

November Reflections

Christians in a Multireligious Society

Although the United States has an overwhelming majority of Christian citizens, it is one of the most religiously diverse nations on earth, according to the Harvard Pluralism Project set up in 1991 to study religious diversity in our country. Our national commitment to religious liberty, enshrined in the First Amendment, has set a solid foundation for attracting immigrants of diverse religious backgrounds. From 1820 to 1920 about 30 million Catholics, at first mostly from Ireland and Germany and later from eastern and southern European countries, came to the United States. In the 1920s, Congress passed laws severely limiting immigration, but the 1965 Immigration Reform Act once again opened the door to immigrants. By eliminating national origins quotas, this law enabled more Africans and Asians, with their rich diversity of religious traditions, to settle here. Although we have no precise statistics on religious affiliation, conservative estimates suggest we have three to four million Muslim Americans and at least two million Buddhists, including many converts. Large cities in the United States typically have Muslim mosques, Jewish synagogues, Hindu temples and Buddhist meditation centers as well as a wide variety of Christian churches. In their ordinary lives, Christians may well encounter professionals with diverse religious backgrounds: a Hindu doctor, a Buddhist engineer, a Jewish teacher or a Muslim lawyer.

Despite the growing influence of other religions in the United States, Christians continue to constitute a solid majority, with all Protestants combining for just over 50% of the total population and Catholics 25%. Those citizens who report no religious affiliation constitute the fastest growing cohort, having doubled to 20% in the last few decades. Members of religious traditions other than Christian constitute about 5% of the total population of the United States. This means Christians are faced with the challenge of living in a religiously pluralistic society, with almost 25% of their fellow citizens holding some other fundamental worldview.

The situation is complicated by the diversity within the Christian world, which includes Mainline, Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants as well as Catholics, Orthodox Christians and the indigenous Mormons. Among Christians, attitudes toward the world religions vary greatly, ranging from outright rejection as pagan constructs to acceptance as legitimate vehicles of divine salvation. Some Christians view secular humanists as enemies while others see them as potential allies in the project of humanizing our culture.

Catholics steeped in the thrust and spirit of Vatican II are in a good position to seize the opportunities and to accept the challenges of living in our multireligious country. The Council taught that all people have a right to religious liberty, a right guaranteed by our First Amendment. As Catholics, we have no need to turn the United States into a modern version of Christendom, nor do we seek a privileged position. Our experience tells us that religion can best flourish in conditions of freedom. Recalling the experience of Catholic immigrants, who, despite the nativist prejudice, made it into the mainstream of American life, should encourage Catholics today to be more understanding of recent immigrants struggling to make it.

Recognizing that the division among Christians “scandalizes the world,” Vatican II called upon Catholics to enter into dialogue with their separated brothers and sisters and “to take an active and intelligent part in the world of ecumenism.” The ecumenical movement in the United States has made great progress over the last half century as Catholics and Protestants have gotten to know one another better and found ways to cooperate for the public good. Although much of the early ecumenical passion has faded, the groundwork is set for renewed collaboration among Christians to create a more harmonious multireligious society.

Due to the remarkable developments of Vatican II, Catholics can approach the world religions, convinced that they have a constructive role to play in God’s plan to save all people. Through “sincere and patient dialogue” Christians can learn “what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth” (Ad Gentes 3). The Catholic Church “rejects nothing which is true and holy” in the world religions, whose teachings and practices “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people” (Nostra Aetate 2). The Council encouraged “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions,” conscious of their “spiritual and moral goods” (ibid). Ongoing dialogue has highlighted some of the moral convictions common to the world religions: do not kill but help others to flourish; do not lie but stand for the truth; do not steal but work for justice; do not practice immorality but treat all others with respect. Inspired by Vatican II, Catholics are well prepared to play a leading role in promoting interfaith dialogue and collaboration in our multireligious country.

The Pastoral Constitution, a groundbreaking Council document, prepared the way for Catholics today to dialogue and collaborate as well with the religiously unaffiliated who care about human flourishing and societal justice. Christians share “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of the contemporary world. “Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo” in the Christian heart. The Council wants to enter into dialogue with the “whole human family” so that “it might be fashioned anew” and “brought

to its fulfillment.” Thus, the Council encourages Christians to work with secular humanists in the great cause of human flourishing, confident of the compelling power of Christian humanism and open to the legitimate insights of non-believers.

Since the Council, it has become common to talk about four different settings for dialogue: everyday life, collaborative service, theological discussion and shared prayer. Much of the interaction between Christians and members of other religions occurs in everyday life. A Christian husband, for instance, shares in the meditation practices of his Buddhist wife. A priest learns about Islam from his Muslim barber. A Catholic financial adviser has lunch and serious conversation every week with his Jewish colleague. A collegian invites her Hindu boyfriend to come to Sunday Mass with her. A Muslim doctor invites Jewish and Christian friends to a meal breaking the Ramadan fast. Opportunities for informal interfaith dialogue abound in our pluralistic society. We all can advance the cause of interreligious harmony by seizing more of the opportunities readily available.

In the United States, Christians have many opportunities to participate with others in a dialogue of service designed to help those in need. The Red Cross sponsors interfaith blood drives. Christians and Muslims organize to bring meals to a Jewish widow in the neighborhood who is now housebound. Synagogues, Churches and Mosques work together to provide food for a central city distribution center. Collegians representing the Abrahamic traditions as well as Eastern religions work together to help clean up a poor neighborhood near campus. The dialogue of service is most meaningful when it creates close personal relationships and promotes religious understanding.

Christians striving to live their faith in our multireligious society can benefit from the many interfaith dialogues carried on by scholars. Most of these scholarly discussions between Christians and representatives of the world religions go on without much publicity or public awareness. We all benefit indirectly, however, when these discussions help overcome ignorance and prejudice while revealing common ground and areas of honest disagreement. This progress gradually filters down to the general population, helping to create an atmosphere more open to dialogue and cooperation.

A good example is the ongoing Catholic-Muslim dialogue initiated by the American bishops in the early 1990s. Meeting regularly in three different regions across the country, scholars from both sides have produced studies on significant issues: for example, marriage and family life, with practical suggestions for interfaith marriages; and religious education, with guidelines on how Christian educators should teach about Islam and vice versa. This scholarly work has not been easy, with each of the major topics taking several years to complete the discussion and produce acceptable documents. Since Christians and Muslims together constitute over half of the earth’s population, it is vital that these two religions learn to live in harmony and to cooperate in creating a more peaceful world. The scholarly dialogue that takes place in the safe environment of the United States has an important role to play in promoting harmony and peace in more troubled places.

Some Christians have experienced, not only the stimulation of interfaith dialogue and the satisfaction of collaborative service, but also the spiritual enrichment of praying and worshipping with members of other religions. A great example of shared public prayer occurred in Assisi, Italy, on October 27, 1986, when Pope John Paul II joined with Orthodox patriarchs, Jewish rabbis, Muslim imams, Hindu priests and Buddhist monks to pray for world peace, not in the same words, but all in their own style and language. It was an iconic moment in the history of interfaith dialogue, one that captured the imagination of people around the world and suggested possibilities of shared prayer at the local level. After the September 11th terrorist attack of 2001, a good number of Christians joined with fellow citizens of other faiths in public events that included shared prayer. Praying with others in a multireligious society demands sensitivity. Many Christians who lead prayers at multifaith gatherings try to use language that is inclusive and not offensive: for example, praying in the power of the one Spirit and not through Christ our Lord. Early in his papacy, Pope Francis exemplified this sensitivity by praying silently with a group of journalists that included persons who did not share his Christian faith. Once again, he has reminded us, through symbolic action, of the spirit of Vatican II.

As we take on the general challenge of living effectively in a multireligious society. Francis warns us against a culture war mentality focused on the divisive issues of abortion, gay marriage, and contraception. The pope advises us, instead, to stress the fundamental gospel message of love and mercy and to follow a dialogic approach that encounters others “in a spirit of openness and without prejudice,” recognizing that “others always have something to give” and that dialogue is “the only way for the life of peoples to progress.”