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AMERICA AND THE CHALLENGES  
OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

A review of Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. xx + 391 pp. \$29.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0691119767.

**D**URING THE LAST THIRD of the twentieth century, some twenty-two million immigrants have established themselves in the U.S. In contrast to earlier waves of immigration, this new immigrant cohort traces its origins in large part to non-Christian cultures. Rather than clustering geographically in immigrant enclaves and economically in low-wage occupations, many of these new immigrants rapidly have worked their way into middle-class professions and neighborhoods, thus increasing the likelihood of regular encounters with the native-born population. How are Americans responding to the increasingly diverse character of their society, and in particular to the growing presence of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists? We long have extolled the virtues of diversity and have pointed with pride to the heterogeneous nature of American society. Is this still the case? Throughout our history Americans routinely have reconciled the celebration of diversity with the insistence that we are a Christian nation with a mandate from God to spread the light of Christian civilization. How has the growing population of non-Christian Americans affected such narratives? These are the central questions that concern Robert Wuthnow in this volume.

Wuthnow developed an elaborate methodology in order to query a representative cross-section of the population regarding their views on religion, diversity, and the character and destiny of the nation. He orchestrated a new national survey in which 2,910 adults shared their opinions in phone interviews lasting approximately thirty-five minutes. Wuthnow complemented this broad survey with more than 300 in-depth interviews with a range of Americans who were likely to have encountered first-hand America's increasing diversity. This smaller sample included Christian leaders and lay people associated with churches located near a mosque, Hindu temple, Buddhist center, or synagogue in one of fourteen different metropolitan areas. It also included thirty-two people

involved in mixed marriages, forty people with eclectic religious beliefs and practices, and forty-five local and national leaders concerned with inter-religious issues.

In the first three chapters of the book, Wuthnow sketches a number of contexts and frames of reference that enable readers to better appreciate the significance of his data. He begins with an overview of how Christian Americans have interpreted religious diversity from their earliest encounters with Native Americans in the fifteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. A common theme runs throughout this five-hundred-year period: "whether they were in a small minority, as was true of the early explorers and settlers, or truly the majority religion, as they were in the nineteenth century, American Christians have thought of themselves as the reigning power and the dominant cultural influence" (35). Next he introduces his readers to the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim newcomers responsible for challenging inherited assumptions regarding American identity. He charts the population growth of these communities, their patterns of settlement, how they practice their religion, and how they feel about living in the U.S. as religious minorities. In chapter three he identifies four prominent, recurring concerns about the impact of diversity on our nation, drawing from the views of scholars and from his interviews with "ordinary Americans."

Wuthnow lays out the heart of his argument in chapters four through seven. He suggests that a careful analysis of his data reveals the presence of three distinct religious orientations among Americans born into the Christian majority. The first type, which he refers to as "spiritual shoppers," is the most open to religious diversity in their own lives and in the nation in general. Often raised by open-minded parents in reasonably well-off families, shoppers usually have been exposed to a variety of religious options, either through education, travel, or other means. They are inclined to experiment with aspects of non-Christian religions and to cobble together an eclectic, personalized spirituality that draws upon multiple traditions, often in combination with an enduring, if tenuous, commitment to Christianity. This tendency to shop around in the religious marketplace first emerged in the counterculture of the 1970s, and it has since become entrenched. Today it no longer requires an intentional rupture with mainstream culture. On the contrary, elaborate networks have emerged that supply a steady stream of readily consumed aspects of non-Christian religiosity adapted to American tastes.

The second type is what he labels "Christian inclusivists." Members of this category actively practice their Christian faith, and yet they believe that other religions also possess a significant measure of truth. Usually their Christian faith

rests on a foundation of strong church involvement as children, but the simplicity of this early faith has been tested through exposure to other religious systems or through personal crises or quests for meaning later in life. Christian inclusivists are serious about their faith, but they are also willing to inhabit a universe of relative truths and lurking doubt. When they articulate their theological convictions, they tend to emphasize that ultimately God is mysterious and unknowable. They are ambivalent about evangelization, emphasizing instead the importance of individual choice in religious matters.

“Christian exclusivists” constitute the third element in Wuthnow’s typology. This group holds more traditional Christian theological positions, as well as the conviction that other religions are inferior and largely irrelevant to the quest for salvation. Exclusivists often are the product of exclusivist parents, remain dependent in some fashion on family and tightly knit communities, and have had relatively modest exposure to religious diversity. Their learning styles typically are rather rigid, privileging clearly defined answers over open-ended possibilities. They do not like to wrestle with the issue of religious diversity, but when confronted with it they are usually troubled by the implications, especially the likelihood that family members, friends, and colleagues of non-Christian faiths will not make it into heaven.

After profiling the three religious orientations he discerned in his data, Wuthnow walks his readers through the finer details of his survey. He concludes that we are a nation divided: 31% of the survey respondents can be categorized as spiritual shoppers, 23% as Christian inclusivists, and 34% as Christian exclusivists (11% do not fall into any category). He also charts the patterns that exist between belonging to one of these three categories and the responses they gave to a battery of questions. These questions touch on a variety of subjects, including the nature of religious truth, the proper place of religion in American life, the religious, cultural, and demographic profiles of the respondents, and their familiarity with and perceptions of various religious groups. His statistics, conveniently broken down into thirteen tables, alternatively confirm and confound widely held assumptions. Was the U.S. founded on Christian principles? 50% of all respondents said yes, although the number was higher among Christian exclusivists (68%) than among Christian inclusivists (55%) and spiritual shoppers (30%). Would you welcome Muslims becoming a stronger presence in the U.S.? 51% of all respondents said yes, although this time the shoppers were more receptive (71%) than the inclusivists (50%) and the exclusivists (36%). These are merely two examples of the dozens of questions and answers Wuthnow interprets.

In his next two chapters Wuthnow explores specific challenges related to living

in a pluralist society. Chapter eight considers to what extent church leaders are cultivating among their congregations a constructive engagement with the increasing religious diversity in their communities. He concludes that they are not meeting this challenge very effectively. The leaders he surveyed tend to either ignore or minimize contact with neighboring religious groups, seemingly intent to avoid “the dissonance that would likely occur if [Christians] took either the position that all non-Christians are eternally damned or the view that all religions are equally valid” (257). Chapter nine examines how couples in religiously mixed marriages cope with the differences between their respective traditions. Wuthnow finds that such couples tend to deemphasize the doctrinal aspects that differentiate their faiths and embrace the view that religions are essentially cultural traditions rooted in personal biography and private opinion.

In his tenth and final chapter, Wuthnow ties together the various strands of his argument with an overarching summary of current American attitudes toward increasing religious diversity. Diversity and pluralism are not one and the same, he insists. Pluralism should be understood as the product of the conscious and thoughtful engagement with the genuine differences that exist in American society. Officially we are a pluralist society, and in our public discourse we routinely affirm the virtues of the same. In reality, however, the present state of the nation leaves much to be desired. A substantial minority of Americans is disturbed by the presence of large numbers of non-Christians and supports the idea of making it harder for non-Christians to settle in the U.S. and practice their faith openly. Many more Americans are tolerant in an unreflective way, demonstrating little knowledge of or interest in their non-Christian neighbors. The greatest barrier to genuine pluralism “is our reluctance to acknowledge the fact that there are indeed *differences*. We want all positions to be equally plausible and any disagreements to be matters of taste” (287).

Wuthnow concludes his book with a passionate appeal for “reflective pluralism,” which he defines as a thoughtful, intentional engagement with the religious incongruities that currently exist in our society and the conditions and institutions that should exist in order to best promote the common good (289). “America cannot reap the fullest benefits from the growing religious diversity in its midst by simply accepting it or ignoring it,” he asserts. “Religious pluralism will prove most enriching if it results in a practice of sustained critical reflection about the unwavering human desire for transcendence” (314). To buttress his case, Wuthnow explains the value of dialogue and cooperation between faith communities, and he explores the lessons of some recent examples of such dialogue and cooperation.

Some may be inclined to argue that Wuthnow greatly exaggerates the challenge

of religious pluralism in the U.S. After all, the large majority of Americans still identify themselves as Christian, and the number of Muslims (2-7 million), Buddhists (2.5-4 million), and Hindus (1.3 million) in this country amounts to but a small fraction of the total population. This reader suspects, however, that Wuthnow is more a visionary than an alarmist. What he offers in this book are some of the first solid readings of a tectonic shift that seems destined to remake America in profound ways over the course of the twenty-first century. I would not be surprised if decades from now scholars of American religion still reference Wuthnow's work as they trace the evolution of American attitudes toward religious diversity.

It is only in his final chapter, where he moves from description to prescription, that Wuthnow shows flashes of alarmism alongside an untethered idealism. In advocating reflective pluralism, Wuthnow warns that our current practice of "muddling through," associating with like-minded individuals and avoiding serious discussion of the religious differences that exist in American society, is no longer sufficient to meet the challenge of religious pluralism. Without a more conscious and thoughtful engagement with these issues, "the public arena becomes a stage only for extremists of the fundamentalist and secularist persuasions" (289). Reflective pluralism is a lovely idea, but it is simply not realistic to expect a critical mass of Americans to engage in sustained reflection about the conflicting teachings of various religions, let alone in interreligious dialogue. An open-ended tolerance of cognitive dissonance is not a common personality trait. At the same time Wuthnow underestimates the power of "muddling through." American society has faced the challenge of religious pluralism before, back in the nineteenth century when millions of Catholics poured into what was once an overwhelmingly Protestant country. That encounter generated a level of vitriol that makes the contemporary era seem like a model of ecumenical understanding by comparison. Eventually these tensions subsided and Catholics won acceptance into the mainstream, but this reconciliation was not the product of a conscious effort at dialogue and understanding. Rather, as Protestants and Catholics muddled through in their neighboring universes, and as they fought side-by-side against common enemies during the Civil War, the world wars, and the Cold War, gradually the old animus softened and familiarity blossomed into friendship. I suspect a similar process will occur between Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus.

For all of his methodological sophistication, Wuthnow's approach to gathering and interpreting his data raise a number of concerns. One notorious weakness of surveys is that respondents are often influenced by the desire to impress their interviewers. Americans routinely overreport how often they attend church or vote in elections, for instance. It seems reasonable to suspect that the respondents

in Wuthnow's survey might have overreported in some consistent fashion as well. Perhaps they inflated their own degree of sympathy for and understanding of non-Christian religions in order to appear more broad-minded and cosmopolitan. It is not clear what measures Wuthnow took to shield his data from warping of this kind.

Another area of concern has to do the tripartite pattern he discerns in his data. Wuthnow explains that he categorized his respondents as spiritual shoppers, Christian exclusivists, or Christian inclusivists according to whether they agreed or disagreed with the following two statements: "Christianity is the best way to understand God" and "All major religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, are equally good ways of knowing about God" (190). A shopper disagrees with the first but agrees with the second. An exclusivist agrees with the first but disagrees with the second. An inclusivist agrees with both. In other words, to qualify as a Christian inclusivist, a person has to affirm two positions that essentially contradict one another. It is reasonable to suspect that the survey itself and the interpretative model applied to it may have pushed people away from the more ambiguous middle ground (inclusivists) and into the logically coherent margins (shoppers and exclusivists) to a degree that does not faithfully represent public opinion.

On a more basic level I wonder whether the three categories he describes adequately capture the subtle differences of perception Americans hold on the issue of diversity. Wuthnow determines his categories based on how respondents judged the relative effectiveness of the major religions in revealing the nature of God. Is this really the only question that matters? Might one be able to construct a finer instrument that includes more categories and takes into account more of the reasons why people esteem and practice religions?

No statistical survey is perfect, and Wuthnow's latest effort certainly has its vulnerabilities. At the same time, no other survey that I know of comes even close to offering the wealth of insight into contemporary American attitudes about religion, diversity, and the character of the nation that Wuthnow delivers in this volume. He has offered us a comprehensive overview composed of hard numbers where partial evidence and intuition once had to suffice. Scholars of American religion and those interested in contemporary America in general stand in his debt.

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