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# Religious Diversity and the American Promise

In his book *What It Means to Be an American*, Michael Walzer observes that political theorists since the time of the Greeks have generally assumed that diversity and democracy do not mix well together. A state works best when it is made up of human beings who view themselves, as a consequence of certain bonds of identity, as a single people. Uniformity of belief was understood as especially important for peaceful participatory societies. Walzer summarizes the view of generations of political theorists thus: “One religious communion, it was argued, made one political community.”<sup>1</sup>

A few paragraphs later, he writes, “The great exception to this rule is the United States.”<sup>2</sup> The American Founders set for themselves the remarkable task of building a religiously diverse democracy, an experiment never before tried at such a scale in human history.

What will it take for the American experiment to thrive in the twenty-first century? That is the question that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has set for itself in launching the *Our Compelling Interests* series. We find ourselves in the midst of what William H. Frey calls, in an essay written for the first volume in the series, “the diversity explosion . . . a demographic force that will remake America.”<sup>3</sup> Will the United States leverage the current diversity

explosion to promote the common good, or will it blow up in our faces in forms such as open prejudice, rampant discrimination, deeper disunity, further inequality, and identity conflict?

This volume focuses on the topic of religion. The growing immigrant and minority populations in the United States bring different colors, languages, foods, and family patterns, as well as varied expressions of faith. Religion gives individuals a powerful sense of purpose, and it also induces guilt that brings them to the edge of despair. It binds what would otherwise be a random collection of people into a caring community while simultaneously providing a sacred justification for painfully excluding others. Religious language has given the United States some of its most enduring symbols (“city on a hill,” “beloved community,” “almost chosen people”), and it is the source of a significant amount of the nation’s social capital and the inspiration behind many of our most vital civic institutions (universities, hospitals, and social service agencies, for example). This is not an unalloyed good. In a diverse society, symbols, networks, and institutions can just as easily be mobilized in the service of violent conflict as inspiring cooperation.

Of all the various forms of diversity that we speak of these days (race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and so on), religious diversity may be the one that the Founders came closest to getting right. These (generally) wealthy, (loosely) Christian, (presumably) straight, (most assuredly) white male slaveholders managed to create a constitutional system that protected freedom of religion, barred the federal government from establishing a single church, prevented religious tests for those running for political office, and penned more than a few poetic lines about building a religiously diverse democracy.

Here, for example, is George Washington responding to the Jewish leader Moses Seixas, who wrote the first president a letter asking about the fate of Jews in the new nation: “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of

one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.”<sup>4</sup>

James Madison believed that allowing religious diversity to flourish was essential to establishing social peace. In the *Federalist Papers*, he stated, “The degree of security . . . will depend on the number of interests and sects.”<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin Franklin appeared to take that counsel to heart when he decided to make a financial contribution to every one of the diverse religious communities building a house of worship in Philadelphia. Just in case there were groups that were not represented, Franklin raised money for a hall in Philadelphia that was, in his words, “expressly for the use of any preacher of any religious persuasion who might desire to say something,”<sup>6</sup> and he explicitly stated that it would be open to Muslim preachers. The religious leaders of Philadelphia expressed their gratitude to Franklin in a variety of ways, including by fulfilling Franklin’s wish to celebrate July 4 “arm in arm” and also observing his funeral together.

The Founders intended for the ethic of religious pluralism they were nurturing at home to extend to international relations. President John Adams signed a treaty with Tripoli in 1791 that stated, “As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion,—as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Mussulmen,—and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the countries.”<sup>7</sup>

And they were not the first European settlers on the Eastern Seaboard to express such sentiments. Over a century earlier, a group of citizens in present-day Queens, concerned about the threats that Director General Peter Stuyvesant of what was then New Amsterdam

(now New York) was leveling against Quakers, gathered to draft a statement of welcome that became known as the Flushing Remonstrance. They wrote, “The law of love, peace and liberty in the states extend[s] to Jews, Turks and Egyptians, as they are considered sonnes of Adam. . . . Our desire is not to offend one of his little ones, in whatsoever form, name or title hee appears in, whether Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist or Quaker, but shall be glad to see anything of God in any of them, desiring to doe unto all men as we desire all men should doe unto us.”<sup>8</sup>

And Roger Williams, banished from John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony for disagreeing with the Puritan insistence on enforcing religious law with civil authority, had this to say about the prospect of a religiously diverse nation in 1644: “And I aske whether or no such as may hold forth other *Worships* or *Religions*, (*Jewes*, *Turkes*, or *Antichristians*) may not be peaceable and quiet *Subjects*, loving and helpful neighbours, faire and just *dealers*, true and loyall to the *civill government*? It is cleare they may from all *Reason* and *Experience* in many flourishing *Cities* and *Kingdomes* of the World, and so offend not against the civill State and Peace; no incurre the punishment of the *civill* Sword.”<sup>9</sup>

It is this long tradition that Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States, recalled during his first inaugural address, standing on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, looking out toward the Lincoln Memorial:

For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering a new era of peace.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways the United States has lived out this vision. We are the most religiously devout nation in the West, and the most religiously diverse country in the world, at a time of religious tension, conflict, and crisis. How do we affirm and extend the ethic that welcoming religiously diverse people, nurturing positive relations among them, and facilitating their contributions to the nation is part of the definition of America? Responding to that question is the task of this book.

For my approach, I have chosen to foreground the Muslim situation in America, using it as a window through which to examine broader themes about America and religious diversity. At earlier times in American history, Mormons, Catholics, and Jews would have served as useful vehicles to illustrate the challenges of our religiously diverse democracy. Twenty or forty years from now, Hindus, Buddhists, or atheists may be the most relevant community to focus on. At this moment, the controversies swirling around Muslims are clearly the most salient, and they raise the sharpest questions about America's traditions, values, and identity.

My section is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, which you are reading now, lays out some of the key themes and tensions regarding American religious diversity. Chapter 2 tells the story of Cordoba House, more commonly known as the Ground Zero Mosque, using it as an illustration of a Muslim group seeking to serve the nation in a very American way, only to be thwarted by a very un-American religious bigotry. Chapter 3 delves into the anti-Muslim atmosphere of the Trump era, highlighting how the combination of Islamophobic rhetoric, discriminatory policies, and tacit support for anti-Muslim groups has raised even higher barriers to the contributions of Muslims to American society and violated the ethic of religious pluralism. Chapter 4 contextualizes the current anti-Muslim atmosphere within the broader arc of American history, underscoring its similarities to anti-Catholic nativist movements of the past and noting that the positive pluralist response to those nativist movements provided the United States with its

self-understanding as a “Judeo-Christian” nation. Chapter 5 asks what it means for a religious community to be or become “American” and explores the manner in which American Muslims are going about this process. Chapter 6 presents a case study of a group called the Inner City Muslim Action Network, which exemplifies, in my mind, America, Islam, and American Islam. Chapter 7 is a short postscript.

The story of Keith Ellison serves as a preview for many of the themes I will discuss in my section. In 2006 Ellison, an African American attorney from Minnesota, became the first Muslim elected to Congress. Glenn Beck, the controversial media personality, had Ellison on his show and marked the historic occasion by saying, “Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.”<sup>11</sup> Representative Virgil Goode of Virginia objected to Ellison’s choice to use a Qur’an during his private swearing-in ceremony, writing to his constituents that Ellison’s decision was a “wake up” moment for America. The danger was clear: if the nation allowed this to happen, it was a slippery slope to “many more Muslims being elected to office and demanding the use of the Koran.” For Goode, the threat was connected to foreigners: “I fear that in the next century we will have many more Muslims in the United States if we do not adopt the strict immigration policies that I believe are necessary to preserve the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America.”<sup>12</sup>

But in the case of Ellison, the description didn’t quite fit. Ellison politely pointed out to his fellow congressman that he was the descendant of slaves and that his ancestors had been in this country since 1742. Given that as many as 25 percent of the human beings ripped off the west coast of Africa and brought as slaves to the United States were Muslim, Ellison may well have been “reverting” to his ancestral religion when he converted to Islam in college. In any case, if legitimacy is bestowed by length of ancestry in the homeland, Ellison’s is impressive.

The episode, and indeed Ellison himself, casts light on several interesting dynamics, many of which I will discuss over the course

of my section. The first and most obvious is that the term *Muslim* is understood to refer to an alien and a threat. In fact, *Muslim* has become something of a multiple-use slur, meaning that it does not necessarily refer to a belief system or religious community but is frequently invoked to signal disgust for any range of minority identities. Don't like the Vietnamese immigrants who own the coffee shop next door, the Mexican laborers doing roof work on your apartment building, the black executive? Call them Muslim. One can almost see the lips of certain people who use it, say, in reference to Barack Obama, curling into a sneer.

On a somewhat different note, Ellison's victory highlighted the internal diversity within the Muslim community in the United States, which is in fact one of its signature qualities. As Su'ad Abdul Khabeer explains in her book *Muslim Cool*, the standard frame on Muslims in America is the "diaspora narrative in which Muslims emigrated from an 'Islamic homeland' to the 'West.'" But while Muslims from at least seventy-seven different countries live in the United States, a 2017 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding report found that approximately half of Muslims were foreign-born and half were native. Moreover, according to the ISPU study, Muslims were the only faith community in the United States with no majority race.<sup>13</sup>

Inevitably, there are tensions between these various communities. Given the volatility of the Muslim world, it stands to reason that diaspora communities carry some vestige of the prejudices, rivalries, and animosities they grew up with, whether it is Salafi versus Sufi, Sunni versus Shia, Pakistani versus Indian, or Asian versus Arab. This is illustrated by the mosques established by first-generation immigrants—this one for Bosnians, that one for Syrians, and so on.

What often draws these various communities together is a shared immigrant identity, but the binding tie of that solidarity often widens the divide between it and another Muslim social experience, that of the African American community. The tension

between immigrant identity and African American identity is intensified by a stark class difference, with African American Muslims reporting significantly lower incomes than Arab American, Asian American, and white American Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to highlighting the interesting ethnic and racial diversity within the Muslim community, Ellison's election underscored "authenticity" tensions as well. While his conversion experience in college took place within a largely African American Muslim context, Ellison is not principally a product of mosques or other Muslim institutions, and he was a relatively unknown quantity in those spaces before the controversy surrounding his election. In fact, Ellison writes in his memoir that he views religion as a private matter and that he's relatively flexible when it comes to religious practice: "If I were Jewish, I would probably be a reform Jew. If I were Christian, I would be one of those come-as-you-are non-denominational Christians. . . . I don't believe in following a strict set of rules to prove my love for God or to prove my faith."<sup>15</sup> Ellison is a vocal proponent of gay marriage and other LGBT rights, and while he has done a great deal to raise awareness of the plight of the Palestinians in Congress, he has also visited Israel and written about the importance of security for the Jewish state.<sup>16</sup>

Both these positions and his relaxed approach to Muslim ritual practice put Ellison at odds with the people who built Muslim institutions like mosques, schools, and advocacy organizations. In fact, for years, the speeches that the leaders of those institutions gave emphasized the importance of strict religious observance, fidelity to the Palestinian cause, and social conservatism. These were the three pillars of Muslim identity, especially in immigrant Muslim communities. Ellison's election put the leaders of these groups in something of a bind. Were they really going to eschew the first Muslim elected to Congress, especially after he was the recipient of ugly Islamophobic attacks, because he didn't toe the line that they drew in the sermons they gave in their mosques? At the same time, by welcoming him onto center stage in their spaces, were

they implicitly erasing that line, and with it both their definition of what it meant to be Muslim *and* their authority to be the ones doing the defining?

In this way, the tensions and conversations taking place within the Muslim community in America mirror some of the tensions and conversations taking place within the wider national community. Just as America has to deal with legacies of discrimination against a variety of minority groups, so does Islam have its own marginalized minorities who are now demanding recognition. Just as America is struggling to deal with its internal ethnic and racial diversity, so are Muslims. Just as ethnic and racial differences in America are linked with class differences, so it is with Muslims. Just as there is a fraught authenticity dialogue taking place within America, so American Muslims are negotiating their own authenticity tensions. Just as high-profile terror attacks by Muslims and Islamophobic discrimination against Muslims have complicated the “who is a real American” dialogue across America, so has it complicated the “who is a real Muslim” dialogue within American Islam. And matters are made all the more interesting by the fact that, until quite recently, a common way for immigrant Muslims to prove their Islamic authenticity was to distance themselves from American cultural patterns. These Muslims now find themselves in a moment in which some of their fellow Americans think that exhibiting open prejudice toward Muslims is a way of displaying patriotism.

Ellison’s election was also a reminder of the core values of America when it comes to welcoming religious diversity. He of course did take his private oath of office on the Qur’an, and a famous one at that—the translation owned by Thomas Jefferson. In a delicious irony, the congressional district that Virgil Goode represented happened to include Jefferson’s Monticello estate. It was near that site that Jefferson, in 1776, had scribbled down this quote from the English philosopher John Locke: “Neither Pagan nor Mahamedan nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of

the Commonwealth because of his religion.” And it was not far from where Jefferson, building on Locke, had drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which became the template for subsequent religious freedom laws in the United States, most notably those contained in the First Amendment.<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting to note that this is not the first time that Muslims have played a role in debates about what it means to be an American. As Denise Spellberg writes in her masterful *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an*, “As they set about creating a new government in the United States, the American Founders, Protestants all, frequently referred to the adherents of Islam as they contemplated the proper scope of religious freedom and individual rights among the nation’s present and potential inhabitants. . . . [They] chose Muslims as the test case for the demarcation of the theoretical boundaries of their toleration for *all* believers.”<sup>18</sup>

And so, this section may be viewed as one part of a conversation on foundational themes that has taken place across the ages.

## Religious Diversity as a Compelling Interest

Previous volumes in this series make a powerful connection between diversity issues and certain forms of inequality. Earl Lewis and Nancy Cantor, in their opening essay for the introductory volume, write, “The structural lines that simultaneously define diversity and solidify inequality along familiar divides—of race, ethnicity, class, home, or birthplace—have in some real way intensified since the civil rights legislation of the 1960’s.”<sup>19</sup> Thomas Sugrue writes about “the entanglement of growing diversity and entrenched inequality,”<sup>20</sup> showing that the persistent gaps in educational attainment and economic stability between whites on the one side and blacks and Latinos on the other constitute a major problem.

But it is not, at least at the macro level, the principal problem faced by religious minorities in the United States, including Muslims.

A large-scale study by the Pew Research Center in 2007 found that a significant percentage of Muslims were comfortably middle class.<sup>21</sup> CNN reported that Muslims have the second-highest level of educational attainment among major religious communities in the United States.<sup>22</sup> The Pew Research Center found that religious minorities of varying stripes—Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims—all have higher levels of four-year college completion than the average American.<sup>23</sup>

There is, of course, no shortage of examples at the personal or local level of prejudice having a deleterious impact on a Muslim family's business or a Muslim student's experience in school. And there are stark differences regarding educational and economic attainment within the Muslim community, but these appear to be tied more to racial identity than to religious identity. All in all, the macro-level data on economic and educational achievement suggest that this is not the most compelling reason why we ought to be interested in engaging religious diversity.

The problems currently facing Muslims take other forms—racist rhetoric that frames Muslims as threats, bigoted civil society movements attempting to block the establishment of Muslim institutions, and discriminatory treatment in immigration policy. These are just some of the barriers Muslims face that hamper their full civic and political participation in American society.

How does differential treatment of religious minorities impact our nation's compelling interests? It is, in the first place, a violation of America's founding ideals. Here is George Washington in 1783, writing to a group of largely Catholic recent arrivals from Ireland: "The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations And Religions; whom we shall wellcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment."<sup>24</sup> Such ideals get enshrined in laws requiring equal treatment of all people.

And why is keeping faith with this ideal, and affirming and extending the laws and policies that protect it, a compelling interest? Because a democracy requires the contributions of its citizens. Unlike in a totalitarian system, where all activity is directed by the state, in a democracy it is ordinary citizens who start businesses, practice medicine, teach school, direct plays, coach baseball, write novels, and give blood. “The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.<sup>25</sup> Prejudice and discrimination are not only violations of the identities of directly affected groups; they also hurt society as a whole by acting as an impediment to those groups’ participation on these various fronts. Simply put, people who feel excluded are less likely to want, or be able, to contribute.

One of the great strengths of the United States is its rich and thriving civic life. Tocqueville marveled at how associations created by citizens addressed matters ranging from “very general to very particular, immense and small.” He dubbed this “the art of association” and referred to it as “the mother science” of America. Why were Americans uniquely good at building civic life? Tocqueville believed it was at least partly due to the distinctive religiosity of the citizenry. He went so far as to call religion the “first” of America’s “political institutions,” the sites at which Americans learned the “habits of the heart” of democracy.<sup>26</sup>

In his books *Bowling Alone* and *American Grace* (written with David Campbell), Robert Putnam illustrates the crucial role that religion plays in civic life with mountains of empirical evidence. Following Tocqueville, Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*, “Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America. . . . Churches provide an important incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interests and civic recruitment.”<sup>27</sup> When all is said and done, approximately half of American civil society is

somehow related to religious communities, in everything from volunteering to philanthropic giving to membership in community organizations.

*American Grace* continues this thread, concluding, “Any way you slice it, religious people are simply more generous.”<sup>28</sup> That generosity is linked to the social networks that religious communities create, is consistent across diverse theologies, and is channeled toward both parochial religious causes and broader civic involvement. Putnam and Campbell found that people who regularly attend a house of worship are more than twice as likely to volunteer for secular causes than those who do not.

If American democracy depends on the vibrancy of our civic life, and if our civic life depends at least in part on the contributions of religious communities, then it would seem self-evident that facilitating such participation is a compelling interest for American democracy. This should behoove us to commit to the following:

- Guard against religious preference and establishment and continue the American ideal of free exercise for all faith communities.
- Develop a national narrative that is inclusive of our new social reality of high levels of religious diversity.
- Reduce prejudice and openly welcome the myriad contributions of multiple communities (civic, professional, cultural, and so on).
- Facilitate positive relations between diverse religious communities, guarding against conflict and strengthening social cohesion.
- Encourage particular religious communities to harmonize their distinctive traditions with national ideals such as civic participation and pluralism.

Each of these points will be expanded on in the chapters that follow.

## What Makes Religious Diversity Distinct—and Difficult

Just because it is in our compelling interests to build a healthy religiously diverse democracy does not mean it is easy. Democracy allows us to bring our personal convictions into the public square; diversity includes both the differences we like and those we don't; and religion is about, per Paul Tillich, ultimate concerns. It is no wonder, then, that political theorists across the ages warned against such a society. In this section, I'd like to highlight the various challenges religious diversity presents to a democracy.

The first challenge is the one posed by the very nature of a religious tradition, at least in the view of John Rawls, who was among the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century. Rawls viewed religious traditions as “comprehensive doctrines” that might divide the loyalties of religious citizens. How can we be sure that a Catholic American would give her loyalty to the arrangements underlying American democracy (free and fair elections, nonestablishment of religion, and so forth) rather than the arrangements promulgated by, say, the Vatican? More concretely, how do we know that she will be loyal to the American president over the pope? Rawls was also concerned that particular religious groups, if they achieved majority status and attained enough political power, could seek to impose their comprehensive doctrine. Finally, he was concerned about people, especially elected leaders and government officials, offering religious reasons as the justification for public policy. The first principles that form the rationale for public policy, according to Rawls, ought to be shared by the entire population rather than the select few who happen to belong to a religious group. Rawls's famous solution for this challenge was the concept of “public reason.” Simply put, it is the idea that citizens and officials ought to offer reasons whose core values are generally shared by the whole population rather than just those who subscribe to a particular religion.<sup>29</sup>

The second key challenge relating to religious diversity is the challenge of the fundamental differences between various religions. The religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero has written compellingly about this challenge. In his book *God Is Not One*, he calls the idea that religions are mostly alike and all paths up the same mountain “pretend pluralism,” a notion that might make us feel good on the surface but at its core is “dangerous, disrespectful and untrue.”<sup>30</sup> Not only do religions differ in areas like doctrines, rituals, and law, but the expression of one can sometimes be an insult to, or violation of, another. How are non-Jews supposed to view the idea that Jews are God’s chosen people, non-Christians meant to countenance the concept that you must hold to the Christian belief that Jesus is Lord and Savior in order to go to heaven, or non-Muslims to reckon with the idea that Muslims have the final revelation and others are incomplete or corrupted? Moreover, the practices of some communities come into direct conflict with others. Muslims typically slaughter and eat cows, goats, or lambs on their holiest of holy days, Eid al Adha, a sacred rite that commemorates God’s placing a ram in Ishmael’s stead when Abraham goes to sacrifice his son. However, many Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains believe that killing animals for food is forbidden by their religion. Thus, what a Muslim does to fulfill a religious obligation is viewed by hundreds of millions of other believers to be blasphemous. Allowing communities that have fundamentally opposing views on these and other matters of ultimate concern to create social capital, build civic institutions, and express their identities through potent and what some would call tribal symbols is a recipe for religious violence.

A single glance at an international newspaper will show that conflict between different religious communities is all too real, making it a third hazard of religious diversity. Sometimes this conflict takes the form of a civil war between religious communities within the same nation; sometimes it is a religiously fueled conflict between countries. More recently, it has taken the form of high-profile acts of terrorism. This is, of course, one of the principal frames

in which Muslims are presented. (In the pages that follow, I will illustrate that violent Muslim extremism is far less of a danger in the United States than we have been led to believe by both media stories and the rhetoric of President Donald Trump.)

While religious diversity has not taken an ugly turn into frequent violence in the United States, growing diversity has been shown to threaten an American treasure: strong communities. Robert Putnam, whom I quoted earlier on the importance of religion in animating civic life, also published a landmark study of the relationship between ethnic diversity and social capital called "*E Pluribus Unum*." His findings are sobering: "People living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker down'—that is, to pull in like a turtle." As diversity increases, the qualities that typically characterize a strong community decrease. The higher the diversity, the more people distrust their neighbors and the less they volunteer and give to charity.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, there is the challenge that diversity poses to the continuity of religious identity. This is obviously important to individual communities, perhaps especially so to religious communities, for whom specific ways of believing, behaving, and belonging are tied to ultimate concerns. It also matters to a society seeking pluralism. Put simply, without strong individual threads, there is no fabric of pluralism. This is easier to observe than address, precisely because religious diversity poses a powerful challenge to particular communities. In his study of the identity of Christian adolescents in the United States, the sociologist Christian Smith observed that their content knowledge of Christianity approached zero. These "churched" teenagers were articulate on pop culture, friendships, college, and sex, but they essentially knew nothing about Jesus, the cross, or the Bible. Smith claimed it would be more accurate to call them "moralistic therapeutic deists" than Christians (they believed in God and believed God wanted them to be good, and that belief made them feel good). In a section of his book *Soul Searching* titled "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," Smith surmises that this lack

of content knowledge about Christianity arises from the fact that young Christians live much of their lives in highly religiously diverse environments, communities that do not normally use, share, or affirm the Christian language that these young people are taught in their brief hour or two at church every week.<sup>32</sup> As such, they do not get much practice using this language, and they likely view it as irrelevant to their “school lives,” perhaps even counterproductive.

This conclusion would not surprise the scholar Peter Berger. In his book *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger made a simple observation that had a profound influence on social theory: “Modernity pluralizes.”<sup>33</sup> Most human beings throughout most of human history, Berger pointed out, had lived within physical, sociological, or psychological bubbles. This enveloping homogeneity had served as a “plausibility structure,”<sup>34</sup> allowing for only a small number of possible identities and creating an environment where these identities were continually strengthened and affirmed.

The obvious negative benefits for those who did not “fit in” notwithstanding, this world had significant benefits for religious communities who viewed the maintenance of particular modes of being, believing, and belonging as moral, righteous, and connected to salvation. In the premodern era, according to Berger, such communities could be reasonably sure that their tradition would persist, that their children would remain within the fold. There were just not that many other viable possibilities present.

According to Berger, modernity changed all of that. Through the melting of physical, sociological, and psychological boundaries, identity moved from, in Berger’s famous phrase, “fate to choice.”<sup>35</sup> Surrounded by a variety of ways of being, believing, and belonging, individuals born into, say, conservative Catholic families were now fully aware that not everyone said Hail Marys, went to church on Sunday, or refrained from meat during Lent. Other identities were possible.

This introduced a significant challenge to faith groups. Their “taken for granted”<sup>36</sup> status, again in Berger’s formulation, had been

lost. They were now “voluntary communities.”<sup>37</sup> In addition to competing for the attention of their children (something many found frustrating, especially when the stakes included salvation), they had to figure out how to relate to these other identity communities, the very ones that were drawing the attention of their children away.

## The Nation and Its Religious Communities

Harvard scholar Diana Eck makes a useful distinction between diversity and pluralism.<sup>38</sup> *Diversity*, she emphasizes, is simply the fact of people with different identities, backgrounds, and worldviews living in close quarters. The term, as she uses it, suggests nothing about how these individuals and communities relate to one another. *Pluralism*, in Eck’s definition, is the energetic engagement of difference toward positive ends. Diversity, in other words, is simply a demographic fact; pluralism is a hard-won achievement. That is the goal that the United States has set for itself. Our motto, after all, is *E pluribus unum*—“Out of many, one.” In the words of Michael Walzer, the challenge is, “How are we, in the United States, to embrace differences and maintain a common life?”<sup>39</sup>

I define *pluralism* as an ethic that has three main parts: respect for different identities, relationships between diverse communities, and a commitment to the common good. (For a longer explanation, see my book *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*.)<sup>40</sup>

This definition dovetails with the framework that Danielle Allen presents in her essay “Toward a Connected Society” in the opening volume of *Our Compelling Interests*: “The ideal of a connected society contrasts with an idea of integration-through-assimilation by orienting us towards becoming a community of communities. . . . A connected society is one in which people can enjoy the bonds of solidarity and community but are equally engaged in the ‘bridging’ work of bringing diverse communities into positive relations while also individually forming personally valuable relationships across boundaries of difference.”<sup>41</sup>

Our Founders viewed religious pluralism not simply as an abstract ideal but as a practical necessity. George Washington, as general of the Continental army, the first truly national institution, sent a stern chastisement to his commanders when he discovered that they had allowed troops to burn the pope in effigy: “In such Circumstances, to be insulting their Religion, is so monstrous, as not to be suffered or excused; indeed instead of offering the most remote insult, it is our duty to address public thanks to these our Brethren.”<sup>42</sup>

Washington was at the time attempting to form an alliance with French Catholics in Canada and was also aware that Catholic soldiers from the state of Maryland were part of the Continental army. To accomplish the common project of defeating the British and winning the Revolutionary War, Washington knew he needed troops from different religious communities in the Continental army to respect each other’s identities and develop relationships across their differences. In some ways, he bet the American project on it.

It may be useful to consider for a moment the dystopian possibility. Imagine the *unhealthy* religiously diverse democracy, one that does not respect diverse identities, nurture positive relations between various identity communities, or welcome myriad contributions to the common good. Envision the civic infrastructure built by Catholics (all those schools, colleges, hospitals, and social service agencies) blocked by anti-Catholic prejudice. Imagine if the conflict that defined relations between Protestants and Catholics in Belfast or Serbian Christians and Bosnian Muslims in Sarajevo were carried on by diaspora groups in Boston or Chicago. Consider the Khalistan movement, which sought a separate state for Sikhs in the Punjab; involved the murder of an Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi; and energized diaspora Sikhs all over the world. What if such a movement were to gather steam in the United States?

These examples are, of course, not so farfetched. All of them, in some shape or form, have in fact occurred in the United States and,

at some level, still do. It was not so long ago that a virulently anti-Catholic movement sought to block the establishment of Catholic institutions, or that Catholics and Protestants battled each other in the streets of New York City, or that black Muslims in the 1960s talked about a separate state.

This is why a friend of mine likes to say that dealing with diversity is not rocket science; it's harder. Whether we call it achieving pluralism or building the connected society, in this precarious moment we need to do hard work in three key realms: law and policy, civil society (which I use broadly to encompass everything from the arts to protest to religious communities), and civil religion.

In the United States, it is a signature part of our constitutional system that people from different religious communities receive equal treatment under the law and in government policy. We see this in Washington's promise, quoted earlier, that "all possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship." It is enshrined in the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson: "The proscribing any citizen as unworthy of the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow-citizens he has a natural right. . . . All men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish or enlarge their civil capacities."<sup>43</sup> It is under threat today.

With regard to civil society, Putnam and Campbell in *American Grace* note that religiously diverse democracies are prone to violence precisely because religious symbols are so potent, religious networks so large, and religious institutions so strong that when some kind of tension between different religious groups emerges, the conflict can be especially ugly.<sup>44</sup> We see relatively little of that in the United States today. "How can America be both diverse and devout without fracturing along religious lines?"<sup>45</sup> Putnam and Campbell

wondered. The reason, they discovered, is that American civil society as it is currently constituted naturally facilitates meaningful relationships between people from different religious communities. Teachers from different religions work together in the same schools, doctors of different faiths cooperate with each other to save lives in American hospitals, and kids who love sports play ball with each other despite doctrinal disagreements that they or their parents might have. In fact, America excels at forming what the sociologist Ashutosh Varshney calls interfaith “networks of engagement,”<sup>46</sup> civic organizations that include people of different faith backgrounds that can keep the peace if and when tensions do flare. As we will see later, such organized interfaith efforts played a crucial role in mid-twentieth-century American history, and they may be poised to do so again.

Finally, there is the complex subject of civil religion. Philip Gorski writes about it compellingly in his recent book, *American Covenant*. “To be part of a tradition,” he states, “is to know certain stories, read certain books, admire certain people, and care about certain things. It is to knowingly enter into an ongoing conversation, a conversation that precedes one’s birth and continues on after one’s death.”<sup>47</sup>

The civil religious tradition was first invoked with reference to the United States by the sociologist Robert Bellah in 1967. Bellah spoke of it as the “religious dimension” of the “political realm” and the “founding myth”<sup>48</sup> of our national community. It stands separate from people’s traditional faiths but draws freely from religious language to sacralize national symbols. “Imagine Lincoln’s or King’s or Obama’s speeches shorn of all religious references,” Gorski says. “Civic poetry would be transformed into political doggerel.”<sup>49</sup>

One crucial role that civil religion plays is to hold a diverse society together, to provide us with a narrative that allows people from a range of backgrounds to not only feel American but also feel that there is something sacred in that. As Justice Felix Frankfurter states, “The ultimate foundation of a free society is the binding tie

of cohesive sentiment. Such a sentiment is fostered by all those agencies of the mind and spirit which may serve to gather up the traditions of a people, transmit them from generation to generation, and thereby create the continuity of a treasured common life which constitutes a civilization. We live by symbols.”<sup>50</sup>

This is a participatory and dynamic process. It is not as if the narrative exists in heaven somewhere and drops bridges of cooperation into diverse neighborhoods and schools. Rather, changes occur on the ground—in demographics, in attitudes, in events—and we discover that our civil religion narrative no longer connects our past with our present and with our hoped-for future in a satisfactory way. So we listen to new voices, we add some symbols and deemphasize others, elevate these stories and demote those, and reinterpret the whole narrative so that we continue being America, or rather, become a better America.

Let me offer a personal story that illustrates how a national narrative impacts lived reality. When I was in junior high school, my grandmother from India came to live with our family. When she would attend functions at my largely white suburban school, dressed in her Indian clothes and speaking with her Indian accent, I quaked with embarrassment. One of my teachers, Mrs. Pellegrino, must have noticed. She called me to her desk in class one day and told me that my Indian grandmother reminded her of her Italian grandmother. She continued, “Outside of native peoples, we all come from somewhere, and we should take pride in our heritage and the customs of our family. Remember what the Statue of Liberty stands for: we are a nation of immigrants.” She smiled and told me to get back to my math worksheet. I walked back to my seat feeling more fully American.

Later, in college, when I read the Walter Lippmann line “The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do,” I thought about that experience with Mrs. Pellegrino.<sup>51</sup> Her statement that my grandmother reminded her of her grandmother, and her invocation of the civil religion

symbol of the Statue of Liberty and the civil religion narrative that frames the United States as a “nation of immigrants,” helped me view myself as part of the American story. In some deep way, it guides what I do today, including what I write here. Alasdair MacIntyre said, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”<sup>52</sup> I am an American. I seek to participate in this nation’s progress, carve a place in its promise, play a role in its possibility, and add a chapter to its story.

One final note on this subject. Gorski claims that the religious dimensions of American civil religion are drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition, specifically the Old and New Testaments. While I am grateful to Gorski for his clear writing on the importance of civil religion, I must disagree with his limiting of our civil religion tradition to symbols and vocabularies drawn from two religions. This is especially the case given the fact that the very term *Judeo-Christian* is a civic invention of the 1930s whose purpose was to expand the national community to include the numbers of Jews and Catholics. The phrase has become so woven into our civil religion that people regularly project it back to the beginning of the nation. I offer the details of this story in the pages to come. For right now, the key question is, If religious language and symbols play a significant role in American civil religion, and if America is getting more religiously diverse, then how will other religious vocabularies and experiences be incorporated into our evolving civil religion?

In my section, I explore this challenge specifically in reference to Muslims and Islam. But, as mentioned earlier, Muslims are not the only community raising questions about the nature of belonging in the American nation. In some ways, the growing ranks of those checking “none” on surveys of religious affiliation (approximately 25 percent of the American population as I write, and an even higher percentage of younger Americans) present a more complicated set of issues. They, by definition, do not have a religious vocabulary, at

least not in easily recognizable ways that derive from a belief in sacred texts or cosmically inspired figures. While my own section does not deal with these issues, I am glad that the essays by Robert P. Jones and John Inazu in this volume do.

## Religious Communities and Their Nation

What does American democracy require of religious communities and their members? As George Washington wrote in his letter to Catholics, “All those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government.” What does it mean to be a worthy member of the national community? I believe it is in the compelling interests of both particular religious groups and the broader nation for communities to harmonize their tradition with the highest ideals of the country. How else are we to achieve Washington’s dream “to see America among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality” unless all communities do their part? Democracy is not a spectator sport.<sup>53</sup>

By *harmonize* I do not mean repeat or duplicate; I mean contribute in a manner that sounds good and improves the song. In *The One and the Many*, Martin E. Marty emphasizes that American civil religion welcomes what he (crediting Johannes Althusius) calls *symplotes*: new stories, or new interpretations of old stories and central symbols, by minority groups who take care to make their interpretations feel continuous with the core narrative of the larger nation while broadening and extending that narrative.<sup>54</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. was a master of interpreting old symbols in new ways. “If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong,” he said in a sermon during the Montgomery bus boycott. A cynic might point out that the Constitution made him only three-fifths of a person, and if he was insisting on his full dignity and equality, he *was* in fact saying the Constitution was wrong. But King was interested less in parsing details than in the poetry

and the pragmatics of civil religion. By holding up the Constitution, he was embracing a symbol to which the vast majority of Americans have an emotional bond and with which they associate the core values of liberty and equality. Once that was accomplished, it was a short step to state that the Constitution also accorded *him* liberty and equality.

This is how a diverse society advances and expands. As Marty writes, “You overcome story with story. You break the spell of myth with another myth.”<sup>55</sup> Like the invention “Judeo-Christian,” you offer a new interpretation that has continuity with the old, you fill it with the awe of sacredness, and sooner or later people not only absorb it but somehow view it as present at the founding.

This is a benefit to the particular community in question. How else will it register its symbols, stories, and interpretations in the national narrative unless it pays attention to that narrative in the first place? It benefits the nation as well, specifically along the lines of the other compelling interests I name. Communities that see themselves as part of American civil religion make contributions, increase our social capital, strengthen our social cohesion, and are far less likely to develop oppositional and separatist identities. Think of this as the inverse of the line quoted by Michael Walzer earlier. If the challenge of the diverse society is to embrace its differences and maintain a common life, the challenge of the particular religious community is to embrace the nation’s common life while maintaining its difference.

Lest anyone think that my desire for religious communities to harmonize their identities with America’s ideals and traditions is a call for conformity, let me remind you that the American tradition celebrates dissenters of all stripes. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson dissented from the theocratic nature of John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony; Jane Addams dissented from Woodrow Wilson’s march into World War I; Woody Guthrie dissented from the gauzy patriotism of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” by writing “This Land Is Your Land”; and Dorothy Day dissented from just

about every civil authority who crossed her path. All of these figures are part of American civil religion. We name our buildings and highways after them, read their writings, tell their stories, and sing their songs. That is a remarkable thing. In American civil religion we do not deify a position so much as we sacralize a discourse, including the inevitable tensions, as long as said discourse follows certain norms and observes basic parameters. As Jeffrey Stout writes, “[Democracy] takes for granted that reasonable people will differ in their conceptions of piety, in their grounds for hope, in their ultimate concerns, and in their speculations about salvation. Yet it holds that people who differ on such matters can still exchange reasons with one another intelligibly, cooperate in crafting political arrangements that promote justice and decency in their relations with one another, and do both of these things without compromising their integrity.”<sup>56</sup> You can live out your faith in harmony with the American tradition by claiming a faith-based conscientious objector status in your refusal to go to war, as Muhammad Ali did, or by holding up a copy of the Constitution as you relate the story of your son perishing in a different war, as Khizr Khan did.<sup>57</sup>

## Campuses as Models of Religious Pluralism

In closing, let me say a word about how we move forward. Both Danielle Allen and Patricia Gurin, in their essays in the first volume of *Our Compelling Interests*, emphasize that colleges and universities are key sites for building pluralism.<sup>58</sup> I agree entirely. By relying on talent at every level of the institution, and recognizing that this talent (scientific, athletic, literary, and so on) comes in a variety of racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual preference packages, colleges have become places that proactively recruit diversity. And because a college is an intense environment, campuses have had to figure out how to warmly welcome different identities, nurture positive relations between them, and encourage their commitments to the common good.

I run an organization called Interfaith Youth Core, which works with higher education to create high-quality, sustainable interfaith programming at every level of a college campus, from the strategic plan to the content of first-year student orientations. We work with over five hundred colleges (I have personally visited over one hundred campuses) and have seen the ethic of religious pluralism in action in dozens of places. At DePaul University in Chicago, for example, different religious groups have their own worship space (demonstrating respect for identity), the University Ministry staff runs interfaith dialogue programs (building relationships across religious communities), and the Center for Service Learning proactively engages them in interfaith service efforts that improve Chicago (contributing to the common good).

This is an excellent illustration of the key point that both Allen and Gurin make in their essays: colleges can create arrangements that engage diversity positively and proactively. Colleges are mini civil societies in which the leaders can require the citizens to do certain things—take that academic course, sit through this training, accept a randomly assigned roommate, and so on.

The arrangements promoted by a college have a profound impact on the broader American society. They help set the civic priorities of other institutions (private companies and K–12 schools, for example), create a knowledge base that is utilized by other civic actors, and nurture a society's future leaders. And because so many colleges in the United States were established by faith communities *and* welcome diversity, they also have an opportunity to model how to retain particularity while achieving pluralism.

On this, allow me to share a personal story.

I am in this country because an institution started by French priests in the Indiana countryside in the 1840s, committed to the faith formation and economic uplift of poor midwestern Catholic boys, somehow saw fit to admit a wayward Ismaili Muslim student from Bombay into its MBA program in the 1970s. That man was my father. During his time in South Bend, he developed a fanatic

devotion to Fighting Irish football and a deep appreciation for how faith communities in the United States built institutions that served people beyond their immediate groups. He viewed it as part of the definition of being American. You hold on to who you are by tapping into those parts of your identity that inspire you to serve others.

Notre Dame was the site of one of my earliest explicitly inter-faith memories. On Football Saturdays, we would take the Skyway out of Chicago, onto I-80, and into South Bend. We grew up in the world before smartphones, so my dad would keep us occupied for the two-hour drive by telling us we could see the Golden Dome across the open fields if we only looked hard enough. Our first stop when we arrived on campus was always the Grotto, a shrine to the Virgin Mary that attracts visitors from all over the world. My father, never a particularly observant Muslim, would close his eyes and cup his hands and rock back and forth in reverence. Once, when I was ten or eleven and had a little Islamic knowledge in my head and a strong desire to skip the Grotto ritual so that we could head straight into the stadium, I pointed out that praying at a shrine dedicated to a statue of a Christian figure was probably not a very Muslim thing to do. My dad gave me the arched-eyebrows look that I now frequently employ as a parent myself, quoted from the Qur'an that God should be imagined as "Light upon Light," and pointed at the hundreds of candles flickering in the cove. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You have a choice whenever you encounter something from another tradition, Eboo. You can look for the differences, or you can find the resonances. I advise you to find the resonances."

I shared this tale at the sesquicentennial celebration for Boston College a few years ago, and lo and behold, the president of Notre Dame, Father John Jenkins, was in the audience. "You know who would love to hear that story," he said to me after the panel. "Father Hesburgh. You should come to South Bend and share it with him."

You didn't have to tell me that twice. Father Theodore Hesburgh became president of Notre Dame in 1952 at the ripe old age

of thirty-five, served in that role for half a century, and was the figure most responsible for leading what was once a modest midwestern parochial school concerned primarily with the faith formation of young Catholic men to the forefront of global academic institutions, all the while maintaining its Catholic identity.

A few weeks later my friend Gabe and I were making the familiar drive out of Chicago onto the Skyway and I-80, looking across the midwestern landscape for glimpses of the Golden Dome. Father Hesburgh welcomed us into his office and asked to hear the story about my father. He nodded as I told it, telling me that it embodied what he hoped Notre Dame would be—a place where people from around the world could connect more deeply with their own identities and develop powerful relationships with people with other identities, all nurtured by the Catholic identity at the core of Notre Dame.

I commented that this is precisely what seemed to be happening at Notre Dame, noting the growing number of Muslim, Evangelical, and Jewish faculty, staff, and board members at the university. Then I asked a pointed question: Were there people within the Fighting Irish family—old-timers, Holy Cross priests, or other types of “traditionalists”—who were less than happy with the growing diversity of the institution? And what did he tell them when they voiced their concerns?

Hesburgh, well into his nineties at that point, perked up, slapped his palm on the desk, and started speaking of the relationship between the large *C* in *Catholic*, which he said stood for the particular tradition, and the small *c* in *catholic*, which he pointed out meant “universal.” “We have to understand our Catholic tradition in a way that helps us accomplish our catholic mission, which is to lift up the well-being of all.”

The success of Notre Dame, even its very existence, was not inevitable. Lyman Beecher, who led a seminary in nearby Cincinnati, made Catholic institutions the object of his anti-Catholic diatribes, claiming that they were a Trojan horse for popery. A few

years before Notre Dame's founding, rioters inspired by Beecher's sermons burned down a Catholic educational institution outside Boston, the Ursuline convent. The Catholic university that had educated my father and given my family its initial footing in America might well have suffered a similar fate at the hands of anti-Catholic forces.

I had come to Notre Dame with my close friend Gabe, a Catholic, and he asked for a blessing as we were leaving. Father Ted nodded, then motioned for me to kneel and close my eyes as well. It was, for my friend, a Catholic ritual of great significance. For me, it was an American sacrament.