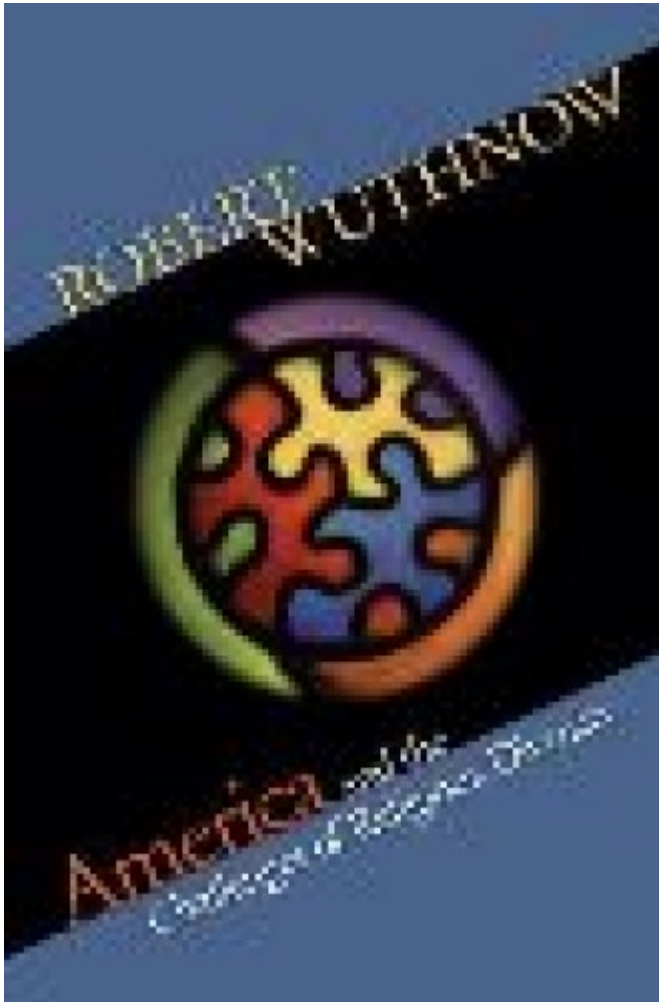


Faith claims

By [Fred Kniss](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

In Review



America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity

Robert Wuthnow

Princeton University Press

Since U.S. immigration laws were liberalized beginning in 1965, America's religious landscape has undergone dramatic change. Whereas the U.S. could once claim to be

a Judeo-Christian nation, and Will Herberg's formula of "Catholic, Protestant, Jew" could capture all the significant religious variations, it is now common to hear references to the troika of "Abrahamic faiths"—that is, Christian, Jew and Muslim. Hindus, Buddhists and adherents of other minority religions are also increasingly visible in the public square. How are Christians dealing with all this new diversity? This is the question Robert Wuthnow explores.

Wuthnow is one of the best and most prolific sociologists of religion on the contemporary scene. His work often sets the agenda not only for other scholars, but also for religious leaders and practitioners concerned with making their faith relevant to social issues. Some of his books are targeted primarily to a scholarly audience, while others clearly have a religious audience in mind. This book successfully addresses both.

It reports on data from a large national survey and hundreds of in-depth interviews with religious leaders and laypeople, exploring how U.S. Christians are dealing with the religious diversity around them. The scholarship is careful and lays theoretical and conceptual foundations for future research. It also offers observations and proposals for church leaders and Christians who are interested in engaging other religions with integrity and care. There is at times a hortatory tone to the writing—not exactly jeremiadic, but almost curmudgeonly. In short, Wuthnow demonstrates that Christians of all stripes are simply not doing very well with the challenges of religious diversity.

Wuthnow identifies three broad approaches to diversity that he found among the people he studied—those of religious shoppers, religious inclusivists and religious exclusivists. Each group has its own strategies for engagement with religious "others," and each has its own particular challenges with regard to religious diversity.

Religious shoppers are individuals on their own particular religious quests who "shop around" in multiple religious traditions, picking up ideas and practices that serve their needs and interests. Shoppers tend to focus on "spirituality" rather than "religion," and on different religious paths as equally legitimate means toward similar goals. Their strategy of engagement is to draw insight from a variety of religious traditions in order to experience God as fully as possible.

The problem with this approach, according to Wuthnow, is that it leads to shallow and partial knowledge of any one religious tradition. Further, because shoppers are engaged in personalized quests, they are unlikely to develop theologies or practices that can be shared and institutionalized. They are unlikely to alter the religious landscape in any significant way.

Religious inclusivists identify with a particular Christian tradition but are accepting of religious diversity. They hold to Christian truths, and at the same time recognize that other religions also contain important truths that Christians would do well to learn. Their strategy of engagement with other religions emphasizes interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

The problem with this approach is the tension inherent in viewing Jesus as a special divine revelation while embracing other religious traditions. The consequence is that inclusivists also tend toward shallowness in their relationships with other religions. They may make their own commitments shallower by ignoring the difficult truth claims of the Christian tradition, or they may avoid engaging others on key religious issues that might highlight differences rather than similarities.

Religious exclusivists view Christianity as the only true way to God and see other religions as false. For exclusivists, a Christian approach to other religions aims at conversion. It resists diversity rather than embracing it. The problem with this approach, according to Wuthnow, is both theological and social. Theologically, it necessarily makes God distant rather than immanent. Socially, it leads to religious tribalism in which engagement with others is made more difficult. Thus, the very religious mission of exclusivists—conversion—becomes unlikely. Exclusivists, like shoppers and inclusivists, tend to avoid serious engagement with religious others.

Wuthnow uses his interviews to produce rich descriptions of the experiences and perspectives of people who embrace each approach. The survey data show the systematic differences in patterns between them. Not surprisingly, they are correlated with demographic characteristics such as age and education. Younger and more educated Americans are more likely to be inclusivists or shoppers. All three approaches are found among all the usual denominational categories. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are more likely to be exclusivists, but they also include significant numbers of inclusivists and shoppers. Mainline Protestants are about equally likely to be inclusivist or exclusivist.

The survey research turns up some findings that are likely to raise the eyebrows of many Christian Century readers. For example, despite inclusivists' embrace of religious diversity, fewer than half of them reported being even somewhat familiar with the teachings of any religion other than Christianity. Twenty-seven percent of inclusivists (the same percentage as exclusivists) were willing to abridge First Amendment rights to make it illegal for Muslim groups to meet in the United States, and nearly the same number would apply the same restriction to Hindus and Buddhists. Forty percent of inclusivists (60 percent of exclusivists) said they would be "bothered" if Muslims wanted to build a large mosque in their community. A Hindu temple would be a bit more welcome, but not much. Thus, it appears that the nimby phenomenon (not-in-my-backyard) is alive and well, even among people who embrace diversity in the abstract.

Wuthnow goes on to explore in more detail how the three approaches to diversity affect congregational life and the actions of Christian leaders. He shows that regardless of whether they are inclusivists or exclusivists, parishioners and clergy are most likely to ignore other religions or engage in strategies that minimize contact.

The one setting in which Wuthnow sees some helpful models of engagement developing is in religiously mixed marriages. Such marriages require a couple to negotiate with differing religious leaders. They also need to negotiate with each other on the practical issues of combining religions in one household. In such settings, the focus turns to religious practices more than theological debates, and here is where Wuthnow sees some hope for progress. Interfaith engagement or collaboration around concrete practical projects is more likely to be a first step toward understanding than is abstract theological dialogue.

In the end, Wuthnow calls for a strategy of "reflective pluralism." Reflective pluralism will overcome the reluctance to acknowledge significant differences between religions. Rather than ignoring or papering over differences, it will self-consciously and intentionally engage such differences. This is most likely to happen in connection with substantive projects in which each party considers and expresses its own perspective while respecting the other and being willing to make principled compromises that will allow civic and civil cooperation. At the moment, says Wuthnow, Christians, either as individuals or groups, are providing few good models of reflective pluralism.