

MULTIRELIGIOUS NATION

BY THE REV. JOAN PIERSON

BOOKREVIEW

A NEW RELIGIOUS AMERICA BY DIANA L. ECK,
HARPERSANFRANCISCO, 2001. \$16.95 PAPERBACK.

SEPT. 11, AS WE ARE OFTEN REMINDED, changed our ways of seeing and being in the world. But a part of our social landscape had already changed dramatically in the last third of the 20th century, changed almost without our noticing.

After the immigration laws of 1965, 30 million immigrants, most of them not the traditional arrivals from northern Europe, had moved into our neighborhoods. Coming primarily from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, they brought with them the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and other unfamiliar faiths. In our midst, they built mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras, monasteries and religious schools.

Suddenly aware of these changes, in these days of "war against terror," Americans have experienced astonishment, anxiety, perplexity and fear. How are we to understand our new neighbors and welcome them as a rich gift to our historic American cultural diversi-

ty? How are we to avoid the perils of misunderstanding, bigotry, hatred?

Fortunately, we have an experienced and insightful guide to our changing cultural landscape. Her name is Diana Eck, and her recent book, *A New Religious America (How a "Christian Country" has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation)*, has just been released in paperback by Harper/Collins.

Eck, who teaches Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard, grew up Methodist in Montana. As a college student, she was captivated by the study of world religions, particularly Hinduism, and made a year-long study trip to India. As she tells us in an earlier book, *Encountering God: a*



DIANA L. ECK

Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benaras, she found there her life work as a living bridge between religious cultures half a world apart.

For over a decade, Eck has guided the "Pluralism Project" at Harvard, and with more than 80 students, many of them born in other cultures, she has explored the emerging religious landscape of the U.S. This book reports their findings, reflects on their implications, and even more usefully, provides a road map toward a life-giving future in a newly pluralistic America.

In her introduction and first chapter, Eck gives us an overview of change and describes the challenges those changes bring. We are challenged, she says, "to make good on the promise of religious freedom so basic to the very idea and image of America." We will be required, she adds, "to reclaim the deepest meaning of the very principles we cherish and to create a truly pluralistic American society in which this great diversity is not simply tolerated but becomes the very source of our strength."

To meet this challenge, Eck declares, we will need to know more than we do about one another. The next three chapters of her book provide some of that necessary knowledge through lively descriptions of American Hindus, American Buddhists, and American Muslims.

In her two concluding chapters, Eck suggests healthy ways that we might deal with our new understanding. First, in the chapter "Afraid of Ourselves," she lays out negative possibilities such as the possibilities of hate crimes. We have seen such outpouring of misunderstanding, fear and anger in Eugene.

But we have also seen in Eugene what Eck describes in her final chapter, "Bridge Building: A New Multireligious America." We have seen neighbors gathering around Temple Beth Israel after a drive-by shooting. We have seen neighbors accompanying Muslim women in head scarves who were afraid to do ordinary errands after Sept. 11. We have seen the formation of interreligious dialogue groups. We have seen, for 20 months, a vibrant monthly gathering of Sikhs, Baha'is, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Native Americans, and Christians in the First Christian Church downtown.

Reading Eck's book will help us to find our way, even in this time of seemingly endless surprise and peril, toward the great promise of American freedom, diversity and blessed community.

JOAN PIERSON OF EUGENE IS A RETIRED PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER AND FORMER PROFESSOR OF LITERATURE AT UO. SHE SERVES ON THE STEERING COMMITTEES OF BOTH TRIM AND FAITH IN ACTION.

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