

Documenting diversity

by [Charles Kimball](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

A New Religious America. By Diana L. Eck. HarperSanFrancisco, 404 pp., \$27.00.

At the risk of sounding like a publicity blurb, I proclaim that Diana Eck's new book should be required reading for clergy, seminary students, religious professionals and government and business leaders. While many Americans are slowly waking up to our changing religious landscape, most will be stunned by Eck's well-documented declaration that "the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth." Our religious diversity--spiritual, theological and civic--poses a host of urgent questions.

Contemporary debates with religious, moral and ethical dimensions are squarely before us: debates about stem cell research, faith-based initiatives, facilitating peace in the Middle East, posting the Ten Commandments in public schools and courtrooms, prayer in schools or at school-sponsored events and so on. An awareness of our religious diversity requires a broader, more inclusive approach to such questions. It will further complicate--and sometimes clarify--public-policy debates.

Eck's study challenges presuppositions. Who do we mean when we invoke the first words of our Constitution, "We the people of the United States of America"? Who now constitutes that "we"? Eck addresses these questions in several ways. While the U.S. has always been a land of many religious traditions, dramatic changes have occurred in the past 35 years. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act marked a key turning point by opening the borders as it sought to address existing structures of racism and discrimination.

Eck underscores the difference between diversity and pluralism. We already are religiously diverse, but whether we can build a healthy, pluralist society where people respect and cooperate with each other remains to be seen. Eck's provocative discussion based on the familiar motto imprinted on U.S. coins, *e pluribus unum* ("from many, one") poses the challenge. What is the measure of our manyness? What is the meaning of our oneness? Eck examines the nuances inherent in these

questions by reflecting on the dynamics of tolerance, exclusivism and assimilation. Her position is clear. She rejects the fundamentalist/evangelical argument for a Christian America and advocates for a new pluralism, a society with a wider sense of "we." She invites us to move beyond the familiar realm of "Protestant, Catholic and Jew" in order to fashion a more richly textured approach that sees our diversity as a source of strength.

The book's central chapters focus on a major obstacle blocking the way forward: ignorance. Most Americans know very little about Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, the world's second, third and fourth largest religions respectively. They know even less about the Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus who are their neighbors in Toledo, Tulsa and Tempe. Eck's complex and fascinating portrait of American Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims showcase both her vast knowledge and her gifts as a writer.

A New Religious America is the culmination of Eck's work with the Pluralism Project, supported by the Lilly Endowment and the Ford Foundation. For ten years, she and a team of more than 80 Harvard graduate students have been documenting the American religious landscape. In addition to an informative Web site (www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/), the initiative has also produced an extraordinary CD-ROM, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*. In 1998, President Clinton awarded Eck the National Humanities Medal for her work.

In the U.S. there are now more Muslims than Episcopalians or Presbyterians, and at least as many Muslims as Jews. Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world. Citizens of Indian descent, many of whom are practicing Hindus, are emerging as leaders in medicine and computer technology. The architectural landscape is also changing, as mosques and temples become increasingly visible in cities and towns all across the land.

Eck goes well beyond simple description. Writing in a style accessible to the educated nonspecialist, she draws readers into the world of American Islam. She explores the roots and contemporary expressions of African-American Islam, as well as the diversity among Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims with ties to the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Her portrait, which incorporates engaging characters and stories, helps put the all-too-frequent stereotypical media images of Islam into a more accurate and helpful context.

Building upon highly publicized events (such as Al Gore's 1996 visit to the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple in Hacienda Heights, California) and focusing on famous people who are exploring Buddhism--personally and through film--Eck weaves a tapestry displaying the many forms of Buddhism in America today. She includes basic information about this religious tradition, as well as guided tours through distinctive Thai, Vietnamese and Japanese communities. She puts people and movements--from the Dalai Lama to Zen--into a comprehensible frame of reference.

The book concludes with sobering accounts of fear and bigotry as well as clear reasons for hope. Eck pulls no punches as she exposes multiple manifestations of misunderstanding and hatred. At the same time, she includes many encouraging stories of cooperation in towns and cities, in the military and among religious organizations. She also draws upon her deep, personal involvement as a lifelong Methodist working in the ecumenical and interfaith movements. The road ahead may be circuitous and littered with obstacles, but the way forward is not blocked.