God’s intention, so we can relax and enjoy the variety God has created.

If you don’t believe this, then you must think that pluralism is a mistake. But whose? God’s? Or ours? What if the Tower of Babel was a blessing, not a cursing? You can read the story (*Gen. 11: 1–9*) as the result of unmitigated human perversion, or as the Tower of Meaning—God’s way

of pushing humankind into creation. Remember that at Pentecost (*Acts 2: 1–12*), everyone in the crowd heard the good news in their own language. God spoke to them in their identity, enriching it by an acceptance of plurality.

The Church’s task is to be the people of God in the midst of *all* people. We must resist anything that negates the world, that does not foster abundant life. Christ is the way that Christians see God in the world—God among us. Christ is the model of how to be human. Understanding this makes the life of Christ of central importance. The impact of Christ’s death and resurrection make sense only in the context of his extraordinary life.

Dialogue with non-Christians is not fighting, but listening. The gift of partnership is loss of control—something that is difficult for a majority or power group to accept. Do you fear this? Are you afraid that dialogue with people of other faiths will lead to doubt on your part? Don’t worry. Doubt leads to better faith because it clarifies understanding.

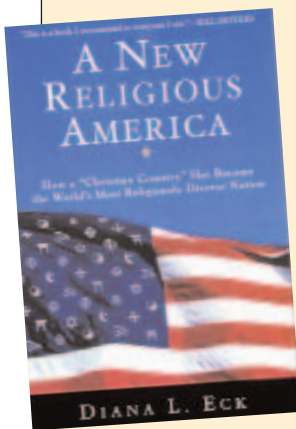
When you open yourself to persons of other faiths, some Christians will criticize you. Don't be troubled by it. True theology, after all, is not so much what you think, but how you act. Belief is about behavior; we are judged by the passion by which we love. Tell the critics: "You are a child of God, but until you can see

me as a child of God, I will not play this game nor be defined by it."

And that is what Americans of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish and other faiths are saying to us, too. "See us and accept us as we are." Let us not hesitate to share with them what we hold precious as Christians, but let us do it with humble

hearts, for they, too, are children who are loved by God, and with whom God is working and revealing truth. 🍷

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***A New Religious America:
How a "Christian Country"
Has Become the World's Most
Religiously Diverse Nation***

By Diana L. Eck
New York: HarperSanFrancisco,
2001

How do I articulate my faith in a world in which neighbors, colleagues and students live deeply religious lives in other communities of faith?

This is one of the important questions that religious scholar Diana Eck addresses in her highly-acclaimed book on religious diversity in the United States. A professor at Harvard University, she began asking questions when she noticed she was no longer teaching about world religions in the abstract. Over the years, her classes were filling up with students who were themselves representatives of those religions in their home communities around the country. Many of them were from families who had immigrated to the United States two or three generations earlier. They were Americans, not internationals.

To find answers, Eck enlisted 80 of her students—Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and others—in the Pluralism Project. She asked them to go home, interview friends and relatives and assess the joys, sorrows, strengths and difficulties they encountered in practicing their faith in their community.

The results were surprising. The students discovered strong worshiping communities in small towns and large cities. They found Muslims meeting in a U-Haul dealership, Hindus gathering in a mattress showroom, and Buddhists using a coat closet as a shrine. They also found many well-established mosques, temples and meeting centers of architectural significance from Montana to Maine.

Among other things, they learned that American Hindus number more than one million, there are more

American Muslims than there are Presbyterians, and that Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world.

Diana Eck and her cadre of researchers soon realized that most Christians aren't aware of the transforming landscape of U.S. religion. Many of those who have seen changes within their own communities are wary of them, even when the influx is of fellow Christians—Latin American Catholics and Pentecostals, for example. Even though intellectually they cherish the Constitutional right to free practice of religion, many people feel uncomfortable thinking of the United States as anything but a Christian country.

Eck cites distressing examples of the violence and hate crimes such fear engenders.

Eck's view is that Christian faith is not threatened, but broadened and deepened by studying other traditions. She asks: In a world of global economics and transnational political awareness, how can we live on Friday, Saturday and Sunday with provincial ideas of God that center on ourselves and our tribe? Shouldn't we be a little more humble? She believes that to encounter Americans of unfamiliar faith traditions does not mean compromising one's own faith. Rather, it allows one to define faith by its roots and not its borders. As a United Methodist, she finds that only as a Christian pluralist can she be faithful to the mystery and presence of God in the whole world.

The book contains eye-opening chapters on Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim history and contemporary practice in the U.S. Eck recognizes that Protestant Christianity still holds a vision of a Christian America. She points out that, while commitment to religious freedom implies acceptance of religious diversity, this has always been difficult for us to embrace. The Pilgrims came to Massachusetts looking for freedom to worship as they chose. They envisioned a biblical commonwealth shaped by their view of Christianity. Not only did they regard Native American rituals as pagan, but within a decade they had also warned a Sephardic Jew out of Boston, forced dissenter Anne Hutchinson to flee to Rhode Island, and hanged four Quakers. Until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, quotas systematically excluded most Asians, who brought with them diverse faith traditions.