

[U.S. GOVERNMENT](#) > [Introduction to the U.S. System](#) > Guiding Principles > Issues of Democracy: Religious Freedom as a Human Right

A NEW RELIGIOUS AMERICA

By Dr. Diana L. Eck



One of the bedrock principles of the United States is religious liberty and the separation of church and state. The Founding Fathers regarded the ideal as so important that it was incorporated into the Bill of Rights as the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. At the time the Republic was founded more than two centuries ago, the overwhelming majority of Americans were Christians. Since that time, however, as Dr. Diana L. Eck, documents in her recent book, A New Religious America, the United States has become the world's most religiously diverse society, especially during the last three decades.

Dr. Eck is professor of comparative religion and Indian studies in the faculty of arts and sciences, and member of the faculty of divinity at Harvard University. Following are excerpts from the introduction to her book.

The huge white dome of a mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside Toledo, Ohio. You can see it as you drive by on the interstate highway. A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. A Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery with a hint of a Southeast Asian roofline is set in the farmlands south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In suburban Fremont, California, flags fly from the golden domes of a new Sikh gurdwara on Hillside Terrace, now renamed Gurdwara Road. The religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past thirty years, but most of us have not yet begun to see the dimensions and scope of that change, so gradual has it been and yet so colossal. It began with the "new immigration," spurred by the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, as people from all over the world came to America and have become citizens. With them have come the religious traditions of the world -- Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Zoroastrian, African, and Afro-Caribbean. The people of these living traditions of faith have moved into American neighborhoods, tentatively at first, their altars and prayer rooms in storefronts and office buildings, basements and garages, recreation rooms and coat closets, nearly invisible to the rest of us. But in the past decade, we have begun to see their visible presence. Not all of us have seen the Toledo mosque or the Nashville temple, but we will see places like them, if we keep our eyes open, even in our own communities. They are the architectural signs of a new religious America.

We are surprised to find there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church USA, and as many Muslims as there are Jews --

that is, about 6 million. We are astonished to learn that Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world, with a Buddhist population spanning the whole range of the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to Korea, along with a multitude of native-born American Buddhists. Nationwide, this whole spectrum of Buddhists may number about 4 million. We know that many of our internists, surgeons, and nurses are of Indian origin, but we have not stopped to consider that they too have a religious life, that they might pause in the morning for few minutes' prayer at an altar in the family room of their home, that they might bring fruits and flowers to the local Shiva-Vishnu temple on the weekend and be part of a diverse Hindu population of more than a million. We are well aware of Latino immigration from Mexico and Central America and of the large Spanish-speaking population of our cities, and yet we may not recognize what a profound impact this is having on American Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, from hymnody to festivals.

Historians tell us that America has always been a land of many religions, and this is true. A vast, textured pluralism was already present in the lifeways of the Native peoples -- even before the European settlers came to these shores. The wide diversity of Native religious practices continues today, from the Piscataway of Maryland to the Blackfeet of Montana. The people who came across the Atlantic from Europe also had diverse religious traditions -- Spanish and French Catholics, British Anglicans and Quakers, Jews and Dutch Reform Christians. As we shall see, this diversity broadened over the course of 300 years of settlement. Many of the Africans brought to these shores with the slave trade were Muslims. The Chinese and Japanese who came to seek their fortune in the mines and fields of the West brought with them a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions. Eastern European Jews and Irish and Italian Catholics also arrived in force in the 19th century. Both Christian and Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East. Punjabis from northwest India came in the first decade of the 20th century. Most of them were Sikhs who settled in the Central and Imperial Valleys of California, built America's first gurdwaras, and intermarried with Mexican women, creating a rich Sikh-Spanish subculture. The stories of all these peoples are an important part of America's immigration history.

The immigrants of the last three decades, however, have expanded the diversity of our religious life dramatically, exponentially. Buddhists have come from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Korea; Hindus from India, East Africa, and Trinidad; Muslims from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Nigeria; Sikhs and Jains from India; and Zoroastrians from both India and Iran. Immigrants from Haiti and Cuba have brought Afro-Caribbean traditions, blending both African and Catholic symbols and images. New Jewish immigrants have come from Russia and the Ukraine, and the internal diversity of American Judaism is greater than ever before. The face of American Christianity has also changed with large Latino, Filipino, and Vietnamese Catholic communities; Chinese, Haitian, and Brazilian Pentecostal communities; Korean Presbyterians, Indian Mar Thomas, and Egyptian Copts. In every city in the land church signboards display the meeting times of Korean or Latino congregations that nest within the walls of old urban Protestant and Catholic churches.

In the past 30 years massive movements of people both as migrants and refugees have reshaped the demography of our world. Immigrants around the world number over 130 million, with about 30 million in the United States, a million arriving each year. The dynamic global image of our times is not the so-called clash of civilizations but the marbling of civilizations and peoples. Just as the end of the Cold War brought about a new geopolitical situation, the global movements of people have brought about a new georeligious reality. Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims are now part of the religious landscape of Britain; mosques appear in Paris and Lyons, Buddhist temples in Toronto, and Sikh gurdwaras in Vancouver. But nowhere, even in today's world of mass migrations, is the sheer range of religious faith as wide as it is today in the United States. Add to India's wide range of religions those of China, Latin America and Africa. Take the diversity of Britain or Canada, and add to it the crescendo of Latino immigration along with the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Filipinos. This is an astonishing new reality. We have never been here before.

The new era of immigration is different from previous eras not only in magnitude and complexity but also in its very dynamics. Many of the migrants who come to the United States today maintain strong ties with their homelands, linked by travel and transnational communications networks, e-mails and faxes, satellite phone lines and cable television news. They manage to live both here and there in all the ways that modern communications and

telecommunications have made possible. What will the idea and vision of America become as citizens, new and old, embrace all this diversity? The questions that emerge today from the encounter of people of so many religious and cultural traditions go to the very heart of who we see ourselves to be as a people. They are not trivial questions, for they force us to ask in one way or another: Who do we mean when we invoke the first words of our Constitution, "We the people of the United States of America"? Who do we mean when we say "we"? This is a challenge of citizenship, to be sure, for it has to do with the imagined community of which we consider ourselves a part. It is also a challenge of faith, for people of every religious tradition live today with communities of faith other than their own, not only around the world but also across the street.

"We the people of the United States" now form the most profusely religious nation on earth. So where do we go from here? It's one thing to be unconcerned about or ignorant of Muslim or Buddhist neighbors on the other side of the world, but when Buddhists are our next-door neighbors, when our children are best friends with Muslim classmates, when a Hindu is running for a seat on the school committee, all of us have a new vested interest in our neighbors, both as citizens and as people of faith.

As the new century dawns, we Americans are challenged to make good on the promise of religious freedom so basic to the very idea and image of America. Religious freedom has always given rise to religious diversity, and never has our diversity been more dramatic than it is today. This will require us to reclaim the deepest meaning of the very principles we cherish and to create a truly pluralist American society in which this great diversity is not simply tolerated but becomes the very source of our strength. But to do this, we will all need to know more than we do about one another and to listen for the new ways in which new Americans articulate the "we" and contribute to the sound and spirit of America.

The framers of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights could not possibly have envisioned the scope of religious diversity in America at the beginning of the 21st century. When they wrote the 16 words of the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," they unquestionably did not have Buddhism or the Santeria tradition in mind. But the principles they articulated -- the "nonestablishment" of religion and the "free exercise" of religion -- have provided a sturdy rudder through the past two centuries as our religious diversity has expanded. After all, religious freedom is the fountainhead of religious diversity. The two go inextricably together. Step by step, we are beginning to claim and affirm what the framers of the Constitution did not imagine but equipped us to embrace.

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. The history of religion is an ongoing process. America today is an exciting place to study the dynamic history of living faiths, as Buddhism becomes a distinctively American religion and as Christians and Jews encounter Buddhists and articulate their faith anew in the light of that encounter or perhaps come to understand themselves part of both traditions. Even humanists, even secularists, even atheists have to rethink their worldviews in the context of a more complex religious reality. With multitheistic Hindus and nontheistic Buddhists in the picture, atheists may have to be more specific about what kind of "god" they do not believe in.

Just as our religious traditions are dynamic, so is the very idea of America. The motto of the Republic, *E Pluribus Unum*, "From Many, One," is not an accomplished fact but an ideal that Americans must continue to claim. The story of America's many peoples and the creation of one nation is an unfinished story in which the ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are continually brought into being. Our *pluribus* is more striking than ever -- our races and faces, our jazz and qawwali music, our Haitian drums and Bengali tablas, our hip-hop and bhangra dances, our mariachis and gamelans, our Islamic minarets and Hindu temple towers, our Mormon temple spires and golden gurdwara domes. Amid this plurality, the expression of our *unum*, our oneness, will require many new voices, each contributing in its own way -- like the voices of Sikhs who will stand up for the "self-evident truth" of human equality not only because it is written in the Declaration of

Independence but also because it is part of the teachings of Guru Nanak and a principle of their faith as Sikhs. Hearing new ways of giving expression to the idea of America is the challenge we face today.

As we enter a new millennium, Americans are in the process of discovering who "we" are anew. Each part of the composite picture of a new religious America may seem small, but each contributes to a new self-portrait of America. One word may signal a shift in consciousness. For example, as Muslims become more numerous and visible in American society, public officials have begun to shift from speaking of "churches and synagogues" to "churches, synagogues, and mosques." The annual observance of the Ramadan month of Muslim fasting now receives public notice and becomes the occasion for portraits of the Muslims next door in the *Dallas Morning News* or the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. The fast-breaking meals called "iftar" at the close of each day have become moments of recognition. In the late 1990s there were iftar observances by Muslim staffers on Capitol Hill, in the Pentagon, and in the State Department. In 1996 the White House hosted the first observance of the celebration of Eid al-Fitr at the end of the month of Ramadan, a practice that has continued. The same year also saw the U.S. Navy commission its first Muslim chaplain, Lieutenant M. Malak Abd al-Muta' Ali Noel, and in 1998 the U.S. Navy's first mosque was opened on the Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia, where Lieutenant Noel was stationed. When 50 sailors attend Friday prayers at this facility, they signal to all of us a new era of American religious life.

Hindus have begun to signal their American presence as well. For instance, on September 14, 2000, Shri Venkatachalapathi Samudrala, a priest of the Shiva Vishnu Temple of Greater Cleveland in Parma, Ohio, opened a session of the U.S. House of Representatives with the chaplain's prayer of the day. He prayed in Hindi and English and closed with a Sanskrit hymn, all recorded on the temple's web site. The occasion was the visit of the prime minister of India to the United States, but the wider message was clearly that Ohio too has its Hindus, as does every state in the union. As Americans, we need to see these signs of a new religious America and begin to think about ourselves anew in terms of them.

America's burgeoning interfaith movement gives us another set of signals about what is happening in America today as people of different faith traditions begin to cooperate in concrete ways. One example is of interest because it was led by Buddhists. In the spring of 1998, from the dazzling white Peace Pagoda, which sits on a hilltop of maples in the rural countryside of Leverett, Massachusetts, a community of Buddhist pilgrims launched the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage. Bringing together American "pilgrims" of all races and religions, they walked 15 to 20 miles a day for seven months, visiting sites associated with slavery all along the coast from Boston to New Orleans. From there, some of them continued the journey by sea to the west coast of Africa. The Buddhist community sponsoring the walk, a group called the Nipponzan Myohoji, was small in size, but, like the Quakers, this group extends leadership far beyond its numbers. It was not the first time this group had walked for racial and religious harmony. It had also journeyed from Auschwitz to Hiroshima to remind the world of the atrocities of the concentration camps and the atomic bomb. On a local level, every year this group walks for three days from its hilltop pagoda to downtown Springfield, Massachusetts, to observe "Juneteenth," the annual celebration of black liberation from slavery. In each case, members walk to remind the rest of us of our deepest commitments.

Envisioning the new America in the 21st century requires an imaginative leap. It means seeing the religious landscape of America, from sea to shining sea, in all its beautiful complexity.

From the book A NEW RELIGIOUS AMERICA by Diana L. Eck, which is published by HarperSanFrancisco, a division of HarperCollinsPublishers, Inc. Copyright © 2001 by Diana L. Eck. All Rights Reserved.

[Back to top](#)

InfoUSA is maintained by the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), U.S. Department of State

Last year, religious studies scholar Diana Eck published an influential book entitled *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. The only problem with this title—and the underlying thesis—is that it is flat wrong (see “One Nation Under Many Gods,” *Public Square*, October 2001). While mass immigration is indeed having an enormous religious impact, the main beneficiary of the process is unquestionably Christianity. Far more than most secular observers yet appreciate, the vast majority of new immigrants are Christian or become so. A seismic survey of American religious and denominational identity—the largest of its kind ever conducted—chronicles changes in the US religious landscape. The American religious landscape is undergoing a dramatic transformation. White Christians, once the dominant religious group in the U.S., now account for fewer than half of all adults living in the country. Today, fewer than half of all states are majority white Christian. In *A New Religious America*, Diana Eck describes the transformation of America's religious landscape, and explores the implications of this new religious reality. From the publisher, HarperSanFrancisco: “The United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world,” leading religious scholar Diana Eck writes in this eye-opening guide to the religious realities of America today. The Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the quotas linking immigration to national origins. Since then, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, and new varieties of Jews and Catholics have arrived.