

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

### Second Sunday Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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For many Americans tomorrow is a holiday to commemorate Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of America. There is a background story about Columbus's voyage of discovery that very few Americans have ever heard about. In his book *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, Robert Wuthnow tells us: "Columbus's voyage was undertaken with several goals in mind, not the least of which was to discover treasure for the Spanish crown and ensure his own fortune and place in history. But the voyage was also inspired by a religious mission, one that not only reflected his own faith . . . but that also illustrated the larger reasons for Europe's eagerness to believe that America would become a Christian land.

"When Columbus left Granada on May 12, 1492, three recent religious developments were fresh in his mind: the war with the Moors [Muslims] in Granada that had just been concluded, the expulsion of Jews from Spain [the Spanish Inquisition], and Jerusalem remaining in the hands of Muslim forces. Thus the time appeared propitious for Columbus to set sail in an effort to further the Christian cause. Believing himself to be living in the end times prophesied in the Bible, he was buoyed by the possibility of being able to find treasure that could be used to pay for armies to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims, not to mention being able to make contact with the 'Grand Khan' of India who had supposedly sent messengers to Rome asking to be instructed in the Holy Faith.

"Columbus's perception of the indigenous peoples he encountered in the New World occurred against the backdrop of these developments, some real and some assumed, between Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and the leaders of India. He was optimistic that Christianity was on the ascendancy and that his own voyage was foretold in biblical prophecy. An amateur theologian himself, he was well prepared to perceive whatever he encountered in the New World through interpretations provided by Christianity." Writing about the indigenous people he mistakenly but everlastingly named as "Indians, he wrote, "I believed that they would become

Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion.” [quoted in Wuthnow, pp. 11-12] When he was unable to fill his ships with gold for the return trip to Spain, he filled them instead with 500 captured Arawak Indians, who would be sold as slaves back in Spain. He wrote, “Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity, go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.” [Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, p. 4]

From the time of their very first “discovery” of the American continents, many of the European “settlers” regarded the New World as divinely ordained to become the new frontier of western civilization in what would later be known as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which was used to justify the expulsion of Native Americans from their homelands. John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, regarded the smallpox epidemic that decimated the Native population as “miraculous.” [James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, p. 81] As Robert Wuthnow says, “If our own identity is part of a divine or transcendent plan, then those who are **not us** must have an identity within this understanding as well—perhaps as our antagonists or as people who cannot share in the divine plan.” [p. 9]

The tension between those who consider themselves God’s chosen people and those they consider as “other” is the driving force in the history of religious diversity in America. Throughout our history Americans have engaged in a wrestling match between tolerance and intolerance, between a **religious** ideology that often promotes **exclusivism** and a **political** ideology that advocates **inclusivism**. Today I want to talk about some of the critical periods in this history—times when the tension between tolerance and intolerance reached crisis proportions.

During the formative period in American history, both of these forces—intolerance and tolerance—were evident. Even though many of the original settlers were refugees seeking freedom from religious persecution, it is surprising how quickly they established a climate of religious intolerance once they were established in a particular area: the Puritans in Massachusetts, the Quakers in Pennsylvania, the Catholics in Maryland, the Anglicans in Virginia. Interestingly, Roger Williams fled from the Puritans’ religious oppression in Massachusetts to found the colony of Rhode Island on behalf of religious freedom. The diversity

issue here involved only different varieties of Christianity. The underlying assumption of the inherent superiority of the Christian faith remained unchallenged. Other traditions were to be ignored or assimilated. The Europeans' attitude toward non-western religions was condescending. Joseph Priestly, himself a refugee from religious persecution in England and one of the founders of Unitarianism in America, wrote that for “the good of mankind, [heathen] nations should be extirpated from the face of the earth.” [quoted in Wuthnow, p. 19] The attitude toward Native American religion shifted from indifference to “missionizing”—a policy that persisted with government support well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American Indian children were separated from their families, sent to boarding schools run mainly by Catholics, and punished for speaking in their native tongues or observing Native American religious practices.

Fortunately, there was a counter-balancing force during the formative period of American history—a force that was anchored in the Enlightenment tradition of reason and tolerance. It was founded on individual freedom, including the right of religious freedom. The champions of this movement aligned themselves against any attempt by the government to impose religion on the citizens of a free democracy. Their views contradict the claims of contemporary fundamentalists that America was founded as a “Christian nation.” Thomas Jefferson and James Madison argued successfully that religion was a matter of individual conscience, and their view is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees that the government should **neither promote nor interfere** with the expression of religious beliefs. There are also some lesser-known but unequivocal expressions by our nation's founders regarding freedom of religion. In a letter to his friend and ally General Lafayette, George Washington made it clear that he didn't care which religion immigrants might profess. “If they are good workers,” he said, “they may be Mohammedans, Jews, or Christian of any sect, or they may be atheists.” [quoted in Bawer, p. 70] In 1797, the Senate approved and President John Adams signed a treaty with Tripoli that began with these words, “The Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” [<http://www.nobeliefs.com/Tripoli.htm>]

The main concern of the Founders was to make sure that no particular version of the Christian faith would be given special favor by the government. Not until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was there any serious awareness of what **other** world religions were saying, when

English translations of sacred texts from other traditions began to reach American intellectuals—most notably the group of New England thinkers who became known as the Transcendentalists. Most of them were Unitarians, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who were deeply impressed with the writings of Eastern wisdom traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Emerson’s concept of the Oversoul represented his version of the Hindu concept of Atman, the presence of the Eternal within each individual person. In Emerson’s opinion, the experience of the Divine was directly accessible to each person without the mediating—and often contaminating—influence of institutional religion. Emerson was the godfather of personalized spirituality, as opposed to institutionalized religion. He wrote, “Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.” [Emerson, “The Oversoul”]

For the first time in American history, the superiority of Christianity as the ultimate source of truth was called into serious question. Public interest in other world religions reached new heights with the convening of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. More than 150,000 visitors braved sweltering heat to listen to lectures by representatives from nearly all of the major world religions, who for the first time “had an opportunity to describe their own beliefs and practices, rather than having them interpreted by Christian missionaries or travelers.” [Wuthnow, p. 28] Out of these encounters came a new appreciation of the truths that could be found in non-Western religions, and with it the idea that different religions represent different paths to the same universal truths—the core belief of Universalism.

In spite of these breakthroughs, the vast majority of Americans continued to regard Christianity as the preeminent religion. It may not be the **only show in town**, but to them it was still the **greatest show on earth**. Churchgoing reached a peak in the 1950s, and the phrase “under God” was added to our Pledge of Allegiance as a response to the threat of godless Communism. As Robert Wuthnow puts it, “Americans were able to practice their faith within particular and often local communities without paying much attention to the ways others were practicing their faith. Tolerance proceeded without having to carry the burden of genuine

interreligious understanding or interaction.” [p. 35] Religious pluralism for most Americans meant little more than different varieties of Christianity.

The 1960s brought a dramatic change in the American religious landscape. One of the sea changes was cultural and the other was political. The cultural shift involved mainly the burgeoning youth population of the Baby Boom generation, who re-discovered the individualized spirituality of the Transcendentalists and combined it with the wisdom of Eastern traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism that were being actively promoted by articulate writers such as Allen Watts and the use of mind-expanding drugs. A whole new generation of life-long spiritual seekers came into being, who had no loyalty to traditional Christianity.

The second sea change was brought about by a piece of mid-1960s legislation that was overshadowed by all of the political turmoil of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. In 1965 Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which for the first time opened the gates to Asians and other non-European immigrants, who brought with them new and strange religious practices. Suddenly religious pluralism meant more than varieties of Christianity. The religious “other” was no longer an idea in a book. It was a family in my neighborhood and a new student in my child’s classroom and a new co-worker whose appearance, language, and daily habits I had never dealt with before. Instead of being an object of curiosity, these new immigrants posed a threat to “our” way of life. In response to the dramatic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the forces of religious intolerance resurfaced with a vengeance. The stage was set for the clash of religious fundamentalisms, which will be the subject of next month’s reflections on religious diversity. I hope you will stay tuned.

## **DISCUSSION**

**HYMN # 121 “We’ll Build a Land”**

**CLOSING WORDS # 494** (by W. E. B. Dubois)

