

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN NORTH AMERICA: NOVEMBER 22, 2002

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University Conference, Toronto, Canada
Held in conjunction with the 2002 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting

Conference Proceedings

- The State of Research on Religious Diversity - U.S. and Canada
- Teaching in and Through the Context of Religious Pluralism
- New Research on Religious Communities

The State of Research on Religious Diversity - U.S. and Canada

The Pluralism Project

This panel began the conference with an introduction and greetings by Director Diana Eck, who also introduced the work of the Pluralism Project and its network of scholars and others looking at religious impact of the new immigration. The new immigration provides an opening to teach about religion in deeper and more expansive ways in our colleges and university — it is also an exercise in learning about our neighbors. The Pluralism Project's affiliate projects are using multiple approaches in researching religious diversity in North America. The Project uses its website for outreach, and its In The News (<http://www.pluralism.org/news/index.php>) section provides a snapshot of what's happening locally on the American religious landscape. The website also offers results of affiliate research (<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/index.php>). Project Manager, Grove Harris, outlined how the website allows different pieces of research to become part of a whole. The directory of religious centers, which started as simple listings, now has links to all types of research (<http://www.pluralism.org/directory/index.php>). New technology, which allows us to offer online slide shows, has been incorporated. The Project reaches beyond the academy, with continued outreach to high school teachers, religion newswriters, medical schools, religious centers and the general public.

Religion and Ethnicity and Canada

Paul Bramadat introduced the history of multi-culturalism and religious diversity in Canada. Both he and David Seljak reported that since September 11, 2001, the Canadian government, the primary source of funding for Canadian academic research, has become more interested in the topic of religious diversity in Canada. The two project leaders are in the process of co-authoring a book on the religious diversity of Canada that will be finished next summer (2003). Paul Bramadat also spoke on issues regarding religion and public policy in Canada and expanding the diversity of religious studies in public education (religion is widely taught in Canadian schools, unlike in the U.S.). David Seljak discussed a mapping and profiling project in Quebec, which aims to discover and interpret types of roles that religion and ethnicity play in that community. Many partnerships taking place across Canada are on the cutting edge of researching religious diversity in Canada.

Muslims in the American Public Square www.projectmaps.com

Zahid H. Bukhari, Director of the Pew Project: Muslims in the American Public Square (MAPS), described the status of research at the project. The MAPS project has been researching Muslims in America for 4 years and has recently undertaken a new initiative for bringing Muslim religious leaders into the public square and a new initiative to research new immigrants in the Muslim community. The project has five main areas of research:

1. The role of Muslims as a minority — This area of research explores the historical debate within Islam and the continuous debate among Muslim scholars on how to live as a minority community in a non-Muslim majority nation.
2. The role of Islamic centers — This area of research examines Islamic centers that are no longer just places of worship but are centers for Muslim life, places of political and economic activism, and focal points for Muslim communities.
3. Gender, generation, and ethnicity — This area of research takes a closer look the role of gender, generation, and ethnicity within the diverse Muslim communities of America.
4. Institutional development of Muslim communities — This area of research documents the new structure and Muslim institutions that support and advocate for American Muslims.
5. Interaction between Muslim community in North America and the Muslim world — This area of research attempts to document the transport of earning and learning 'back home' to the Muslim world from North American Muslims. This research also explores the transfer of values and cultural exchange between the two.

The project has also researched the incredible diversity among American Muslims. The research of the project indicates that currently, 36% of Muslims in America were born in the U.S.; the rest were born in 80 different countries. The project has also determined that 20% of American Muslims are converts to Islam and that 60% of those converts are African-Americans. There is also a great diversity of schools of thought amongst Muslims in U.S.; however, they are coming together as American Muslims.

The project places emphasis on a strong connection between religious leaders and religious scholars and continues to organize seminars and workshops to bring them together. Since September 11, 2001, the project has received a great deal of outside interest from both the media and government. The project has also been listening to the experiences of American Muslims during this time and has been documenting some of the backlash against and solidarity with Muslim communities on the local level. The project has also begun briefing the Muslim world about Muslim community in America.

Teaching in and Through the Context of Religious Pluralism

The discussion on teaching began with affiliates sharing their teaching experiences, pedagogical models and research outcomes.

Stuart Chandler

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/chandler/index.php>

Students: Lower-middle class student population, regional and rural Pennsylvania

Courses: World religion classes with 125 students

First part of course - overview of world religions

Second part of course - focus on fieldwork

Method: In order to make material come alive for students, Dr. Chandler gets them engaged in fieldwork. Students have a list of 25 centers from which to choose.

Teams of student researchers visit one center and pretend (among themselves) that they are reporters — they each write an article introducing the tradition to an educated community.

Outcomes: Dr. Chandler produced a magazine featuring the best article from each team (determined through peer evaluation). Students whose articles were selected for the magazine worked on their articles instead of the final exam, bringing them to a level suitable for publication and working to incorporate elements of each team members' papers. The research teams were credited along with the author of each article in the magazine. Dr. Chandler also secured funding to send the publication to 300 high schools in the Pittsburgh area, with a letter to teachers saying that students would be happy to come and present to their classes on the religious centers they researched.

Benefits: Students that were previously unengaged produced a publication, and became engaged through field experiences.

Challenges: Dr. Chandler outlined one of his biggest challenges as engaging students and getting them to see the importance of studying religion. The extensive transportation coordination (due to the remoteness of university) and the amount of work involved for the teacher in setting up center visits was an additional challenge.

Rita Lester

Nebraska Wesleyan University

http://www.nebrwesleyan.edu/events/harvardrel/Website_New/index.html

Students: Nebraska Wesleyan University was founded as a Christian school; 80% of students come from small towns in Nebraska.

Courses: Dr. Lester was able to change the school's religion introductory course requirement from Introduction to Christianity to a choice of comparative courses. She also plans to teach a new course on religious diversity and a liberal arts seminar entitled "Interfaith Dialogue." Dr. Lester hopes to diversify theology courses so that students will encounter diversity not just in history and in person, but also in theology.

Method: Dr. Lester's courses use 50% primary text from the religious tradition being studied along with four visits to religious centers. Most students have limited exposure —

limited scope coming in so the fieldwork element and experiential learning has a lasting impact. The fieldwork requirement of visiting four centers also includes reflection on the experience of visiting for the student.

Outcomes: Some of Dr. Lester's students were able to participate in the Encounter Project in Toronto, a 21-day program for Christian students to visit, share meals and engage in dialogue with members of other religions.

Benefits: Dr. Lester observed that due to the Christian setting of her university, many of her Christian students were able to take others' religiousness very seriously, and that they had a heightened respect for religious devotion, even outside their own tradition.

Eboo Patel

Interfaith Youth Core

<http://www.ifyc.org>

Students: The Interfaith Youth Core brings together students that are involved in the youth organizations of their religious traditions. The students' religious identity is tied to their community or group; their identities are inherited ways of being, believing and belonging.

Activities: Students come together in their groups with other faith-based youth groups to perform service projects. The goal is to allow young people of faith to build bridges with each other, to create a community of communities.

Model: The Interfaith Youth Core uses a dynamic service-learning model that incorporates service and reflection, as well as interfaith dialogue.

Youth groups articulate from their own backgrounds why it is important to do service based on the shared values of justice, service and hospitality. The Interfaith Youth Core meets students where they are, helps them build relationships, and then pushes them to dialogue with others for better understanding. This method of learning fosters a dialogical understanding of religion — students have to tell others why their religion works for them, why it is meaningful, and therefore to explore the depths of their own tradition.

Outcomes: The Interfaith Youth Core is committed to networking, sharing models of interfaith youth work and seeking to use projects as a way to build networks into a movement for a lasting effect. The Core intends to hold a conference on models on interfaith youth learning in May 2003 and to publish a book out of that event.

Benefits: Students more deeply understand and appreciate others' point of view, as well as owning their own tradition and affirming it for themselves. When youth engage in service, they develop special relationships. Youth groups also go home with materials that they can bring to their own communities. Students are able to build the level of sophistication in conversations and their understanding of other traditions.

Patrice Brodeur

Connecticut College

<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/brodeur/index.php>

Students: Connecticut College students do not have a sense of belonging to local community, so the fieldwork gets students out to into the school's small town setting in South Eastern Connecticut.

Courses: Courses on religious diversity that bring students into the community through fieldwork to discover religious diversity on the local level.

Method: The students go out in teams to collect the 'first layer' of research — what they are doing matters because it feeds into an important research project. The project brings the Pluralism Project into a small town, meaning the project can map the entire religious community. The project encourages online conversation among students and faculty, both in preparation and in follow-up to fieldwork. Center visits include meetings with community leaders and members; the courses use a service-learning model in which communities get to shape the research and have input into the course; the result is a valued partnership. Student researchers visit centers and then debrief immediately as a group, as reflection is also part of the service-learning model. The research topics are open and a variety of research is possible within the project, but research is kept to high quality so students know what they are doing matters. Student researchers have also come to use the topic of 9/11 as a reference point for research and center visits. The coursework relates fieldwork to theory in Religious Studies.

Outcomes: Half of the students involved in the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College attended the World Conference on Religion and Peace in Jordan, and the other half attended the World Parliament of Religion in Cape Town, South Africa. Students presented their research at an academic symposium held at Connecticut College. The project is also in the process of producing a website.

Benefits: The project broadens students' sense of diversity, and gets them out into local community. Their involvement in the project allows them to produce quality research as part of a larger project and helps students feel that their work is valuable.

Yudit Greenberg

Rollins College, Florida

<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/greenberg/index.php>

Students: Many students have been involved in profiling religious centers in central Florida, most of which are religious centers of immigrant communities started in the last 10-15 years.

Courses: Students combine their coursework with field research that ranges from documenting and profiling of centers to more extensive projects on one center, such as a recent project on The Holy Land Experience, a Christian theme park.

Model: The teaching model used for the project at Rollins College is one that combines scholarship, research and dialogue. Students are involved in documenting religious centers,

including a strong Jain center and several large Hindu temples, and other religious organizations such as that Women's Multi-Faith Center and the Kashi Ashram. Students are also researching the interfaith movement and incorporating dialogue into their studies. Outcomes: The project at Rollins College promotes interfaith dialogue, and some students have created a residential student community dedicated to dialogue. The students live in dorms, take classes together, and are linked to other groups on campus. The students' work culminates in a student conference that has both scholarly presentations and multi-media and artistic presentations.

Jack Hawley

Barnard College, Columbia University

<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/hawley/index.php>

Students: Undergraduate students in New York have the opportunity to explore variety of Hinduisms in the city.

Course: Dr. Hawley has designed a new course entitled "Hinduism Here." This course is designed to explore Hinduism in New York City through study and fieldwork. The course also addresses issues of urban life and religion, questions of memory — what is involved in religious life that is about memory — especially connected to immigration, and exploring issues of Hindu identity. The course is a new idea that examines what happens in the Hindu experience in New York.

Method: The first part of the course consists of readings and classroom work; the second part is fieldwork. The centers for fieldwork visits are carefully chosen to address questions of the course, especially surrounding Hindu identity. The specific sites include traditional Hindu centers whose communities are now a minority in the United States, as well as Didhy Dham, a theme park, ritual space and museum environment, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Infinity Foundation with their BJP (Hindu nationalist) connections.

Discussion

Saroj Chawla (York University)

Compassionate perspective on Sociology — are we including multicultural perspectives in our research/fieldwork?

Thomas Russell (Western Kentucky University)

Often the people we least expect to be able to dialogue are often the most able because religious people of various faiths share a value and respect for religiousness that resonates with each other. It is important for faculty to develop relationships with local religious leaders.

Lawrence Snyder (Western Kentucky University)

Fieldwork has re-energized the religious studies project; there are now more than 100 undergraduate majors for four faculty members. This student interest has re-vitalized the project and it is now focused on the diversification of the region.

Lee Hancock (Auburn Theological Seminary)

Perspective of seminary: an immersion project has been set up for seminarians for encounters with people of other faiths and their perspectives.

Corrie Norman (Converse College)

When do we cross the line between inquiry and tiring the communities?
Many responded that communities continue to be welcoming repeatedly.

Patrice Brodeur

In the Connecticut College case, leaders of local religious communities contribute to and shape the course, more like a partnership. They will benefit from research and continue to be welcoming to visiting students.

Rita Lester

Another idea is to invite religious leaders to participate in campus events/speakers, so that they feel part of community and get something back from relationship with the students/school.

Carl Evans (South Carolina)

Hometown Project — This project sends students out to their hometowns first to complete a mapping and description of religious diversity, and then to complete an in-depth project. The students are also asked to set forth a vision of their hometown in the future.

Diana Eck

Carl Evans' department has also created a model for interfaith relations.

New Research on Religious Communities

The final panel gave research affiliates and guests a chance to share the findings and progress of their research on the diverse religious communities of North America.

Janet Mclellan

Wilfrid Laurier University

Janet's research has documented five Asian Buddhist communities in Canada, including the Tibetan, Japanese, Chinese, Cambodia, and Vietnamese communities of Toronto, where immigration has increased significantly since the 1980s.

Corrie Norman

Converse College

Gender, Food and Meaning: Mapping the Religious Diversity of Charlotte, NC.

Corrie and her students continue to ask the question, What can the food rituals and food ways tell us about immigrant religious communities and women's religious devotion and roles in these communities? <http://www.cnjg.net/pluralism/>

Elijah Siegler

University of California, Santa Barbara

Elijah is completing his dissertation on Taoism in America and reported that Taoism in the States, which evolved through scholarship rather than immigration, differs greatly from Taoism in China.

Bill McNeece and Claude Jacobs

University of Michigan, Dearborn

The research team at the Pluralism Project at UM-Dearborn continues to map the diversity of the greater Detroit area using profiles, photography, and hopes to incorporate music and sound. <http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/jacobs/index.php>

Allen Richardson

Cedar Crest College

The Vraj Affiliate Research Project has made great progress in documenting the new Hindu Temple complex in Pottsville, PA known as Vraj. The project has specifically addressed the role of pilgrimage at the center and the intentional creation of sacred space in the American context. <http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/richardson/index.php>

Pamela Klassen

University of Toronto

Pamela's current research is focused on women's religious interpretation of childbirth. She is approaching this research through examining the home birth movement, and notes that more and more women of religious minorities, especially Muslim women, are working with midwives through their childbirth experience.

Linda Barnes

The Boston Medical Center

Linda's research as part of the Boston Healing Landscape Project combines the study of medicine, anthropology, and religion. The project examines the intersections between the diverse religious traditions of the Boston area and their healing practices for mind, body, and spirit. She suggested ways that other affiliates' research could be broadened to include research on religious healing. <http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/barnes/index.php>

Viggo Mortensen

University of Aarhus, Aarhus, Denmark

Viggo has established a Danish Pluralism Project that is currently mapping the 80 different religious groups in Aarhus, Denmark.

http://www.teo.au.dk/cms/english/Pluralism/pluralism_introduction_eng.htm

Martin Baumann

University of Lucerne, Switzerland

Martin's research includes extensive work on Buddhism in Europe and the recent growth of Tamil Hindu communities in Germany and beyond. He hopes to establish a new mapping project in Switzerland to document the religious diversity of the area.

<http://www.baumann-martin.de/research.htm>

Patrice Brodeur

Connecticut College

Along with his mapping project in South Eastern Connecticut, Patrice has been involved in conversations about the religious diversity of Canada. He attended a conference in Norway and has worked with the Canadian Government's Metropolis Project, which attempts to document the new urban landscape of diversity. The Project involves policy makers, scholars, and NGO leaders. Patrice also offered insight into the progress of research in Quebec, a project based in Montreal, and tensions between the French and English speaking Canadian research communities.

Paul Numrich

University of Illinois, Chicago

Paul's research focuses on Asian Buddhist communities in the greater Chicago area. He has begun to examine the additional questions of how to get media to realize that there are more ethnic Buddhists in America than there are Euro-American practitioners of Buddhism; how do we protect our human subjects when studying religious communities; and how are area churches reaching out to those of different faiths.

<http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/numrich/index.php>

Vivodh Anand

Indo-American Cultural Society

Vivodh reported that his work as a community leader and advocate for the South Asian communities in New Jersey completely changed after September 11, 2001. He noted that maintaining the close connection between NJ and India became harder while US issues came more to the forefront.

<http://www.montclair.edu/Pages/ICS/navratri.htm>

Yifa

Hsi Lai University, California

Yifa discussed her observations that after September 11, 2001; many people think the Buddhist voice is too passive. Her new book addresses a post September 11 world from a Buddhist perspective.