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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM SUITS A MORE DIVERSE MADISON

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When Diana Eck talks about the changing religious landscape of America, she can cite many vivid examples, but one in particular hits close to home for her.

Speaking in Madison last week, the Harvard professor described how a Knights of Columbus Hall in Cambridge, Mass. - a gathering place for some of the most loyal Roman Catholics - is now an Islamic mosque.

"Change is what is happening in the American context, and we know perfectly well that it makes people uncomfortable," Eck told Madison area residents who had gathered for one of the major public events at an academic conference on religious pluralism in modern America.

Although many of the presentations had a scholarly tone, the folks gathered here from around the country under the auspices of the Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions were dealing with topics that have a particular edge in a society that tries to cope with a huge change in its religious landscape.

It's true, Christianity is still the dominant religion in the United States, but Eck notes that immigration has substantially changed the mix. Now there are Brazilian Assembly of God congregations and Korean Presbyterians and, of course, a boom in Spanish-speaking congregations all across the country. The fastest-growing religious segment is those who describe themselves as not religious at all. They accounted for 7 percent of the population in 1972 and now account for about 14 percent, according to data presented by sociologist John Evans of the University of California-San Diego.

While specific data are not available, you can bet that the "no religious preference" figure is higher in Madison, but don't think that Madison is the ultimate secular city, either. We are home to the Freedom From Religion Foundation but also to the national headquarters of the IntersVarsity Christian Fellowship. The Muslim Students' Association here is just finishing Islam Awareness Week, and the May 4 talk of the Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, at the Kohl Center is sold out. This is the home of the largest Unitarian Society in the country and a major Wiccan center near Barneveld as well as one of the largest Lutheran congregations in the nation.

What this suggests is that the ideas of Eck and others about religious pluralism matter not because pluralism is an end itself but because, as church historian Martin Marty told the conference, "pluralism is what you do to have a civil society."

Eck described pluralism as one response to diversity. There are other responses -- exclusion -- trying to keep people away; inclusion -- trying to make people blend in with the majority; or universalism -- letting commonalities supersede differences.

"Pluralism is our engagement with diversity," she said. "It is our encounter with our deepest beliefs." She explained that it does not require diluting one's own faith, adding, "Pluralism is not premised on agreement, it is premised on relationship."

That does not mean people who encounter those with other beliefs will not change in the process. R. Marie Griffith, a professor of religion at Princeton University, noted that as various religious traditions have interacted, one consequence has been a growing acceptance of female leadership in many traditions, but also a defense of female submission in other traditions as they react to trends they see developing elsewhere.

Although the notion of pluralism sounds nice - it's got deep roots in the American tradition - it clearly is not something that everyone embraces easily. To engage in conversation with people who have different beliefs means you have to have given some thought to your own beliefs. As a recent survey pointed out, even though Americans consider themselves religious and some 85 percent call themselves Christian, their knowledge of things religious is pretty shallow. Only half of those who are Christian can name even one of the four Gospels in the New Testament (hint: think Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

It also means that even as you stay grounded in your own beliefs, you acknowledge that what others believe may have validity as well. Not all faith traditions are willing to do that.

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This all becomes more urgent as this nation becomes more religiously diverse. "Genuine pluralism is only in its infancy," Eck said.

But where better to nurture that approach than in a place like Madison, with its vibrant and growing diversity and with institutions committed to exploring these issues? By working on this now, communities like Madison can create the kind of civic space that can handle the conflicts that inevitably arise in a place that brings together people from every corner of the world.

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