

Faithful and respectful: Paradox of pluralism

by [Bob Abernethy](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

Three years ago, on the very first broadcast of *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, the PBS program I host, we did a feature on a stretch of road outside Washington, D.C., that has been nicknamed the “Highway of Heaven.” Side by side, block after block, is an amazing variety of new places of worship for Vietnamese Catholics, Korean Presbyterians, Cambodian Buddhists, Ukrainian Orthodox, Spanish Seventh-day Adventists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and, tucked away among all the newcomers, American Episcopalians too.

We had reported the location of all these new structures; still, viewers called and wrote asking, “Where is this Highway to Heaven? What country is it in?” We answered, “It is in the United States of America, just outside the nation’s capital,” and we could have added that there are highways like this now in almost every major American city.

It is true that nine out of ten Americans still identify themselves as Christians, but it is also true that the influences of globalization and the prevalence of immigrants, especially those from Asia and the Middle East, are making the U.S. religious scene stunningly diverse. This pluralism is colorful and interesting—no question about that. But it also raises, for me, perhaps the greatest challenge of all the thousand or more stories we have reported.

How do I remain committed to the truth of my own faith and, at the same time, learn to understand and respect the truths of others? Are there many paths up God’s mountain, any one of which will lead to the summit? Is my path better than all the others? Or is mine the only one that goes all the way?

Chaim Potok wrote in *The Book of Lights* about two American rabbis, both army chaplains, in Japan during the Korean War. They passed a Japanese man praying devoutly beside a roadside shrine. One rabbi said to the other, “Do you think our God is listening to that man?” He went on, “If our God is not listening, what do we

mean when we say 'God'? And if he is listening, what do we mean when we say 'we'?"

In Christ's Great Commission, he said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 38:19). That is hardly ambiguous, and millions of Christians believe they must try to convert everyone else if they are to be true disciples themselves. But how can we do this without infuriating non-Christians? How can we be respectful of others and at the same time honor Jesus's assertion, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one cometh unto the Father but by me"? (John 14:6).

Last year the Southern Baptist Convention published a prayer guide to help SBC members convert Jews during their High Holy Days. The SBC explained that it was trying to do what Christ had taught, and that it was motivated by love of neighbor. But Jewish leaders were deeply offended: one of them said he would prefer "less love and more respect." The SBC has also published guides for the conversion of Muslims and Hindus, with similar reactions.

How can Christians carry out their duty to evangelize without provoking resentment, especially in a more and more pluralistic society? I have asked questions such as this of several of the people interviewed on *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, and I have found their answers helpful.

Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter, for instance, says he believes Christianity is the truth, and that he has a duty to preach it. But he also recalled Jesus's caution to "Judge not . . ." and he concluded that it is up to God, not us, to decide whether anyone is saved. President Carter also said he thinks he is most effective as an evangelist when he shows his faith by what he does with his life, not in what he says.

For Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard and the director of its Pluralism Project, the danger of clashes between competing doctrines begins to fade when people of different faiths get to know each other as persons. Eck said, "When I go, as I have, to sit in the prayer room in a mosque, to sit with Muslim brothers and sisters as they are saying Friday prayers, it is very clear to me as a Christian—not simply as a scholar, please—that the one I call God is not a stranger to that place." Eck added that learning about Hindus, for instance, had

given her new insight into some of the great truths of her own Methodism, and that this had been of great solace to her in times of grief.

Some Christians find that meditation and other spiritual practices create a sense of unity with others. Tilden Edwards, an Episcopal priest who heads the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland, says, “When we go deep in prayer we find that everybody is there. We find there is an inclusive reality of all creation in God with us, that everyone belongs together—not just as a nice concept but as an experienced reality.”

Another Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor of Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia, says Christianity has many paradoxes, and she has no problem observing another. “We believe Jesus is the only way,” says Taylor, “and that his way teaches us to live in peace with other ways.”

Adds Taylor: “Because of him, I can learn from people who call God by other names. . . . The way of openness to God, the way of relationship with other people, this way of unconditional love is the only way for me. I don’t know any other way to find God.”

For most of us, the challenge of religious diversity has not yet become a problem, but the potential is there, as almost any day’s headlines from South Asia or Africa or the Middle East confirm. Despite our great tradition of religious freedom, we have not been immune to sectarian rivalry and discrimination in the past, and there is no reason to think they could not reappear, in all their ugliness.

As we try to learn how to live faithfully in the midst of many religions, maybe there are clues to doing so in the eloquent words of some of those we have spoken to on our program. I hope so. For me, there is great reassurance in the idea that among love’s many demands is the duty to respect others, and that this implies learning to respect not only their rights but their religious truths as well. It may be—as in Taylor’s paradoxes—that if we are successful in proceeding from tolerance to respect it will not be in spite of our deepest beliefs, but because of them.