

*A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become
the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*

By Diana L. Eck, Ph.D.

Reading Program Category: Education for Mission

Reviewed by Liza Kittle

This book on the 2005 Reading Program list is an endorsement of religious pluralism as the ideal cultural dynamic for our country. While the face of America is in fact changing to reflect a growing diversity of races and religions, Eck over-emphasizes many of these trends in her attempt to downplay the predominance of an overwhelming Christian majority and to portray Judeo-Christian beliefs as a fading piece of history with a decreasing relevance to these cultural dynamics. Dr. Eck’s book, *A New Religious America*, shows an American flag on the cover with religious symbols of different world religions in place of the traditional stars and stripes—intentionally absent in this mix of faith symbols is the cross, the sacred sign of Christianity. Also, by placing the words “*Christian Country*” in parenthesis in the sub-title, a negative connotation is implied regarding this reality of our heritage. This telling cover is a harbinger of the contents therein as the author spends countless pages uplifting emerging religions in America and very few on the continued traditional predominance of Christianity in the United States (still the overwhelming majority of Americans-- 77% Christian, 3.7% Other Religions, 14.1% No religion—American Religious Identification Survey-ARIS). More often than not, the book fails to distinguish and categorize subgroups of Christians with the intricate detail afforded even the most obscure religious sects, for example, evangelicals and fundamentalists Christians are rarely separated in regards to beliefs and actions. Conservative Christians are often portrayed collectively as “*xenophobic, Islamophobic, ignorant or intolerant.*”

Religious pluralism is the belief that “one can overcome religious differences between different religions, and denominational conflicts within the same religion” (Wikipedia encyclopedia). While these sound like reasonable ideals to achieve, these beliefs are based on a non-literal view of one’s religious traditions whereby no truth is absolute, all doctrine is open to modification and every faith is equally valid. These viewpoints are inconsistent with the worldview of the majority of mainstream Christians including many United Methodist Women and this book offers many disturbing statements, principles and conclusions.

Diana L. Eck is a professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard University. She is a United Methodist lay woman, noted author, consultant to major church groups such as the World and National Council of Churches, lecturer in academia and a leading proponent of a multi-religious, pluralistic society. This book is based on her research, **The Pluralism Project**, which started in 1991 at Harvard University where she and eighty students set out to explore the changing religious landscape of the United States. **Dr. Eck extols in her biography the fact that she and her lesbian partner, Dorothy Austin, are the first homosexual housemasters of the prestigious Lowell House dormitory at Harvard, where they serve as surrogate “parents” for 450 male and female students.** Dorothy is an Episcopal priest and teaches psychology and religion at United Methodist affiliated Drew University in New Jersey. In the acknowledgements of *A New Religious America*, Dr. Eck thanks her partner of 25 years for “kicking off her shoes at many temples, mosques and gurdwaras.” Eck and Austin have been active in homosexual causes at Harvard for

many years. Dr. Eck received the National Humanities Medal from President Clinton in a White House ceremony for her work in the area of religious pluralism.

The book begins with a preface concerning how our country changed on September 11 and the xenophobia that ensued against Muslim peoples in this country. She refutes the prevailing view concerning the absence of outrage from American Muslim leaders in the days following the attacks and claims there was an immediate initiative to denounce the violence by Muslim groups. She applauds the positive curiosity about Islamic beliefs and the prevalence on television and other media of information about interfaith dialogue. Dr. Eck goes on to chastise “some very conservative Christian leaders like Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson who gave public expression to their Islamophobia and made intemperate remarks, fueling monolithic stereotypes about Islam.” She continues that these leaders were criticized by fellow Christians and that “the days when Christian church leaders could ignorantly assail Islam with impunity were over.” Nowhere in this discussion does Dr. Eck acknowledge the valid concerns of many Americans about radical Islamic terrorists in our midst—fears based on the fact that almost every global terrorist attack has been perpetrated by Muslim extremists. **The insinuation that conservative Christians would somehow advocate and endorse violent retribution against Muslim people is ludicrous.**

Dr. Eck challenges the reader to “open our eyes” to the changing dynamics of this multicultural society that is America. She reports how the liberalization of immigration laws that occurred in the 1960’s has affected the religious makeup of our country. Her report neglects however to make distinctions between the influx of legal and illegal immigrants in her statistical information. **Many of the facts reported in the Pluralism Project have been overstated in several instances.** For example, her research claims there are presently more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians or members of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and an equal number of American Muslims and Jews—about 6 million (which represents 2% of the U.S. population). However, church membership sources report the Episcopal Church membership in the U.S. at 2.3 million, the Presbyterian U.S.A. at 2.4 million and American Jews at 2.8 million. The actual number of Muslims in the U.S. is disputed with a wide range of statistical findings. Independent studies show ranges between 1-3 million while Muslim groups consistently report higher numbers from 6-8 million (a range of 0.4%-2.3% of the national population with an average of 1.3%). The report also claims there are currently 4 million Buddhists in the United States (1.4% of the U.S. population). Buddhist estimates from various sources range from 500,000-5 million with the average estimate at 2.3 million (a range of 0.2%-1.7% with 0.8% average), well below what is reported in this book. The Pluralism Project clearly uses the higher estimates in reporting numbers and percentages of religious demographics.

Some interesting statistics (not used in Dr. Eck’s book) have been reported in the American Religious Identification Study (ARIS), a comprehensive independent survey of religious affiliation over the last ten years. This study reports that while membership in Christian groups (35 different denominations—Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventist and Jehovah’s Witness are included) may have dropped 10% from 86.2% to 76.2% from 1990 to 2001, all other non-Christian religious groups combined (including Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, Hindu, Native American, Scientologist, Baha’I, Taoist, New Age, Eckankar, Rastafarian, Sikh, Wiccan, Deity, Druid, Santeria, Pagan, Spiritualist, Ethical Culture and Other) have only increased from 3.3% to 3.7% of the U.S. adult population. Those professing to have no religion (atheist, agnostic, humanist, secular,

none) have increased from 8.2% to 14.1% of American adults! This is a chilling statistic and reveals that increasing secularism is by far the most prevalent trend in America versus the increase of non-Christian religions and should cause us great alarm. Interestingly, while many Christian denominations have experienced a decline in membership including the Episcopal, Presbyterian U.S.A. and the United Methodist Church, people describing themselves as evangelical has increased five fold and membership in nondenominational churches has increased ten fold in the last ten years. It is obvious from these trends that our mainline denominations are not being effective in reaching an increasingly secularized society with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those churches which adhere to the historical, evangelical foundations of the Christian faith, and those which are operating outside of the institutional churches are clearly growing in our present multicultural landscape.

Dr. Eck speaks of religious freedom always giving rise to religious diversity. **She repeatedly interprets the intention of our founding fathers from the eyes of a liberal progressive who de-emphasizes the Judeo-Christian foundations of our country.** These deep-rooted foundational narratives are according to this book “deeply embedded in the sub-soil of American consciousness...a narrative so deeply held that it is virtually taken for granted...what we in religious studies refer to as a myth.” Although Dr. Eck repeatedly highlights how other American religious groups are maligned, discriminated against and persecuted in our “Christian country,” there is no discussion about how Christian persons, traditions, belief and institutions are increasingly being attacked by progressive political, legal and religious groups.

The stripping away of the Ten Commandments from our government buildings, the abolishment of prayer in public schools, the secularization of Christmas by banning traditional hymns, nativity scenes and even the use of the greeting “Merry Christmas” in department stores, discrimination on our college campuses of Christian groups and professors and the renaming of the Easter bunny to remove any association with Christianity are just a few examples of the persistent dismantling of the Judeo-Christian tradition in America in order to adapt to the politically correct desires of a radical minority! At the University of Colorado, Professor Ward Churchill, a radical leftist faculty member who compares the victims of Sept. 11 to “little Eichmanns” who deserved their fate and advocates the overthrowing of the U.S. government, is supported by fellow faculty members and invited to other liberal universities. At this same institution, a much loved history professor with a stellar twenty-year career of teaching on his resume is dismissed due to his evangelical Christian beliefs (and he never proselytized his students). Where is the tolerance for evangelical Christians who merely believe in the historical doctrines of our faith and take the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ seriously when He calls us “go and make disciples of all nations”? (Matthew 28:19)

Dr. Eck states, “Religion is never a finished product, packaged, delivered, and passed intact from generation to generation. There are some in every religious tradition who think of their religion that way, insisting it is all contained in the sacred texts, doctrines, and rituals they themselves know and cherish. But even the most modest journey through history proves them wrong. Our religious traditions are dynamic, not static, changing not fixed, more like rivers than monuments.” As Americans encounter other religious traditions and “articulate their faith anew in light of that encounter or perhaps come to understand themselves as part of both traditions.”

Eck gives examples to illustrate the changes taking place at Harvard University which was historically a Christian college. Islam Awareness Week and Buddha's Enlightenment Day are celebrated. In the Divinity School, beneath historical portraits of former deans, Dr. Eck recalls how fifty students representing a dozen Buddhist lineages sat on rows of square zabutons, listening to chanting. One by one, "they rose to bow to Buddha and to make offerings of incense." "The fixed pews of the Divinity School chapel have been removed in favor of chairs to accommodate Buddhist meditations." Another example of this vibrant pluralistic phenomena borders on the ridiculous—a local Buddhist community group chartered a boat to release hundreds of lobsters into the Boston Harbour as an act of compassion and freedom!

A Hindu group called Dharma was formed—the first in Harvard's 360 year history—and they held the Festival of Lights, or Diwali, a domestic celebration of the goddess Lakshmi in a student's dorm suite. **When Dr. Eck and her partner became housemasters at Lowell House in 1998, she describes how it was a hard decision, but a positive opportunity to help "create a pluralist community in a living context."** The downside was it meant missing her planned sabbatical leave in India, where she maintained an apartment and traveled frequently. India was the place of Dr. Eck's spiritual seeking in the 1960's as she grew disenchanted with her traditional theological roots—she has written several books on the religions of India. She had planned her trip to coincide with the festival of the Goddess, called Navaratri—a fond memory from twenty years previous.

The next week at Harvard, Dr. Eck was pleasantly surprised when she was invited to a similar festival on campus so, she recalls, "I put on my black-mirrored selvar kamiz and went...they had brought **a range of deities for the altar, the ones they ordinarily kept on their dorm room bureaus in the makeshift altars of college life...**it was a simple celebration, but in the life of an American institution like Harvard, even such a simple celebration is truly a revolution...with a happy heart, I stayed for the ras garbha and danced till I dropped!"

This multi-culturalism dynamic is reflective of a trend among our college campuses and is applauded loudly by the Pluralism Project. **Dr. Eck states, "Our campuses have become the laboratories of a new multicultural and multi-religious America. Will they lead us toward the common purpose of an informed, energetic, and even joyous pluralism?"** This is one assessment of which there is full agreement—our colleges are indeed the labs and our young people the guinea pigs in this theological experiment. An article written by the Institute of Religious Democracy concurs that **"Eck's vision is perfectly attuned to the biases of the popular culture, where tolerance too often tolerates only voices that deny the existence of any objective truth. She is a prophet who is not likely to be martyred but instead is almost universally welcomed."**

Detailed chapters are written in this book on American Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. There are no chapters on Christianity, the proclaimed faith of the author. In the last chapter entitled "Bridge Building," Dr. Eck highlights more evidences of the progression of this new "georeligious reality" of pluralism in America. She cites religious organizations forming cooperative alliances; watch-dog organizations that monitor hate-crimes (Wiccans have their own civil liberties organization called the Witches League for Public Awareness.); a United Methodist Church and an Islamic Society in Fremont, California building a new church and mosque on the same property and sharing facilities; politically correct civic proclamations that won't offend the

Goddess Durga or parades that allow for representation of the Goddess Kali, the Divine Mother both in life and death. She mentions “military milestones” occurring, such as the U.S. Government accrediting a Wiccan chaplain at Fort Hood, Texas, the nation’s largest military base, allowing “Wicca” to be engraved on dog tags, pentagrams to be worn, and high priestesses who now lead Wicca circles from ‘Louisiana to Alaska’; and finally, the one hundred year anniversary of the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Chicago in 1993 (a “coming out” of a new religious America). **What a contrast, the author exclaims, that one hundred years ago the processional was “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” but has now evolved to “the poly-phonic chanting, the cymbals, and the drums of the Drepung Loseling Tibetan Monks, invoking the forces of goodness.”**

Diana Eck’s worldview is vastly different from mainstream Christianity. While she has “found that only as a Christian pluralist could she be faithful to the mystery and the presence of the one she calls God,” one wonders how she maintains an allegiance to a monotheistic faith when her fascination and alliance with the polytheistic deities of Hinduism is so pervasive and evident. **What makes her align herself with Christianity which she portrays in her book in such a predominantly negative light?**

Dr. Eck says there are “thinkers and movements” in every tradition who are articulating a new world dynamic. She postulates that it is impossible for us to live in a global community during the week, where our economies, politics and business relationships are international and yet on the weekend live “with ideas of God that are essentially provincial, imagining that somehow the one we call God has been primarily concerned with us and our tribe.” Dr. Eck dares to speculate that we would never consider operating in global business or politics with ideas formed 50, 100 or 500 years ago. She states she “may sing ‘**Give me that old-time religion! It’s good enough for me!**’ with great gusto, but in her heart she knows it’s not ‘good enough’...to be good enough, the old-time religion has to be up to the challenge of an intricately interdependent world.” This is an amazing statement. Just as the government of the United States doesn’t need to pass a litmus test of world opinion before formulating foreign and national policy, Christians don’t need to modify their historical doctrinal standards in light of a multicultural and pluralistic reality.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ was sufficient 2000 years ago and doesn’t carry an expiration date or a shelf-life. His teachings, His relevance and His incredible gift of grace are eternal and contain absolute truths that are steadfast and withstand the tossing waves of a pluralistic sea. If one espouses the theology of Diana Eck, Christianity, in this dynamic environment of religious diversity and doctrinal egalitarianism can’t help but be transformed to a faith that is unrecognizable and irrelevant to a lost and hurting world. **Maintaining the purity of the Gospel and the Christian faith, which is the most inclusive religion in the world—accepting of all and available to everyone—is absolutely critical if we are to be disciples of Jesus Christ. If all religions lead to God, then what you are really saying is that the sacrifice of our Lord on the cross of Calvary long ago wasn’t necessary or “good enough” to redeem the sins of all humankind.**

Christianity, while decreasing in the United States, is exploding on other continents of the world. Africa, India and Asia are seeing dramatic increases in people coming to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Even a secular country such as France is experiencing a revival of evangelical

Christian groups. Furthermore, a large majority of immigrants to this country are Christian which will greatly affect the dynamics of our culture—this isn't mentioned in *A New Religious America*.

A missionary from Indonesia who visited our church recently shared moving stories of how the Gospel of Jesus Christ is bringing transformation and hope to the people of her country. Many of the other world religions provide no vehicle for the redemption and forgiveness of sin, offer little hope in ever being good enough to approach God, require constant sacrifices and works to be deemed acceptable and give little directive roadmaps for a life of holiness and purpose. In such circumstances the uniqueness of the Christian faith shines through. Christ's sacrifice in our behalf offers a free and gracious gift, with no strings attached. This is eternal redemption, the very hand of God reaching down to us from above to reconcile all humankind to Himself—a beacon of light in the darkness—what a precious gift, what a precious Savior—what an inclusive faith! Jesus desires that we accept His proclamation when He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life—no one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)