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“Neighboring Faiths: How Will Americans Cope with Increasing Religious Diversity?”
by Diana L. Eck [Harvard Magazine, Sept.-Oct. 1996]

Diana L. Eck, a scholar of world religions, has been a professor at Harvard University since the late 1970s. Her academic specialty is the culture and religions of India.

I have to admit that I had never stopped to think what this [new reality of post-1965 immigration] would mean for the United States until the children of this first generation of Indian immigrants reached college age and enrolled in my classes at Harvard. . . . Straddling two worlds, critically appropriating two cultures, they lived in perpetual inner dialogue between the distinctive cultures of their parents and grandparents and the forceful, multiple currents of American culture. In their own struggles with identity lay the very issues that were beginning to torment the soul of the United States.

...[Q]uestions pushed themselves to the fore: What does it mean to speak of “our own” culture? Who do “we” mean when we say “we”? How are “difference” and “otherness” defined, and by whom? The word “multicultural” signaled the fact that every dimension of American culture had become more complex. . . , America’s issues, have become, increasingly... the world’s issues: race, culture, religion, difference, diversity, and whether it is possible to move from diversity to pluralism. . . .

Some say such a multicultural and multi-religious society is impossible. . . . [O]thers would insist that this is a secular society, so why make a point of looking at religious differences at all? But to ascertain how we—all of us—are doing in this new struggle for America’s soul, we have to look not only at race, not only at ethnicity, but at religion. The history of prejudice and stereotype demonstrates that religious insignia and institutions often become key markers of “difference”. . . religious institutions come to stand in a public way for the very heart of the community and often become the most visible targets for bigotry and violence. . . .

One of the decisive facts of the 1980s and 1990s has been the tremendous migration of peoples from one nation to another, both as immigrants and as refugees. Every part of the globe is experiencing the demographic changes of these migrations. . . . This is our new geo-religious reality... The plurality of religious traditions and cultures challenges people in every part of the world today, including the United States, which is now the most religiously diverse country on earth.

Diversity we have. But what is pluralism?... [P]luralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with that diversity. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. In this new world of religious diversity, pluralism is not a given, but an achievement. Pluralism will require not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding. ...In the world into which we now move, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

And finally, pluralism is not simply relativism. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. In the world into which we now move, it is a language we will have to learn.