

Is Your Religion Too Small?

By Peter Gilmour

Introduction

In a city filled with impressive churches, Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago is among the most noted. Part of a world-class university and grandly situated on the city's Midway Pleasance, this neo-Gothic edifice built overlooking part of the site for the 1893 Columbian Exposition has always loomed large in the religious consciousness of its city and beyond. Four times yearly, the University of Chicago holds its graduations there. An annual Thanksgiving service attracts people from across the metropolitan area. Handel's *Messiah* is sung every Christmas season Hayden's *The Seven Last Words of Christ* performed every Holy Week. An array of leaders have led services there and a host of other luminaries have spoken from its pulpit, among them Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. William Faulkner, Rev. Jesse Jackson, John Kerry, Jane Addams, and Toni

Morrison.

In the narthex of this chapel, its dedication plaque quotes John D. Rockefeller himself: “As the spirit of religion should penetrate and control the university, so that building which represents religion ought to be the central and dominant feature of the university group...” (Lane, 182).

Today, Rockefeller Chapel has a unique plan for its undercroft. This space will be reconfigured to serve the needs of about 35 different religious and spiritual traditions, among them Muslim, Hindu, Baha’i, and Sikh. Although this sacred space was envisioned as an interdenominational chapel by the University of Chicago’s founding president, William Rainey Harper and its major donor, John D. Rockefeller, these two people, and, no doubt, many others then defined “interdenominational” as bordered and boundaried by Christianity. In spite of the 1893 meeting of the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Chicago as part of the Columbian Exposition, interdenominational activity around the turn of the 20th century was a radical vision for many Christians, including Baptists, whose numbers included both Harper and Rockefeller. Interdenominational activity gave new meaning to the old hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation” just as the contemporary

construction plans for Rockefeller Chapel's undercroft does today.

Nearly fifty years after the founding vision for Rockefeller Chapel emerged, J. B. Phillips penned a little book that has become a perennial religious best seller. Titled Your God Is Too Small, Phillips challenged Christians to think about their God in terms appropriate for a modern age. "While their experiences of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static." (xx)

Phillips' book was a boundary breaking experience for many Christians. Your God Is Too Small invited Christians to theologize God less parochially, more broadly. "We can never have too big a conception of God, and the more scientific knowledge (in whatever field) advances, the greater becomes our idea of His vast and complicated wisdom" (135-136). Phillips urged Christians to move beyond what he termed, "churchiness" (37) that is, "the narrowing of the Gospel for all mankind into a set of approved beliefs...(and) the exclusive claim made by each one to be the 'right one'" (38-39). Your God Is Too Small, like Rockefeller's chapel, once again gave renewed meaning to the hymn,

“The Church is One Foundation.”

Today, nearly a hundred years after the vision of an interdenominational chapel on the University of Chicago’s campus started to take shape, and 50 years after the publication of Your God Is Too Small, one is struck not only with the expansive vision of these efforts, but, also with their exclusivist limited Christian perspective. Non-Christian religious and spiritual traditions were not part of the vision of either Rockefeller’s chapel or Phillips’ book. This lacuna is especially noticeable today when religious and spiritual traditions other than Christian have become prominent, both in the individual and personal lives of many Christians and in the social and communal lives of nations that traditionally have defined themselves as Christian.

The Contemporary Situation

Today we live in a New Age. Diana Eck in her book, A New Religious America documents the significant growth of non-Christian religious and spiritual traditions in the United States. She offers a thick description of many religious traditions in America. She reflects deeply on the meanings of so many religious and spiritual traditions living cheek by jowl. Her reflections on these emerging realities lead to a new definition and understanding of

pluralism. And she challenges theological educators to face the realities of this new religious America.

Churches, synagogues and theological schools have barely begun to take notice of this new religious reality. Yet, with the changing landscape, the entire context of ministry has begun to change....The issue of living in a pluralist society and thinking theologically about the questions it poses is important today for every community of faith. How do we think about our own faith as we come into deeper relationship with people of other faiths and as we gain a clearer understanding of their religious lives? (Eck, 23)

Focus of this Paper

This paper affirms the basic insights of Diana Eck as presented in her book, A New Religious America, and reflects on her interrogative, “How do we think about own faith as we come into deeper relationship with people of other faiths and as we gain a clearer understanding of their religious lives?” First, Eck’s definition of pluralism arrived at through her study of American religious

traditions is presented. Then two models of pluralistic religious education are presented that I believe capture and reflect Eck's understanding of contemporary religious pluralism. Finally, some implications for religious education are explored.

This paper's exploration of pluralistic religion education transcends novelty and innovation. At its heart, pluralistic religious education is justice-based. How can any religious or spiritual tradition, and hence religious education, be it parochial or public, misrepresent or militate against other religious traditions? How can any religious or spiritual tradition allow, albeit unintentional, "collateral damage" to other religious or spiritual traditions either through silence or through singular emphasis on one's own tradition? Such practices are not justice-based and, therefore, not religious education.

A Contemporary Understanding of Pluralism

A New Religious America sets the stage for in-depth exploration of the contemporary phenomenon of pluralism in the United States. She begins by rehearsing a little history. Readers learn that it was the 1965 immigration law that once again opened the United States to all peoples of the world and their

religious and spiritual traditions after generations of highly restrictive and exclusionary policies. Such a seismic shift necessitates, according to Eck, a new approach to the study of religions. This new approach must embrace not only the “submerged histories” of religious and spiritual traditions that have been present on the American landscape but also the new realities present as a result of the half century of new immigration.

Eck fleshes out what contemporary pluralism is and is not. “Diversity alone does not constitute pluralism”(22). Rather, pluralism is the occasion for a far more robust and active activity. She focuses her understanding of contemporary pluralism by contrasting it with exclusion and assimilation in the American religious tradition. Exclusionists did not welcome others, and in this country’s history that meant anyone who was not Caucasian and Protestant. From the exclusivist perspective, Asians, Catholics, Jews were not welcome. Assimilationists were more welcoming of others, but only with the condition that they left their differences behind and quickly fit into the already established white, Christian mythos of this country. Pluralism, on the other hand, offers the invitation to all peoples to come as they are with their differences, participate in citizenship, yet fully be themselves.

Contemporary pluralism then, according to Eck, “...is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences” [emphasis added](70). Active engagement with people from other religious and spiritual traditions moves beyond mere tolerance and embraces “the encounter of commitments” (71), that is engaging the differences and particularities of one’s own faith with other faiths rather than an embrace a relativism which posits all faiths as ultimately the same.

Eck’s understanding and interpretation of religious and spiritual traditions further contextualizes her approach to contemporary pluralism: “Religion is never a finished product, packaged, delivered, and past intact from generation to generation....Religions are not like stones passed from hand to hand through the ages” (9). “They are dynamic movements, more like rivers – flowing, raging, creative, splitting, converging”(22).

Eck acknowledges some deeply rooted obstacles to the contemporary multi-religious phenomenon. Fear of other races, negative stereotypes of others, e.g, “pagans”, vandalism, and hate crimes all militate against the new consciousness of pluralism. When such situations occur there are still too few mechanisms to alleviate such problems. One person involved in a

struggle to obtain permits for the annual festival of Navaratri from a New Jersey town noted, “In our democracy there is a paucity of institutions to study, educate, arbitrate, and promote the credence of the religious ‘other’. Yet for a democracy to flourish, it is imperative that both individuals and groups be enabled to recognize that their own stories may be found in the stories and lives of fellow citizens who may appear dissimilar to themselves” (328). Eck believes that much work still needs to be done in order for Americans not to be afraid of the others.

Yet, Eck sounds some optimistic notes also, citing the presence of bridge builders who have embraced this new religious plurality in America. There are interfaith networks that respond to religious violence both on the international and on the local front, that work to educate against white supremacist activity, that work to create public acknowledgment and ceremonial discourse. She singles out the United States’ military as one major organization in the forefront of pluralistic bridge building. The Parliament of the World’s Religions conferences of 1993 in Chicago, United States of America and 1999 in Cape Town, South Africa (the 2004 meeting of the Parliament in Barcelona, Spain postdates the publication of her book) as yet

one more venue embracing pluralism. Various program in some college and university campuses and places of spiritual dialogue, e.g., Gethsemani Abbey, also educate towards this new pluralism.

Eck's definition of pluralism and its implications for religious education move well beyond teaching tolerance for all religious and spiritual traditions as well as teaching about religions and spiritual traditions other than one's own.

Two Models of Interfaith Religious Education

Two other venues of justice-based, inter-faith religious education that promote understanding among all religious and spiritual traditions are the Interfaith Youth Corps and Common Ground. One focused on youth, the other focused on adults, these two innovative organizations are models of responsible and responsive pluralism for today's world.

The Interfaith Youth Corps was founded in Chicago in 1998 by Eboo Patel, and now runs programs in several other cities. As a middle-class American Muslim attending a suburban high school, his lunch time group included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, and a Lutheran. Religious pluralism was present in their lives but never really developed. Some one didn't eat a particular food, or fasted from food on occasion, or couldn't join in some

activity on a given weekend because “of some prayer thing” (453). Patel, reflecting on his high school experience, writes, “We all knew religion hovered behind these behaviors, but nobody ever offered any deeper explanation than “my mom said” and nobody ever asked for one”(453). He thinks that, at the time, this “silent pact” relieved both he and his lunch time companions from conversations in which they were incapable of participation. “None of us were equipped with a language that would allow us to explain our faith convictions to people outside of our faith communities. The reason is simple: we were never taught one. In my case, my religious education consisted of learning the private language of the Ismaili Muslim faith: the prayers, the devotional songs, the rites, and ceremonies. It was a language which served me well within the Ismaili Muslim community but felt irrelevant in other situations” (453).

As Patel pursued his interest in interfaith work and his graduate studies in the sociology of religion, he noted two things. First, most all interfaith activity, like many religious denominations, was heavily populated by people over the age of 55. Young people were conspicuously absent, unlike many exclusivist sects that swarm with young people. Secondly, many role models in interfaith understanding and cooperation became actively involved at a

relatively early age. Knowing his own generation's dedication to service learning, he decided to launch the Interfaith Youth Corps, an organization designed to bring together religiously diverse fourteen to twenty-five year olds to work on service projects and to discuss how different religious traditions speak about and interpret the spiritual values underlying the service projects. "Sometimes the discussions come first, sometimes the projects come first. As much as possible, we try to connect the actual service and the interfaith discussion" (458).

Eboo Patel and the Interfaith Youth Corps make no little plans. He and his organization want young people to come together with those of other religious beliefs in order both to strengthen one's own religious identity and to build understanding among religious and spiritual traditions. Their first National Day of Interfaith Youth Service, April 24, 2004 included 1,500 participants in twenty cities; in 2005 the number of participants reached 3,000 on their second National Days of Interfaith Service, April 9-10, 2005.

Another organization that promotes interfaith religious education is Common Ground, found in 1975 by Ron Miller, Jim Kenney, and Marc Gellman. They envisioned an interfaith education for adults seeking

enrichment, not degrees, “different from the parochial programs taught by people of one spiritual tradition to an audience from the same tradition” (Miller, 461). “The need was clear for an adult education center that might bring together participants and resources from a multiplicity of backgrounds in order to address the increasingly complex religious and spiritual issues of the modern age.” (Miller and Kenney, 7) Today, some thirty years later, the basic instincts of these Common Ground founders ring with contemporaneity. “...I distinctly recall that we spoke of the coming millennium and we felt that the world would need the best of resources to cope with the challenge. Our conviction was unwavering that the richness of the world’s sacred traditions was not only germane but vital to a successful twenty-first century (Miller, 463).”

Not just information, but dialogue is at the heart of Common Ground’s mission. Dialogue is first and foremost a journey of discovery with all participants willing to listen and to change. Dialogue at Common Ground is also based on self-definition rather than definitions of outsiders. And Common Ground dialogue is also based on “moving beyond this self-referential way of tagging the world,” e.g., “...that the British drive on the wrong side of the road”

(Miller 465). It is Common Ground's concept of dialogue that moves this organization beyond teaching about religions to a pluralistically-based religious education.

In the thirty year history of Common Ground, the organization has gone from meeting in people's homes to renting a center in Chicago's north shore community. Satellite programs have developed in other regions of the metropolitan area of Chicago, and two other satellite programs are active in Cincinnati, Ohio and Naples, Florida. Likewise, the mission of Common Ground has expanded through the years, from an exclusive focus on interreligious dialogue to an interdisciplinary focus. "The all-embracing challenge is understanding and fostering our personal and communal identities in a pluralistic culture" (Miller, 468)

Significance of Interfaith Models for Religious Education

These two organizations, The Interfaith Youth Corps and Common Ground, embrace an understanding of pluralism that is both functional and forward looking. Their work brings people together from different religious traditions and extends opportunities for dialogue among their interfaith participants. These organizations do not favor one tradition over others, nor

do they exclude people from any religious or spiritual traditions from participating in their endeavors. Theirs is an interfaith *communio* educating participants toward a vision and understanding of contemporary pluralism. Each of these organizations sees itself as a religious educator, not in the parochial sense of a specific church giving instruction about itself to its church members, but in the contemporary context of a venue for dialogue and formation across the spectrum of religious and spiritual traditions.

Neither of these two organizations are church sponsored. Their spiritual missions and organizational lives are not yoked to any specific church group. They answer to no source of authority within any given denomination nor do they rely on any given church for their finances nor their staffings. Rather, these organizations' source of authority flows from their vision of creating venues for assisting people who strive to encounter the divine in a pluralistic society, and their mission of bringing people from diverse religious or spiritual traditions together for education and dialogue.

Is it possible for a pluralistic religious education as defined by Eck and modeled by the Interfaith Youth Corps and Common Ground to take place within usual church structures? Or is pluralistic religious education by

necessity something that can only occur outside the parochial precincts of individual religious and spiritual traditions? If the former is true, that is pluralistic religious education can indeed take place within church structures, then how will religious educators need to adjust their curricula and their programs to achieve an pluralistic religious education? If the latter is true, that is a pluralistic religious education can not take place within parochial religious structures, then religious educators who view pluralistic religious education as essential first need to admit that church education is by definition is incomplete. Then other venues must be sought out to insure a more complete religious education for their students.

Although I do not want to consign church-based religious education programs *en masse* to the dust-bin of history, from the perspective of a pluralistic context, I do fear that is extraordinarily difficult to accomplish a pluralistic religious education solely within ecclesial precincts in this given day and age. As many religious denominations struggle today with identity and membership, their religious education has become more focused on their specific histories, teachings, and practices. What is considered foundational to religious education by many churches is almost totally parochial.

The entire concept of “foundational” is questioned today on two fronts. First, there is the traditional wisdom that a person should first learn one specific religious or spiritual tradition, and, once done, is better equipped to explore other traditions. To do otherwise is confusing to people. This wisdom has been especially rearticulated since the ‘60s when some parents chose not to bring their offspring up in any one religious or spiritual tradition with the intention of not biasing their children’s choice of a religion in adulthood. Secondly, postmodernism posits (perhaps a contradiction in terms) the very lack of a single foundation or even the concept of foundationalism in any endeavor. Depending where on the postmodern spectrum one chooses to land, what is foundational to any given religious or spiritual tradition, if anything, is an open question.

Other Contributing Phenomena to Pluralistic Religion Education

Many people’s education today, especially younger people’s schooling, is far more episodic rather than systematic. So it is in religious education. They know an odd assortment of facts and misinformation about a variety of religious and spiritual traditions, but usually don’t have what would at one time be recognized as foundational knowledge in any particular tradition.

Only 40 percent of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Ar was Noah's wife. This failure to recall the specifics of our Christian heritage may be further evidence of our nation's educational decline, but it probably doesn't matter all that much in spiritual or political terms. Here is a statistic that does matter: Three quarters of Americans believe the bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; its counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor. On this essential matter, most Americans – most American Christians – are simply wrong, as if 75 percent of American scientists believed that Newton proved gravity causes apples to fly up (McKibben, 31).

Many teachers are ill prepared for any kind of interfaith curriculum, and, as Diana Eck points out in A New Religious America, "Churches, synagogues, and theological schools have barely begun to take notice of this new religious reality" (23). Most theological education has not well prepared religious educators for interfaith encounters, dialogue, and formation. I suspect that a content analysis of many texts used in religious education would reflect a significant lack of attention to interfaith religious education.

Another discouraging note regarding the ability of specific churches to

do anything significant in interfaith work was the church trial of a Lutheran minister who participated in an interfaith service shortly after 9/11. Rev. David Benke joined with ministers of other faiths in an interfaith prayer service at Yankee Stadium, and, for this activity, was accused of heresy by some of his fellow denominational believers. One person went so far as to say that the Rev. Benke's participation in the interfaith service was "the real terrorism."

Yet, in the aftermath of 9/11 when a vast array of ministers from various spiritual and religious traditions came together in innumerable places for prayer, a religious education that reflects the pluralistic context occurred. So too in the aftermath of the recent Hurricane Katrina did various interfaith services provide venues for encountering the divine and for consoling the traumatized. When faced with widespread adversity, a great number of believing peoples find it worthwhile to be in the company of other peoples of faith.

It is not just during adversity that faithful people intermingle with other faithful people. Many of our children, and sometimes ourselves, fall in love with members of other religious and spiritual traditions. More than half the marriages in the United States now a between members of different

denominations or religious and spiritual traditions. Several years ago the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago joined with some leaders of the Islamic community to explore how best to prepare and celebrate interfaith marriages involving a member from each religious tradition.

This pluralistic age in which so many now live, move, and have their existence also generates, polyreligious identity and practice, i.e., the informed awareness and participation in more than a single religious or spiritual tradition simultaneously by a given individual. These people, some famous, many not, have transcended the singularity of a specific religious identity for a plurality of religious identities. Two prominent people representative of this emerging reality are Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian woman who embraces a Catholic Benedictine spirituality, and Phil Jackson, a self-described “Zen Christian.” These people live their faith lives on largely unexplored frontiers where multiple religious and spiritual influences combine in radically unusual ways to create heretofore unconsidered identities and practices. Elements of polyreligious identity no doubt emanated from parochial venues of denominational religious education for these and other people, but the unique combination of a multiplicity of traditions surely did not come from any one

source of denominational religious education.

Conclusion

One hundred years ago, the University of Chicago envisioned a sacred space for Christian interdenominational activity. Fifty years ago J. B. Phillips outlined an agenda for understanding among Christian denominations. Rockefeller Chapel today, through its architectural renovations, breaks these Christian boundaries. Diana Eck's book, *A New Religious America*, by redefining religious pluralism, transcends the Christian borders of J. B. Phillips' book, *Your God Is Too Small*. All religious and spiritual traditions, not just Christian, have a place, not only at the altar of the 21st century, but also in the religious education curricula of all religious and spiritual traditions. It is simply, or not so simply, a matter of justice.

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