

Spring 5-31-2000

Religion and the Global Moment

Diana L. Eck
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl>

Recommended Citation

Eck, Diana L. (2000) "Religion and the Global Moment," *Macalester International*: Vol. 8, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol8/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester International by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Religion and the Global Moment

Diana L. Eck

It is significant, indeed, that the Macalester International Roundtable has chosen religion for analysis in 1999, the last year of the century and the millennium, and it is a great honor to address this topic with you. I have always considered it a privilege and a challenge to be a scholar of religion. Studying religion means trying to understand the forces of faith that have created, undergirded, and sometimes undermined the great civilizations and cultures of the world. It means trying to understand not only one's own tradition of faith, but taking it as a matter of scholarly inquiry to understand worlds of faith that are not one's own. Today, religion is increasingly in the public view, not only as a matter of practice, but as a subject of study. This is especially true in the United States where departments of religious studies have continued to grow in the last decades of this century, both in private colleges and public universities. Now, as the twentieth century draws to a close, people in a wide variety of fields—business, law, politics, economics, development policy, medicine, and conflict resolution—are becoming interested in religion as they become increasingly aware of the power of religion in their own societies and in the world...a power that is evident for better and for worse. I would like to explore the currents of religion at century's end looking at the matter globally, and then testing our thinking in the context of local developments here in the United States.

The term *globalization* signals the fact that world-systems (like banking, commerce, communications, and security) have become increasingly linked in an interdependent whole. Events in one part of the world resound in other parts of the world. Powerful telecommunications networks deploy worldwide advertising strategies, create worldwide markets, and become worldwide news-brokers. Brazilian soap

operas are seen in Turkey, American prime time sit-coms are broadcast in rural Egypt, and CNN brings its version of the news to the whole world. Great moments in world history — like the release of Nelson Mandela or the transfer of power in Hong Kong — can be seen more intimately in one's living room in St. Paul than in the very places they happen. Within a week in the fall of 1997, the whole world watched the funerals of Lady Diana and Mother Teresa. In February of 1999, Muslims from Morocco to Seattle were able to watch the funeral of King Hussein of Jordan, to be present from tens of thousands of miles away as his casket was lowered into the ground, to hear the Arabic readings and prayers. Non-Muslims could observe both the familiar and distant rituals of grief and interment. In America, Christians, Muslims, and Jews gathered in cities like Detroit and Pittsburgh to offer prayers jointly for King Hussein.¹ Just as globalization extends the human reach of sympathy or grief around the world, it also quickens the reverberations of international events. The bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi, for example, triggered a spate of threats against Muslim citizens in the United States and also triggered a response from American Muslims, who spoke up to condemn terrorism in the name of Islam and set up a counter-force of Muslim doctors to travel to Nairobi.

As I sit down in my study in Cambridge and open my Internet bookmarks, I am able to read the headlines of the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle* in my Montana hometown and then turn to the *Times of India* in New Delhi. I am young enough to be able to manage the new media, and old enough to marvel at its capacities. And yet I am also acutely aware of how few of us in the human family participate positively in the revolutions of globalization. As the 1999 Human Development report of the United Nations put it, "The collapse of space, time, and borders may be the creation of a global village, but not everyone can be a global citizen."² No indeed, for the report documents that the wealthiest twenty percent of the world control eighty-six percent of the world's product, while the poorest twenty percent are left out of the growth of globalization and control only one percent of the world's domestic product. The annual sales of General Motors or Walmart are greater than the gross domestic product of Malaysia or Venezuela. We can access this sobering report on our computers, for we in the United States own more computers than the rest of the world combined. Twenty-six percent of us are online, as opposed to four hundredths of one percent in South Asia. We can print out the United Nations report

on these sobering facts, as I did, for we in the richest twenty percent consume eighty-four percent of all the world's paper.

The Buddhist philosopher and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh describes our world as one of "interbeing." Everything is interrelated. The very paper on which my text is printed is dependent upon and related to the sunshine and rain it took to grow the trees from which it was produced, the labor and machinery that produced it, the forms of commerce that marketed it. It is a classical Buddhist observation, but he puts it in modern and practical language: we inter-are. We do not exist of and for and by ourselves. Refining the awareness of our inter-being is certainly one of the great religious tasks of our time.

For the United States of America, a nation that has long cherished the ideals of independence, the term "interdependence" has only slowly found a place in our vocabulary. The fact that we "inter-are," as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, is often not easy for our American rugged individualism, not easy for our view of self-interest, and not amenable to the many religious and commercial interest groups that press their singular concerns upon us all. It may make us uncomfortable to recognize that we cannot independently achieve our visions and aspirations, even the most noble of them. In today's world, we are interdependent. We cannot go it alone, for there is no such thing as alone in an interdependent world. The Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan, lecturing at Oxford in the 1930s, prophetically pointed to the dimensions of this interdependence some seventy years ago:

For the first time in the history of our planet its inhabitants have become one whole, each and every part of which is affected by the fortunes of every other. Science and technology, without aiming at this result, have achieved the unity. Economic and political phenomena are increasingly imposing on us the obligation to treat the world as a unit. Currencies are linked, commerce is international, political fortunes are interdependent. And yet the sense that humankind must become a community is still a casual whim, a vague aspiration, not generally accepted as a conscious ideal or an urgent practical necessity moving us to feel the dignity of a common citizenship and the call of a common duty.³

He concluded, "The supreme task of our generation is to give a soul to the growing world consciousness." Reflecting on these words, we have to conclude that Radhakrishnan's generation did not achieve this goal, nor did the subsequent generation, that of my parents. This "supreme

task” is still the burden of my generation and of yours, the student generation today. Developing a consciousness of our growing religious interrelatedness and developing a moral infrastructure that will guide us in the years ahead are among the most urgent tasks of our time.

As we think together about religion at the century’s end, let us keep in mind three analytic observations about religion that will help us explore what is happening today — both in our own traditions and in those of our increasingly proximate neighbors.

A. Religious Traditions are Dynamic

Religions are more like verbs than nouns, more like rivers than buildings. Our religious traditions are not boxes of goods passed intact from generation to generation, but rivers of faith — alive, dynamic, ever-changing, diverging, converging, watering new lands, drying up in one area and surging to flood levels in another. For many people, the term *religion* may convey a sense of the eternal, the rock of ages, the firm and unshakable foundations. To be sure, religious people ground their lives with surety and confidence in their traditions of faith. But as an historian of religion, I have to report that these religious traditions are eternal “rocks,” but are in motion. Those that do not change have died. This should be encouraging to those of you who have given up on religion. Religions have a history — and it is not yet over.

Religious traditions, after all, are not isolated sets of activities, but world-shaping ways of life. They have to do with the visions and values that shape all of life, not just the public or ritual acts that we may participate in on Fridays, Saturdays, or Sundays. One of the great historians of religion of the twentieth century, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, found in his studies that people of every religious tradition find the word “religion” inadequate to describe what it is they do.⁴ The term *religion* does not quite fit us, they report; ours is a way of life. A modern Jewish thinker said, “The attempt to reduce Judaism to a religion is a betrayal of its true nature.” A prominent Buddhist religious leader insisted, “Buddhism is not a religion in the sense in which that word is commonly understood.” A Muslim wrote, “Islam is not merely a ‘religion’ in the sense in which that is understood in the West.” Jawaharlal Nehru insisted, “It is hardly possible . . . to say whether [Hinduism] is a religion or not.” The theologian Karl Barth spoke half a century ago of the “Abolition of Religion” in an essay of the same name, and Deitrich

Bonhoeffer spoke of “religionless Christianity.” All express a dissatisfaction with what comes to mind in thinking of religion. Perhaps the resonance of religion is too institutional, too fixed, without the dynamic quality of life itself.

Religious traditions are also dynamic in yet another sense, a more literal sense: they move from place to place. One of the decisive facts of the 1980s and 1990s has been the migration of peoples from one nation to another — as immigrants, both legal and illegal, and as refugees. Every part of the globe is experiencing the demographic changes of these migrations. The United Nations has recently estimated that two percent of the world’s population now lives outside its country of origin. The number of refugees is estimated to be some twenty million, and this does not include the multitude of politically displaced persons who do not meet refugee criteria. In addition to refugee movements, there is the migration of people for political or economic reasons.

Today’s unprecedented migrations have changed the map of the world. If the end of the Cold War created a new geo-political reality, the dynamism of religious movements through migration has created a new “geo-religious” reality. New Hindu temples have been built in Leicester and London, new mosques in Lyons and Rome. Vietnamese or Khmer Buddhist communities have found homes in Amsterdam and Chicago. The majority of the world’s Christians today live in the Southern Hemisphere — in Africa and South America. While some multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations have splintered into narrowly defined ethnic identities, others are coming into being, bringing people of different religious traditions into closer contact than ever before, and posing the challenging question of who “we” are—in the U.S., the U.K., France, and Germany.

In the past three decades, since the 1965 Immigration Act, the U.S. has become a truly multi-religious society. There are Buddhist refugee communities from Vietnam and Cambodia, new Buddhist immigrants from Korea and China, and hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of native-born Americans who have come to consider themselves Buddhist through their participation in meditation-based communities. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains have settled in the U.S. from South Asia, have built temples, established national networks, and run summer youth camps. Today, there are about six million American Muslims, and Islam will soon replace Judaism as the second largest religious tradition in the U.S. It is more difficult to estimate Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain minorities, but collectively they also number

in the millions. And each of these traditions changes as it takes root in new soil and copes with new problems.

A few years ago, a prominent American political scientist, Samuel Huntington, in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, wrote of the new geopolitical reality of “the West and the rest” and proposed that “civilizational identity” will have a major role in the coming political realignment.⁵ He contends that the Confucian, Islamic, and Hindu worlds will be forces with which the West must reckon, and he predicts that the “clash of civilizations” will define post-Cold War politics in the next century. But where exactly are these civilizations? With mosques in Lyons and London and with some seventy mosques and half a million Muslims in Chicago, it is difficult to know what might be meant by the “Islamic world.” Today, the Muslim world is not somewhere else; Chicago is part of the Muslim world. It is precisely the interpenetration and proximity of great civilizations and cultures that is the hallmark of the late twentieth century. The map of the world in which we live cannot be color coded as to its Christian, Muslim, or Hindu identity, but each part of the world is marbled with the colors and textures of the whole.

B. Religious Traditions are Complex and Multi-Vocal

When you hear “Christianity,” “Judaism,” or “Islam,” do not think you are encountering a solid block of people, thought, practice, and vision. No, indeed. Religions are inherently multi-vocal. They always have been. The closer you get, the more complex they are. We know this about our own traditions all too well. I am a Protestant Christian, not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox; a Methodist more precisely, because all Protestants are not the same. But if you think Methodists are all of one voice, think again. The Methodist church, even in the United States, is deeply divided about many issues: feminism and the role of women, the social and economic meaning of the Gospel, and the role of homosexuals in the church and in the clergy. Mention “pluralism” to a Jew and he or she is likely to think first of all of the pluralism within the Jewish tradition, the arguments over who is a Jew and what is essential to Jewish identity. For all their common tradition, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jews also disagree, sometimes deeply, with one another.

There are also multiple voices in the Islamic world, Shi’a and Sunni, from Jakarta to Casa Blanca, from Johannesburg to Chicago. They

include the Islamist voices of politically resurgent Islamic parties today, Muslims who support the Ayatollahs in Iran or the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as the voices of Muslims who are strong advocates of universal human rights like Abdullah An-Na'm, progressive Muslim philosophers like Muhammad Arkoun, and Muslim feminists like Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed. Even so, many non-Muslims perceive Islam as a monolith, ascribing to Islam a uniformity that is both falsifying and alienating.

Just as there is no one great geographical mass called "the Islamic world" or "the Christian world" (despite the theoretical constructs of Samuel Huntington), there is also no one tonality to Islam or Christianity. Each of these traditions, even as it universalizes about truth claims, has many voices within it. Each has its own internal arguments. Indeed, I often describe the world's religious traditions as long historical arguments — ongoing energetic arguments. To miss the diversity within the Muslim world or to miss the arguments within the Christian world distorts our analysis and often privileges the loudest and often most extreme voices.

C. Religious Traditions are Interrelated

One of the ways in which religious traditions change is in relation to one another. The whole fabric of Indian civilization, with its many strands of tradition, demonstrates what is, in a broader way, true for the whole world: one cannot pull out one strand from the fabric and study it alone, for its knots, textures, and colors are bound into a complex whole.

We also interpret one another — Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs; Jews, Christians, and Muslims. And one of each tradition's internal debates is about the meaning of the others. Are we all basically alike, traveling different paths to the top of the mountain? Are we profoundly different, with conflicting goals and dreams? Is our community the sole possessor of the truth, and others either condemned or lost? We profoundly affect one another, as we people in every religious community (and non-religious people as well) relate to each other, refuse to relate to each other, understand one another, misunderstand or misconstrue one another, marry one another, and kill one another. Today, people of all religious traditions are neighbors somewhere, minorities somewhere, and majorities somewhere. The question of the relation of people of different faiths is on the world's agenda as never before. We

have mounting evidence of the friction and fracture of societies and nations as deep conflicts become expressed in religious and ethnic terms. Religion has become one of the most divisive forces on earth, and the instances come readily to our minds — the Middle East, the Balkans, Ireland, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia.

At the same time, we have mounting evidence of a very different approach to interreligious relations: the deliberate attempt to build bridges across the fault lines, to create an interfaith infrastructure. The World Conference on Religion and Peace, for example, brings religious leaders and communities together internationally, with local chapters in Japan and India, South Africa and Sierra Leone, and in Europe and North America. In the midst of the war in Bosnia and the destruction of Sarajevo, the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina came into being, with leaders of the Islamic, Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish communities witnessing publicly to a different way of coping with differences.

The worlds of technology, business, and communications have put considerable effort into imagining and creating transnational networks of activity and influence, for better or for worse. Political and military strategists understand our global interdependence. Yet religious instruments constructed to “give a soul to our growing world-consciousness” are still very fragile. The careful making of the forms of interreligious communication and cooperation that must be considered part of the basic infrastructure of the world of the twenty-first century is just beginning.

II. Taking Stock of Religion: America 1999

Global dilemmas are increasingly reflected in local dilemmas, and here in the United States we have barely begun to recognize, let alone resolve, our new local dilemmas. The American scene is worth a careful look as 1999 draws to a close. To be honest, most people are still unaware of just how multi-religious America really is. They are surprised to find out that there are more Muslim Americans today than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church USA, as many Muslims as Jews. Most people I speak to 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, and with a multitude of native-born American Buddhists. 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 prayer at an altar in the family room of their home or that they might bring fruits and flowers to the Shiva-Vishnu Temple on the weekend.

The dynamism of religions, the multi-vocal complexity of religions, and the interrelations of religions help us to think more broadly about specific cases and events. I have chosen seven events, seven news stories, which took place in 1999, the last year of the century. Looking at American religious life through the lens of these events might help us think more concretely about where we are and where we are going. They are not the year's seven most important religious events, not at all. In some ways they are very ordinary. One would read about them in local newspapers, which are my primary sources here, and only occasionally would they make the national news. But they enable us to see in more specific ways the dynamism, the complexity, and the inter-relatedness of our religious traditions today. And each story spins out beyond itself to open a broader vista on our world.

A. Durga Temple Appreciation Week

Perhaps only a few thousand people were aware that the week of March 20 in Fairfax County, Virginia was proclaimed Durga Temple Appreciation Week by the Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. Local newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, covered the story, and so did I. I arrived on the morning of the consecration and had to park a mile away in a school parking lot, where I waited in the rain for a shuttle bus to the temple. By the time I arrived, thousands of Hindus had already gathered. Most were of two generations: an Indian-born immigrant generation that had put years of energy and more than four million dollars into building this temple to enable them to transmit their tradition to the second generation, their American born children, whose Reeboks and Nikes were piled high on either side of the door to the large main temple hall. It is estimated that there are 60,000 to 70,000 Hindu immigrants in Fairfax County, more than double the number counted in the 1990 census.⁶

The consecration of this Hindu temple, half an hour's drive from the nation's capital, is indicative of the new religious demography and landscape of America. Fairfax County is typical of the new diversity of America's urban areas and their suburbs. Part of the penumbra of

Washington, D.C., it is home to new Islamic centers, Islamic schools, Sikh gurdwaras, Korean Protestant Churches, and Hindu temples. The Durga Temple is one of several under construction in the Washington area. Indeed, a few weeks after the Durga celebration another Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Murugan opened on the other side of the city in Lanham, Maryland. Opening newly built Hindu temples, Islamic centers, and Buddhist and Jain temples makes the local news today in one American city after another. It began in the late 1970s, when immigrants who had come to the U.S. as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act began to establish permanent institutions. For decades they had worshipped in makeshift and rented quarters, and then they began to dream. They incorporated, attracted members, raised money, drew up plans, confronted zoning boards, and eventually were able to realize their dreams — a mosque in Toledo, a Hindu temple in Nashville, a Chinese Buddhist temple in Houston. These realized dreams stand as signals of a permanent, committed presence of new religious communities in the United States.

A 1999 sampler of this new religious reality would include the opening of new Buddhist temples in Safety Harbor, Florida and in Auburn, Washington; the dedication of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky in Louisville; the opening of a new mosque in the St. Louis suburb of Swansea; and the dedication of a new Jain Temple in St. Louis. These local stories are America's stories, and they are part of a much wider shift in the world's religious demography. They are the founding stories of our new "geo-religious" reality.

B. Khalsa Sikh Day in Ohio

On April 10, 1999, an article in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* announced Sikh plans for a procession at the public square in Cleveland to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa, the brotherhood and sisterhood of initiated Sikhs. The paper reported that there are two Sikh gurdwaras in the Cleveland area and about five hundred families of Sikhs. According to the article, Ohio Governor Bob Taft had proclaimed that April 14 would be "Khalsa Sikh Day" to recognize "the faith, rich cultural heritage, and family values" of the Sikh community of Ohio, heirs to a religious tradition dating to the sixteenth century teacher, Guru Nanak, in North India.⁷

There may well have been other states and cities where the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa was noted officially in the United States.

There were certainly many city newspapers that reported the celebrations in their area. In mid-April, *The Sacramento Bee*, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and *The Houston Chronicle* reported on Khalsa anniversary festivities, and *The Indianapolis Star* had an article on the opening of a new Sikh gurdwara in the city, adding further luster to the anniversary.⁸ In Washington, D.C., 25,000 Sikhs marched along Constitution Avenue from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol.⁹ Downtown Los Angeles saw a procession of another 10,000 Sikhs.¹⁰ At the Meadowlands Exposition Center in Secaucus, New Jersey, 6000 Sikhs gathered for a day-long celebration described by *The New York Times* as "part academic convocation, part political rally, and part performance."¹¹

In addition to the celebrations here in the U.S., there were huge celebrations in northwest India. Many American Sikhs returned to the holy center of Amritsar in the Punjab and to the village where Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, formed the Khalsa in 1699 as the backbone of Sikh resistance to political and religious persecution. Becoming a member of the Khalsa, then as now, expresses one's full commitment to the Sikh faith. A Khalsa-initiated Sikh will wear uncut hair (thus a turban for men) and carry a symbolic sword, usually a small knife called a *kirpan*, among the five signs of the faith. The 300th anniversary celebrations in America and India demonstrate an aspect of the world's new geo-religious reality: the emergence of new transnational religious networks that shape people's sense of identity regardless of nationality. American gurdwaras pay close attention to what is happening in the Punjab, and sometimes argue among themselves about how much attention is appropriate and how to balance concern for the welfare of the community in the U.S. and the Punjab. Web sites now link Sikhs worldwide, and travel makes the ongoing relationship of American Sikhs with their families in India both possible and common.

Khalsa Sikh Day in Ohio is but one indicator of the new shape of the world's religious life. In March of 1999, in mosques all over America, there were leaflets and appeals to get American Muslims involved in the plight of the Muslims of Kosovo. Many American newspapers printed day after day the list of relief organizations through which one might send aid to the Kosovar Albanian refugees who were streaming into makeshift camps in Macedonia and Albania. Despite the active engagement of Muslim relief organizations, these Muslim organizations were not among the dozen or so listed. Few non-Muslim Ameri-

cans know much about Muslim relief organizations. So it is interesting and important to know that by April of 1999, more than two million dollars had been raised by the Muslim communities of the United States for Kosovo relief. On April 18, \$300,000 was raised at a single fundraiser in southern California.

The Sikh and Muslim instances are new, yet familiar, indicators of transnational forms of religious concern, alliance, and involvement. Churches have long been involved in ecumenical alliances like the World Council of Churches. Evangelical Christians have more recently become involved in international human rights issues, such as trying to prevent the persecution of Christians in China. Jews have been active in their support for Israel, and American Hindus now concern themselves with Hindu nationalist politics in India. Through their forms of advocacy and growing advocacy networks, religious communities have increasingly become political actors. If we seek to understand the new geo-religious reality of an increasingly interdependent world, we will need to pay closer attention to these forms of transnational involvement.

C. Headscarves at Dulles Airport

In February 1999, five Muslim women were fired from their jobs at a security firm at Dulles International Airport in Washington. The reason for their dismissal from Argenbright Securities was their refusal to come to work without their headscarves, a covering worn by many observant Muslim women as a matter of faith. The women filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Eventually, the case was settled out of court, but it raised for us the question of a new and sensitive area of religious relations in America today: the workplace.¹² People of different faiths who may never meet in a formal "interfaith dialogue" meet everyday in the workplace. Since 1990, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has reported a thirty-one percent rise in complaints of religious discrimination in the workplace.¹³

Wearing or not wearing a headscarf might not seem, to some employers, an issue of special weight or controversy. But today, in the increasingly diverse public space of America, we encounter many seemingly simple issues that have sparked contention all over the world. Visible markers of faith have been of great symbolic importance in the fierce controversies of humankind. It is a sign of our increasing

globalization that most Americans today have seen women in Islamic dress — not just on television, but on Main Street in Bozeman, Montana; in class at the University of Indiana; or in the Mall of America in Minneapolis (where a woman in full *hijab* was arrested three years ago for wearing what the police officer deemed a “disguise”). A series of headscarf cases over the past few years make clear that the issue will not go away. For example, in 1996, a flight attendant took U.S. Air to court because she had been dismissed for wearing a headscarf. In 1998, a convert to Islam in Denver was told by her employer at Domino’s Pizza, “Unless you take that stupid thing off, you have to leave.”¹⁴ The Council on American Islamic Relations has been formed as a watchdog agency to help Muslims who are concerned about such issues of discrimination, making clear to those involved that the words and subsequent actions of employers are not just rude, but illegal. Most of these cases have been solved out of court. K-Mart Corporation affirmed a New Jersey Muslim employee’s right to wear the headscarf. Cox Communications in Florida made a public statement after investigating charges of discrimination by a scarf-wearing Muslim employee: “Thank you again for helping us to clearly understand your work attire requests....”¹⁵

It is not surprising that Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, Muslim men wearing beards, Sikh men wearing turbans and beards, and Orthodox Jewish men wearing the yarmulke are the most visible targets of discrimination. All these groups have many stories to tell about their requests for religious accommodation in the workplace. Can a turbaned Sikh work on a hard-hat job or wear his turban in the U.S. Army? Can a turbaned Sikh get a job in a family restaurant like Sam-bos? Will the Whirlpool Corporation in Nashville find a way for Muslim employees to meet their obligations for prayer? These have been some of the workplace issues of the late 1990s.

Employers today are encountering workplace issues most of us have never even thought about. For example, where do Muslim cabbies who work the airport routes pray during the long days in line at the airport? A hundred Muslim cab drivers in Denver put the question to the Denver Airport authority. *The Christian Science Monitor* reported, “When the city of Denver moved a glass shelter to its international airport this winter, giving Muslim cabbies a warm place to pray to Allah, it did not merely show government goodwill toward a religious minority. The move highlighted the growing willingness of American employers to provide for their workers’ religious needs.”¹⁶

What these issues make clear is simple: How we deal with religious difference is not just a matter for theological schools and religious institutions, but is a matter for businesses and corporations, offices and factories. In the U.S., these are the very places “We the People,” diverse as we are, encounter one another on a daily basis. Interreligious relations are worked out not only in the hot spots of the world and in dramas of global dimensions, but in the places of our everyday work.

D. The Night of Power at the Pentagon

How do we deal with increasing religious difference in our public life as a nation? The federal government is a special kind of workplace, and often the government signals the changes that are underway in our society. The fourth story I would like to call to our attention took place at the Pentagon on the 15th of January 1999. It was the holiest night of the Muslim year — Laylat al Quadr or the Night of Power, toward the end of the month of Ramadan, the month of fasting. On the Night of Power, Muslims celebrate the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. It is a night, they say, when the angels draw near the earth. Of course, each day of fasting ends with an *Iftaar*, a ritual fast-breaking meal. On this special day, an *Iftaar* was observed by Muslim employees at the Pentagon.

There is perhaps no acreage in the U.S. more associated with military power than the land occupied by the Pentagon across the Potomac River from the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. But the gathering here had to do with a very different kind of power—the power of Divine revelation. Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. John J. Hamre was asked to speak, and he began by expressing the “tremendous honor” this was for him. “I am a Lutheran in my own religious background and not a Muslim,” he said, “so I cannot fully appreciate how important this Night of Power is for all of you. But I can understand why this Night of Power is deeply important to you, because I am a religious person myself.” He went on to quote the opening lines of the Constitution, “We the People of the United States . . .,” which express ideals and fundamental values of liberty, justice, equality, and opportunity. These ideals, he concludes, are “grounded in our shared community of faith.”¹⁷

The armed services have passed many landmarks in the past few years as “We the People” come to terms with our growing religious

diversity. In World War II, the Muslims and Buddhists who served in our armed forces were not even permitted the inscription of their faith on their identification dog tags. They were identified as “other.” But today, the “other” has a name, and a voice, and a space in America. In 1996, the first Muslim chaplain was sworn into the corps of Navy chaplains and the official seal of the chaplains’ corps was modified to include the Crescent as well as the Cross and Star of David. In 1998, the first military mosque was opened—in Virginia at the Norfolk Naval Base. The Deputy Secretary recalled this in his Pentagon remarks: “I heard the story about what it took to establish a mosque in the naval base in Norfolk, where Muslims had no place to worship until just a few years ago. Through those fights—large and small—our men and women are being faithful to the ideal expressed in our Constitution, recognizing the religious freedom and rights of our own soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. It is the same ideal expressed in the Holy Koran: ‘O mankind, I created you from a single pair and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other, not that ye may despise each other.’”

There are many related milestone stories that indicate our changing public life. In early June of 1999, New York newspapers announced the appointment of the first Muslim chaplain in the New York Police Department, Imam Izak-El Mu’eed Pasha from the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque in Harlem.¹⁸ In 1996, there was the first-ever observance of Eid al-Fitr at the end of the month of Ramadan in the White House. 1991 witnessed the first-ever Imam to offer a prayer at the beginning of the session of the U.S. Senate. As we observe these landmarks, we should also take note of the fact that these gains do not come without the energy and effort of the American Muslim community. The American Muslim Council, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, and the Council on American Islamic Relations all have as their stated purpose the greater participation of Muslims in American public life.

E. Synagogue Arson in Sacramento

Our fifth story is a perennial one. In the early morning of June 18, 1999, three synagogues were burned in Sacramento, California. B’nai Israel, said to be the oldest congregation west of the Mississippi, now celebrating its 150th anniversary, lost its library of more than 5,000 books—all destroyed by fire. Knesset Torah Israel sustained fire and smoke damage and Congregation Beth Shalom was damaged by water from

the sprinkler system that discharged when the fire was set. Anti-Semitic flyers left near the synagogues contained allegations about the negative impact of Jews and the “Jewsmedia,” blaming Jews for the war in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Belgrade.¹⁹

In the days following the Sacramento incident, I received a widely circulated e-mail from a long-time member of Congregation B’nai Israel, Alan Canton. He described his feelings as he phoned members of the congregation in disbelief:

We talked about how this could happen in America. What have we done? Why do they still hate us so much? Aren’t we good members of the community? We volunteer for local services and donate funds to civic causes. All we ask is to be allowed to worship the way we wish and to be allowed to keep our culture alive in our own homes and temples... And on one night, in my hometown, they firebombed three of our temples. Not in New York or L.A. But here.

The Sacramento story made all the national newspapers and elicited a top-level response. Andrew Cuomo, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, promised federal loan guarantees for helping to restore the buildings, saying “Let’s make a clear sign that this act has not dissuaded us, this act has not torn us apart, but if anything, has brought us together and energized us.” Cuomo went on to say that we “must repair the bonds between us as Americans, just as we must repair the building. And frankly, it is sometimes more difficult to repair the bond because that deals with our hearts and minds, rather than just repairing bricks and mortar.”²⁰

Hate crimes are an issue that does not go away. If we ask how we are doing with our new diversity as Americans, one response is that we are seeing some of the same suspicion, bigotry, and prejudice that has torn apart societies for centuries. Religious buildings are more than bricks and mortar. They come to stand for the soul of the community. Attacks on religious buildings — whether the burning of a church in Indonesia, the destruction of an age-old mosque built on an age-old Hindu temple site in India, the destruction of Hindu temples in Pakistan, the burning of Christian churches in India, or the arson fire of a Hindu temple in Fiji — are public displays of the animosities of the human community played out by proxy on their places of worship.

America has had its share of these displays of animosity: the desecration of Jewish graveyards, the burning of Black churches, and, more

recently, attacks on America's newest and most vulnerable religious communities. The mosque in Yuba City, California — not far from Sacramento — was almost finished when it was destroyed on September 1, 1994, in a five-alarm fire of suspicious origin. Only the dome and part of the minaret were left, lying in the ashes of the new building. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) documents and investigates such incidents, and there are many of them (in High Point, North Carolina; Springfield, Illinois; and Greenville, South Carolina, to name but a few).

Here in the Twin Cities I don't have to remind you of the arson at the mosque in Northeast Minneapolis on the night of March 5, 1999. When Senator Paul Wellstone visited the building the next week, *The Star-Tribune* began its story, "Broken glass crunched into the water-soaked carpet and the acrid smell of charred wood filled the air as U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone toured the ruins of the Masjid Al-Huda with leaders of Minnesota's Muslim community."²¹ The story was well reported — at least here in St. Paul and Minneapolis. But did you also hear of the arson attempt at the Colorado Muslim Society's Islamic Center on the outskirts of Denver on the night of May 12? According to *The Denver Post*, the man arrested in connection with the incident was found with a "small arsenal of weapons, black clothing, tactical goggles, and writings indicating his hatred for Muslims and his desire to bomb the mosque."²² And did you hear of the incident a few days later at the Islamic Center in the Chicago suburb of Villa Park where, on the morning of May 15, 1999, a huge concrete block was thrown through the window, shattering the glass?²³

Our Muslim neighbors are not alone in the experience of prejudice in the form of violence against their communities. In the early 1980s, shortly after the Hindus of Pittsburgh had dedicated their second temple, a headline in *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* read, "Vandals toss paint, smash holy statues in Hindu Temple." The new temple, built in a residential area in Monroeville, had been broken into. The vandals had smashed five of the images of the Deities and torn up the sacred Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs, which had a place on a side altar. The word "Leave" was scrawled across the main altar.²⁴ And in 1993, the small, struggling Cambodian Buddhist community of Portland, Maine, which had just moved into a clapboard house, found its center of worship vandalized with an ax, the contents of the Buddha hall strewn around the yard, and the words "Dirty Asian Chink Go Home" written on the walls.²⁵

The synagogue arson in Sacramento made the national news, but most of these stories of arson and vandalism do not. They are local stories that involve both hatred and heartache, and they are microcosmic versions of a global story of inter-ethnic and interreligious conflict. Writ large, the prejudice, stereotype, and hatred in which these crimes are rooted are fracturing the human community in societies all over the world.

F. Muslims and Methodists Condemn Synagogue Attack

There is a sequel to this story of hatred. It does not erase the story, but provides another narrative of the response to hatred. One of the first groups to speak out at the Sacramento bombing was the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC), based in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. On June 21, 1999, MPAC released the following statement:

The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) condemns the arson attacks against three Jewish synagogues in Sacramento last Friday, 18 June. "People of all faiths must band together to reject the intolerance demonstrated by this violent act," said Dr. Maher Hathout, Sr. Advisor to the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

The Council expressed its solidarity with major Jewish organizations in Los Angeles today to reaffirm and fortify dialogue and cooperation. "It is astounding that in this modern era of mass communications, we still see the ugly face of hate and misunderstanding," said Dr. Hathout.²⁶

All too often in the case of hate crimes, the religious watchdog agencies that bring such incidents to light speak for their own tradition. In this case, predictably, the Anti-Defamation League spoke swiftly and strongly. Abraham Foxman, National Director of the ADL, said, "This is clearly the worst such attack in years." Less predictable was the response of Dr. Hathout and MPAC: "The attack against these three Jewish Houses of Worship was an assault against all religions and reason." The Northern California Methodist Conference, which was having a conference in Sacramento at the time of the attacks, also expressed solidarity and presented the synagogues with a check for \$6,000 in donations collected from those attending the conference.²⁷ For many Jews, this was not business as usual. Let us return to the e-mail of Alan Canton:

We heard...that our weekly Friday Sabbath service would be held in the 2000 seat Community Theater. I wasn't going to go at first...However, I thought that someone should be there to "stand up" to the terrorists who would attempt to rend and destroy us. Even though it was announced that everyone was invited, I figured that there would be 150 or 250 people there, enough to fill up a few rows in the huge theater, which has two balconies. When I arrived, I was totally surprised. Eighteen hundred people from all over our community—Jews, Catholics, Buddhists, Hare Krishnas, and members from every sect of the Protestant community were there...Never have I seen such an outpouring of grief and concern from the community—for Jews....

He went on to describe the Methodists in Sacramento, circulating by the hundreds, and the introduction of the Reverend Faith Whitmore.

She reached into her suit coat and took out a piece of paper. 'I want you to know that this afternoon we took a special offering of our members to help you rebuild your temple and we want you to have this check for six thousand dollars.' For two seconds there was absolute dead quiet. We were astounded. Did we hear this correctly? Christians are going to do this? On the third second, the hall shook with thunderous applause, and then people broke into tears.

Standing forth publicly and audibly for one another in times of trial is only slowly emerging in interreligious relations. It is important to take note of these witnesses to our common life and to hold them up for our common appreciation. When that concrete block landed in the mosque in Villa Park, an interfaith group of religious activists came together to carry it out. They enacted together something Muhammad had done when there was a dispute about who should carry a sacred stone: they placed it on a sheet and all of them carried it together. In this Chicago suburb, people of many faiths expressed their common cause by carrying the block out together. The local leader of the National Conference for Community and Justice said, "For sixty-five years we have stood amid broken glass, painted swastikas." Said the leader of Chicago's Board of Rabbis, "It has to stop. When evil is on the march, it must be confronted." A photograph of the interfaith group, sweeping up the broken glass together, was published in *The Chicago Sun-Times*.²⁸

G. The National Commission on Terrorism

There is another related story in this fabric of news from 1999, and it poses some very difficult issues that remind us of the tensions in inter-religious relations. We can learn to stand up for one another, speak out for one another, in times of trial and loss. We can even applaud symbolic markers of the presence of new neighbors in the public arena. But can we support one another in times of real empowerment and success? In June of 1999, Congressman Richard Gephardt nominated Salam Al-Marayati, the executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, to the National Commission on Terrorism. We have met Salam before, for it was his Los Angeles based MPAC that immediately spoke up with a Muslim voice in support of the Jewish communities of Sacramento. A Muslim who grew up in the U.S., he is part of a progressive new generation of American Muslim leaders. The nomination of Al-Marayati seemed a very astute and wise one, for the Muslim Public Affairs Council under his leadership had spoken forcefully on the subject of terrorism, condemning acts of terrorism associated in any way with Islam. For example, in August of 1998, when the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi was bombed, Al-Marayati wrote in an op-ed piece in *The Los Angeles Times*, "Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam has no room for terrorism."²⁹ At that time MPAC, along with the Council on American Islamic Relations and the American Muslim Council, condemned the bombing and MPAC also organized blood drives for East Africa and called for a team of American Muslim doctors to go to Kenya.

The story of Salam Al-Marayati's nomination to the National Commission on Terrorism did not make national news, however, until it was withdrawn. On Saturday, July 10, 1999, *The New York Times* carried the story, "Muslims Denounce Gephardt for Withdrawing a Nominee."³⁰ We learn from reporter Laurie Goodstein that, "Since he made the appointment in June, Mr. Gephardt, a Missouri Democrat, had been severely criticized by Jewish organizations that portrayed Mr. Al-Marayati as a terrorist sympathizer cloaked in a moderate's guise." In the same article, David Harris of the American Jewish Committee is quoted as saying that, of course, Muslims deserve a place at the table, but "this table is not just any table." In an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, a leader of the Zionist Organization of America compared the nomination to putting David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan leader, on a civil rights commission.³¹ Thus, the ten-member commission to review

national strategy for preventing and responding to terrorism has no Muslim member and, more importantly, no member deeply knowledgeable about the Muslim world, including the part of the Muslim world that is now America.

On July 12, a coalition of nine American Muslim and Arab American organizations issued a statement expressing their “total support” for Al-Marayati as “a thoughtful analyst whose enlightened perspective would make a valuable contribution to the Commission’s deliberations. We hoped that Mr. Al-Marayati’s appointment might mark a turning point for our communities, inasmuch as it would represent a sign of inclusion and recognition of the role that American Muslims and Arab Americans should rightfully play in the shaping of critical policy issues.” The statement expressed concern about the “outrageous and slanderous attacks” made against Al-Marayati who was “smeared with broad brush strokes of ‘guilt by association’ and defamation. His words were taken out of context and grossly distorted . . . His integrity was challenged and, worse still, his loyalty to America was called into question.” The statement, which to my knowledge was published in no major newspaper, ended “Finally, it should be clear to all Americans that the manipulation of the discussion of the important issues has a negative impact not only on American Muslims and Arab Americans but also on American democracy and pluralism. Exclusion of any group from the national discourse is contrary to America’s values and detrimental to its national and international interests.”³²

III. New Imagined Communities

In conclusion, let us return to the challenge with which we began: the interdependence of the world in which we live. This interdependence links our economies, our political fortunes, and our search for environmental and economic justice. It is also an interdependence that links our communities of faith, around the world and across the street. And yet, communities of faith are still uncertain about how to relate to one another as we tackle the challenge of “giving a soul to our growing world-consciousness.”

The relationship and interdependence of religious communities is now enacted in both local and global sites—Hindus and Christians in India and Indianapolis, Muslims and Jews in the Midwest and the Middle East. The stories of interreligious encounter remind us that religions are dynamic — as people of all faiths struggle to address

brand new questions, such as AIDS and the degradation of the environment. They remind us that our religious traditions are multi-vocal and that newfound alliances may be made across the political spectrum. For example, the American Muslim Council and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a joint statement on birth control and family planning, while Muslims joined with Jews, Christians, and Hindus to support Thai Buddhists in their efforts to build a temple in Los Angeles. These stories of encounter also remind us that our religious traditions are constantly influencing one another: Christians encounter the faith of new Sikh or Hindu neighbors and rethink what it really means to speak of God's universal providence; a Lutheran Under-Secretary of Defense finds himself addressing Muslims at the Pentagon on the holiest night of the Muslim year; and Jews in Sacramento find new allies in Christian and Muslim neighbors in the wake of the synagogue burnings.

Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, investigates the ways in which nations imagine themselves. Even when citizens do not know one another, he writes, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."³³ For a nation like the United States to imagine itself anew as a multi-religious nation is, at least for most of us, truly challenging. It means being able to imagine in our mind's eye the mosque in Toledo and the Hindu temple in Nashville as we think of America, from sea to shining sea. It means including in our image of "We the People" the Muslim members of the armed forces, the Hindus from Fairfax, Virginia, and the Sikhs of Cleveland, Ohio.

The story of religion in the global moment is an unfinished story, both globally and locally. The chapters of the story are still being written in cities and towns all over the world, and all over America. In November of 1998, on the occasion of the 529th birthday of the first Sikh teacher Guru Nanak, President Clinton issued a statement which said, in part: "We are grateful for the teachings of Guru Nanak, which celebrate the equality of all in the eyes of God, a message that strengthens our efforts to build one America. Religious pluralism in our nation is bringing us together in new and powerful ways."³⁴ There are some, as we have seen, who disagree. They see religious pluralism as a threat that is tearing us apart. Whether our new pluralism will bring us together or tear us apart depends greatly on whether we are able to imagine our national community anew. And the fate of a vibrant pluralism in the U.S. will have an important impact on the fate of religious pluralism worldwide. The ongoing argument over who "we" are

—as religious people, as a nation, and as a global community—is one in which all of us, ready or not, will participate. ●

Notes

1. *The Detroit News* (9 February 1999); *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (6 February 1999).
2. See *The Boston Globe* (13 July 1999): A17. The full text is on the UNDP web site.
3. S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 2.
4. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962). These quotations are part of his discussion in Chapter 3.
5. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
6. *The Washington Post* (20 March 1999): A24, Religion.
7. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* (10 April 1999): 1F.
8. *The Indianapolis Star* (17 April 1999): G1.
9. *The Washington Post* (11 April 1999): C3.
10. *The Los Angeles Times* (10 April 1999): B2.
11. *The New York Times* (5 April 1999): B6.
12. *The Washington Post* (3 March 1999): B3.
13. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act requires “reasonable accommodation” of religious belief and practice, unless it would cause the employer “undue hardship.”
14. Katherine Roth, “God on the Job,” *Working Woman* (February 1998): 65.
15. CAIR Web site.
16. Jillian Lloyd, “Religious Practices vs. Work Demands,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (31 December 1998).
17. <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/1999/c19990115-depsecdef.html>
18. *The New York Daily News* (4 June 1999).
19. *The Los Angeles Times* (19 June 1999). The crime was later alleged to be linked to members of a group called the World Church of the Creator, which has engaged in persistent verbal rhetoric on the dangers of racial and religious minorities in the U.S.
20. *The San Francisco Chronicle* (23 June 1999): A17.
21. *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* (14 March 1999): 1B.
22. *The Denver Post* (15 May 1999): B1; see also, *The New York Times* (13 May 1999).
23. *The Chicago Sun-Times* (24 May 1999): 18.
24. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (8 February 1983).
25. Pluralism Project Research by Julie Canniff, 1993.
26. Press Release, Muslim Public Affairs Council.
27. *The Los Angeles Times* (20 June 1999).
28. *Chicago Sun Times* (24 May 1999).
29. *The Los Angeles Times* (13 August 1998).
30. *The New York Times* (10 July 1999): A10.
31. *The Los Angeles Times* (12 July 1999).

32. See <http://www.mpac.org>

33. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

34. *San Diego Union-Tribune* (13 November 1998): E3.