The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity


Boston University
The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity
Nancy T. Ammerman, Boston University

Abstract
This paper argues that religious pluralism is the normal state of affairs. Religion itself is multi-dimensional, and those dimensions of religious and spiritual experience can be combined in myriad ways across individual lives. Preliminary findings from new research are presented, detailing modes of spiritual discourse that include mystery, majesty, meaning, moral compassion, and social connection. These dimensions find expression across multiple social institutions. In addition, religion is multi-traditional and organized by plural producers of the goods and services and events that embody and transform religious tradition. Finally, it is argued that religious pluralism must be studied in terms of the structures of power and privilege that allow some religious ideas to be given free voice, but limit the expression of others, constraining the formation of dissident religious communities.

KEY WORDS: pluralism, spirituality, religious institutions, religion and law, everyday religion.

The question of religious pluralism is a recurring theme in the sociology of religion, and it has often dominated public discussion, as well. How will established religious groups respond and adapt to competition? What are the practical difficulties of living in a religiously-plural world? What are the causes of inter-religious violence? I want to begin, however, by questioning the assumptions that often lie behind the questions and by considerably expanding the range of questions that need to be asked.

When questions about religious pluralism are framed in the language of “challenges,” the hidden assumptions are often found in a narrative of loss – loss of privilege, loss of authority,
perhaps loss of vitality and influence. The implied question is, “What do we, the majority, do now that we no longer enjoy unquestioned dominance?” This is a narrative that begins in perceived religious homogeneity and moves toward today’s presumably-new situation of religious diversity. It imagines that “we all” once shared a religious worldview that has now been challenged by the presence of religious diversity among us. I want to suggest, by contrast, that pluralism is not new, but is the natural state of religion, everywhere and always. I want to suggest that our questions are best asked in terms that take at least some religious diversity for granted. Our task is not to delineate stages along a path from unity to diversity or to outline possible institutional responses to having lost a place of singular privilege in a society. Our task is to examine how multiple religious ideas, groups, and practices constitute the dynamic social reality in any given place and time.

The implied narrative of loss is, however, constitutive of our very field. The classic theories of secularization, formulated in the European context of state churches and loss of church power, have been powerfully influential and continue to lurk in our thinking (Warner 1993). In Peter Berger’s 1969 classic The Sacred Canopy, an intellectually powerful argument was laid out about how religion works (Berger 1969). Religion forms a seamless sacred cosmos in which human action is meaningfully located in a transcendent order. That cosmos is sustained, Berger theorized, by the plausibility structures of everyday conversations in which it is taken for granted. In the face of modern pluralism, where a single system could not be taken for granted, Berger surmised that religion could either accommodate or retreat into sheltering enclaves.

Even Berger himself is no longer convinced that religion is doomed to decline, but he does seem to remain convinced that there has been a shift from homogeneity to choice, a shift
that he believes has profound existential consequences (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008, 12-14). Nevertheless, he admits, religious groups seem amazingly resilient, able to encounter a world of plural alternatives without disappearing, either to the margins or into the secular soup (Berger 1999).

There are, of course, many reasons why we should never have been surprised that human beings might be capable of living with ambiguity and multiplicity. The need for a coherent and seamless view of the world seems much more characteristic of academic philosophers and theologians than of everyday citizens. Nor are alternative worldviews necessarily threatening to religious beliefs. Christian Smith offered a theoretical explanation for why pluralism might even strengthen belief, showing how encounters with others can provide the theological, psychological and social material out of which religious groups can construct a thriving way of life. The best adapted “modern” religions, he suggested, are those that incorporate a kind of civil and tolerant, but unrelenting, boundary work into their way of being religious (Smith 1998). Beckford, as well, has outlined the many ways in which encounters with plural religious alternatives need not precipitate a crisis of faith (Beckford 2003).

Berger’s picture of the effects of pluralism works only if religion is a comprehensive meaning system, centered on a single deity, expressed in a single institution (or in an isolated group), and enforced by a single state. But each of those singularities should be questioned. Is religion best understood as a single meaning system that comprehensively encompasses a person’s life? What is given up when our theories effectively rule out multiple sources of sacred power? What do we lose when we accept official institutions and creeds as our own definition of religious presence or absence? When we recognize the complex competing and overlapping
loyalties of nation, family, profession, tribe, and more, why should we presume that religion alone is a zero-sum, in or out, all or nothing social reality?

The possibilities for plurality in religion are with us – everywhere and always. That such a situation is normal is, however, easier to see in places outside Europe. Research from elsewhere in the world takes plurality for granted, rather than problematizing it. In writing about religious innovation in West Africa, Elizabeth Amoah says, "The reality of religious plurality can be seen everywhere in Africa" (Amoah 2004, 217). What is unmistakable there are the processes of adaptation, mutual influence, and multiple belonging that are the product of plurality and change in every society, not just African ones. She notes that “religions in Africa are not in watertight compartments" (p. 219) -- but that could be said of religion everywhere. The study of religions outside Europe, then, shines new light on the social realities inside Europe, as well.

Plurality in religion begins, in fact, with the everyday experiences and dilemmas of ordinary people, whether they live in Paris or in Nairobi. Much of the time, religion is not about group loyalty or a comprehensive meaning system at all. As Meredith McGuire reminds us, when ordinary women and men encounter the practical difficulties of everyday embodied life, they have always employed diverse practical solutions – some religious, some not, some approved, some not (McGuire 2008). Much of what most people would include in their own inventory of “religious practices” has often included the everyday prayers and rituals designed to harness sacred power in behalf of health and wellbeing. And in this material domain, religious petitioners rarely confine themselves to a single divine source of help. Nor do they confine themselves to the official rites offered by people in power. Everyday pragmatic plurality and the tension it may produce with religious authorities has to be included in our assessment of the
pluralisms at work in the world of religion. Patchwork quilts full of holes might better describe how sacred worlds function, rather than sacred canopies.

If we begin, then, with the notion that religious diversity is a normal condition rather than an extraordinary one, how might we frame our questions? I want to outline a few possibilities, beginning with individual everyday practice, moving on to take account of the organizational dimensions that intersect with and often shape that everyday experience, and finally raising questions about the larger dimensions of culture, law, and politics.

**Plurality in Individual Religious Experience**

The task here is to explore all the many ways in which multiple religious alternatives are incorporated into a life story. That multiplicity will likely be exhibited by the presence of multiple religious meanings interwoven in unpredictable ways, multiple religious affiliations both serially and at any given moment, and religious beliefs and practices that are present in shifting sets of domains of everyday life – from “private” to “public” and back again (Dillon and Wink 2007).

Just what constitutes “religious meaning” is, of course, a hotly debated issue. I am currently in the midst of analyzing data from a project in which we invited people from diverse religious and non-religious affiliations to tell us stories about their lives – both about their histories and about their current everyday activities (Ammerman 2007). We asked about explicitly “religious” things, like participation in religious communities and traditions, as well as about any experiences they would call spiritual; but mostly we just asked about their families, their work, their leisure, and the like, listening for where and how the stories included things denoted as religious or spiritual.
Over the course of those conversations, people included a typical range of institutionally-religious stories. Some had no more than nominal attendance at church or synagogue to report to us. But some talked about intense involvement and leadership. Some were deeply connected to their religious communities, but many reported at least periodic alienation. Some had slowly ceased to believe over a lifetime, and a few had converted as adults. The patterns are enormously diverse, but the nature and range of people’s connections to organized religion fits fairly predictable categories. If I had to, I could probably devise a set of numerical scales to describe them. Where “religion” has been institutionalized, it produces recognizable patterns we can measure, even if those patterns are themselves wide ranging and plural.

Spirituality, on the other hand, proved to be more contentious and less easy to categorize. Like social scientists and theologians, our participants were prone to referencing spirituality in a variety of ways, with no one definition predominating. If I were to venture an analytical frame for the taxonomy of discourse that seems to be emerging from our data, I might posit that for the Americans we interviewed, spirituality is a discursive category defined by various ways of encountering “something beyond.” To speak of spirituality seems to be an attempt to describe something beyond the ordinary, something perhaps transcendent. Not “sacred” in the Durkheimian sense of radical separation from the profane, because the boundaries between ordinary and extraordinary are too porous for most people. Still, what is spiritual is not part of the mundane, the expected, or the limited. It is surprising, special, and not marked by ordinary human frailties. Just what that “something beyond” is, however, cannot be captured in a single definition.

1 Among the many explorations of “spirituality,” each with their own definitions are Giordan (2007), Heelas and Woodhead (2004), Roof (1999), and Wuthnow (1998).
We would be remiss, however, if we did not acknowledge that the single most common way of talking about the “something” that is beyond ordinary human experience is to name it “God.” Whether institutionalized religion creates or merely reflects human experiences of the sacred, the links between religious institutions and individual spiritual narratives should not be ignored. Religious institutions do give shape to discourse about spirituality. As a number of researchers have shown, the category “spiritual” and the category “religious” are by no means separate, no matter how pervasive the “spiritual-not-religious” rhetoric may be. What we find is that spiritual experiences are institutionally shaped. The stronger a person’s ties to a religious institution, the more likely they are to talk about spiritual experiences and meanings in ways that take God to be an actor in the story. They are also more likely to engage in practices and activities, created by their institutions, that help them seek spiritual encounters and growth. They pray and read scripture and attend worship services so as to cultivate a spiritual sensitivity and depth. Spirituality is often an intentional part of their lives, and intentional or not, the religious community provides the terms and the techniques. For those on the inside of the institutionally religious world, spirituality is something to be desired and will likely be named in the terms provided by that community.

To identify this institutionalized domain in which there is a language and recognized categories for spirituality does not yet answer the question of what kinds of experiences are tagged as spiritual by individuals. Whether affiliated or not, committed or marginally religious, multiple modes of spiritual experience were present in the stories our participants told. And while a given person might be more prone to one mode more than another, spirituality seems

---

2 See for example, Marler and Hadaway (2002) and Hout and Fischer (2002).
3 Davies’ (2006) notion of “vicarious religion” suggests that institutional frameworks for defining sacred reality affect far more than just the persons most intimately involved in religious communities. At some level, the symbols of once-dominant religious institutions retain power in identifying communities, sanctifying the life-cycle, and pointing to meaning and solidarity in moments of crisis.
always to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Attention to these multiple dimensions is one of the requisites for understanding the plurality of religion in individual lives.

*Spirituality and the Mysterious*

Sociologists and other modern philosophers have long posited that religion is what provides explanations for what might otherwise be unexplainable. Indeed a dose of magic and mystery have been seen as essential to the power of religious functionaries (Weber 1922 [1963]). Things operating in the spiritual realm, by this reading of the world, are mysterious forces causing outcomes that cannot be explained by ordinary means. While many of those who talked about mystery named God as the explanation or the cause, many simply named the mystery as an example of the presence of spirituality in the world.

Some of what our respondents described involved extraordinary happenings, visions, a sense of divine presence, and the like – events others might discount as not real, but which they simply saw as unexplained by any earthly means. Others talked about a sense that no matter how much we come to understand the natural world, there will always be some part of it that is beyond us. A 44-year-old doctor, Steven James, member of a Black Baptist church in suburban Boston, said, “I can’t explain half – I can’t explain a tenth of what occurs in here just based on what I read … in medicine. There’s … something more going on here.” Others spoke of the little coincidences of everyday life that are more than coincidences. They spoke of an order and plan in the world that is only glimpsed occasionally or seen “through eyes of faith.” “But that wasn’t a coincidence. That was a God thing. That’s an expression I use. That was a God thing,” said Vicki Johnson, a 61-year-old retired nurse, an active member in her Catholic parish in

---

4 Malinowski (1948) and others posited this in terms of a contrast between religion and rational science. Geertz (1973), Berger (1969), and others note the continuing challenges of suffering and death that seem to call forth theodicies.

5 All personal names and names of congregations are pseudonyms.
Atlanta. Ordinary events come together in unexpected ways that are seen as spiritual. What all of these people had in common in their talk about spirituality was a sense that the spirit has reasons of its own, that there are forces at work we cannot measure and explain.

**Spirituality and the Majestic**

Closely related to the experiences of mystery and miracle we have been describing are the experiences people more often described as “awesome.” If a spirituality of mystery is about the cognitive domain, a spirituality of awe is about affect. These are not experiences that anyone sees as demanding explanation. They are not mysterious, they just are. They are real, but they point to a reality that is greater than the sum of the parts that can be seen. Jessica Kingman told us, “I think if you’re like just walking and looking at trees or a beautiful flower or a pretty bird, you know what I mean, it reminds you of the simplicity of life, too, and the wonders of it all.” Experiences in the natural world were often the occasion for such experiences. Rebecca Klein, a member of a suburban Boston Jewish congregation, said:

> Sam and I often will ride our bikes on Sunday morning and I feel really lucky to live where I live because it’s the most beautiful place. And like the birds are right outside my window all the time. I don’t take it for granted. I live right by the beach and it’s amazing. Every night we hear the ocean puts us to sleep and it’s quite something. It is spiritual.

Others spoke of music in a similar way. Encountering beauty in all its forms seems to evoke for many of our respondents “rumors of angels” (Berger 1970), hints of “something beyond.” Even some of our secular participants talked about this rather amorphous recognition of natural beauty as something spiritual.

**Spirituality as Meaning**

Much of sociological theorizing about religion as taken “meaning making” as a starting point. Human beings, Peter Berger taught us, are animals who must construct a meaningful
world for themselves (Berger 1969). Both Berger and Weber are clear that not all meanings are spiritual, but both suggest that a life of meaning and a meaningful cosmos are often connected. Whether in seeking answers to “why?” (theodicy) or in wondering about whether one’s life has a divine plan, human beings often seek meaning in spiritual terms. As Francis Parker, a Boston Catholic, said, “Spiritually, you’ve got to think why is this happening? And you’re not going to get the answer but you’re going to get at least a feeling that God is making the right choice for you.” Having one’s life directed in a meaningful way is the essence of spirituality for many of our respondents.

**Spirituality as Moral Compassion**

Talk about a spiritual path or a sense of meaning in life carries only an indirect implication that this path is a moral one. For seekers of majesty or mystery or even meaning, spirituality may have more to do with personal fulfillment than with ethical guidance. Others, however, freely linked being spiritual with living a good, moral life, with transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right. These participants in our study are closely related to the people I have described elsewhere as “Golden Rule Christians” (Ammerman 1997). While Mainline Protestants seem especially prone to this notion of spirituality, they are by no means alone. Olivia Howell, a 36-year-old Southern Baptist in Atlanta, was explicit about what real spirituality means. “The whole point is though if you don’t love your neighbor, anything that’s accomplished, even in God’s name, right, even if you say you’re doing good in God’s name it does not matter. Because God said and Jesus said, you know, that love was, was supreme. Love of God first, but then love of your neighbor.” One of our Wiccan participants voiced her own version of the same idea as the ”whole idea of karma, living a good life, you know, what you send out comes back, that sort of thing.” Eric Patterson, a member of the Vineyard Community
Church in Atlanta, said, “I would say religion is very unimportant for me. I consider myself a spiritual person….Religion to me is nothing but rules, whereas the God that I was taught about and sort of where I am at spiritually now is all about love.” The perennial charge of religious hypocrisy is one that often implies this link between “authentic” spirituality and caring, moral, behavior. Laura Henderson described one of her friends this way. “One of the things that I like about him on a spiritual level is because he, even though he’s not a day-to-day practitioner of what I would call spirituality, he’s one of the best people I know. He’s just a good person. He tries to live his life in a very moral way.”

When our participants told stories about their everyday worlds, then, they sometimes recognized spirituality by the character of the actions they observed. They recognized those moments when people reached past rational self interest to sacrifice in behalf of others. They saw hints of transcendence in “random acts of kindness.”

*Spirituality as Connection*

If spirituality is sometimes signaled by the beauty of the natural world, it is also sometimes experienced in the beauty of the social world. Finding (or losing) oneself in the ocean of a common human spirit is another of the things people mean when they say something is spiritual. Durkheim would, of course, not be surprised. In the “collective effervescence” of rituals and the sense of solidarity engendered by group symbols, people experience themselves as part of something beyond themselves, something they identify as a god, but that is actually the transcendent reality of society itself (Durkheim 1964).

For many of our participants, this deep sense of spiritual and personal connection was tied to their religious community. Gwen Mothersbaugh, a retired teacher and member of Grimsby Congregational, outside Boston, said, “The women of the church have a group that
meets every Wednesday…and we have speakers and it’s not, it’s not really very spiritual, except the fact that there is wonderful companionship and caring for one another.” That sense of spiritual connection was also talked about on a smaller scale in the friendships some of our participants described, both in and out of the religious community. Some of our more religiously-conservative subjects talked about God sending people their way. And Jessica Kingman recalled some recent pre-marital advice her priest had given her. “The couples that had higher levels of common spirituality, they’re the ones that sexually things were better. Their conflict resolution was better. Their marriage was healthier.” For each of these highly involved religious participants, the human connection took on spiritual significance.

For the unaffiliated, the spiritual dimensions of human connection were there, as well. They spoke of the interconnectedness of all of life, of the importance of “community,” or of experiencing a deep sense of compassion. After our interview with Carolyn Horton, a 47-year-old artist and scientific researcher in Atlanta, she sent an e-mail note about something that had occurred to her.

I think joy is an essential part of spiritual well-being - it's what drives that sense of connectedness. And for me there is no joy like making love. I have often thought of this as spiritual but for some reason it didn't occur to me today in a conversation about religion and spirituality to bring it up. But it's right at the heart of my experience of ... whatever that is... god? love anyway. oneness.

Carolyn is one of our unaffiliated subjects, and she plays here with what to name the experience of connection she feels. As Greg Collins, an occasional attender at St. Michael’s Catholic in Atlanta, put it, “There’s something about just being human that makes us need some kind of spiritual connection.” The human, the interpersonal, the social, and the divine were often intertwined in how things “spiritual” were identified among our subjects.
Each of these narrative uses of spirituality bears some resemblance to definitions and theories sociologists have used over the years. The point here is that no one definition will do because most people include multiple kinds of spirituality in their telling of their own life stories. This is but one of many ways in which individual life stories bear the marks of religious plurality. We could add to this the phenomenon of multiple belonging – both over a lifetime and simultaneously. And we could add the pastiche of beliefs and practices that constitute the religious life of any given person at any given time.

Just as people draw from many different religious components in putting together a life, they also place those components into all sorts of different social locations in their lives. Some parts of life are more religious than others, but religion and spirituality seem to show up across public and private lines. Sometimes religious belief is broadly metaphysical, dealing with cosmic realities of salvation or the destiny of the universe. But just as often, religious beliefs and practices deal with routine earthly matters others might relegate to science. Sometimes religious practice has to do with bodies and health; sometimes with economic productivity. Sometimes religious belonging has to do with family traditions and identity, while sometimes it has to do with political and national loyalties.

Religion, in other words, does not stay neatly in a cosmological box. It finds its way into multiple social arenas. The plurality of religion present in a given life may be as much about which combination of social arenas as about which combinations of beliefs. This is not simply a public/private dichotomy. Religious meaning and religious practice can be present in any social arena, and no one of those arenas is ever firmly on one side or the other of a fixed “public/private” line. Locating religion means looking in all the social arenas of life, asking what religious beliefs and practices are present, even if they are not supposed to be.
Plurality of Religious Institutions

Paying attention to those social arenas and to the plurality of religious elements in them brings us to the second set of questions about religious pluralism – questions about religious institutions. As I have already suggested, religious institutions are a significant part of the explanatory story, even if by no means the only part. They themselves provide language and practices that shape the religious experiences of individuals, and to the extent that there are multiple institutions, with multiple ways of interpreting the spiritual world, there will likely also be multiple expressions among the individuals we encounter.

Many religious institutions respond to this multiplicity by attempting to control and limit it. In the most extreme case, a religious institution may seek to harness the power of the state to impose sanctions on religious expression that does not fall within that institution’s definition of orthodoxy. Other religious groups, confronted by competing religious claims, seek to encapsulate the lives of their adherents. Still others attempt to survive without drawing clear lines of distinction between inside and out. Attention to such boundary-maintaining strategies is one interesting way to study responses to religious pluralism.

But such strategies assume that the primary person-religion organizational connection is membership in a single religious group. We are asking whether the person is a member, how committed he or she is, and the like. The reality for most persons, however, is that they are connected to multiple religious organizations, each providing more and less complementary resources for engaging the spiritual world. Even groups that manage to construct and maintain fairly tight boundaries are very likely to be connected to a broader network of presumably like-minded organizations, from publishers to broadcasters to manufacturers of religious paraphernalia, each of which can introduce new religious elements into the system. Membership
in religious organizations is still a very interesting thing to study, but the effects of religious organizations extend far beyond the parish rolls and pews. The multiplicity of religious organizations, in other words, is not just a matter of multiple traditions, but also a matter of multiple organizational functions, networked in ways that often blur the boundaries of tradition (Ammerman 2001). The organizations to be observed today might begin with congregations, denominations, and state churches, but that cannot be the end of it.

In the U.S., where I have done most of my research, the organizational result of three and a half centuries of voluntary organizing is somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 local congregations, several hundred denominations and countless other religious social service agencies, publishers, bookstores, mission boards, pew manufacturers, church conflict consultants, recording studios, retreat centers, newspapers, schools and colleges, day care centers, refugee agencies, retirement homes, pension funds, suppliers of clerical and choir robes, not to mention the clearing house that makes it legal for churches to reproduce praise choruses for powerpoint presentations (Ammerman 2005). The study of religious pluralism surely must encompass this organizational pluralism, recognizing the degree to which few religious traditions are able to keep a strict boundary separating authorized purveyors and unauthorized ones.

**Plurality, Power, and the Law**

That brings us, finally, to the question of authority, power, and the macro-structural realities that shape opportunities and constraints for religious organizations and for individual expression of religious beliefs and practices. The degree to which plural religious expression flourishes is not entirely a voluntary matter. Left to their own devices, individuals may tend toward plural religious expressions. Left to their own devices, religious organizations may proliferate. But religion is very often not left to its own devices. There is always religious
pluralism, but the costs for deviation vary considerably. Where uniformity appears to exist, it is likely to be sustained more by powerful institutions than by everyday consensus. As Beckford has pointed out, Berger’s notions about sacred canopies pay scant attention to the degree to which any unified sacred cosmos would have to be sustained by powerful elites and state-sponsored institutions with the power of life and death over heretics and prophets (Beckford 2003). One of the most interesting tasks for the sociologist of religion who takes pluralism as a given is to examine the mechanisms of power that limit (or expand) the range and context of religious expression in any given society.

In the very particular U.S. context, religious pluralism has been an accepted fact of life nearly from the beginning. While some European settlers brought habits of enforced monopoly with them, American society was seeded with free thinkers and dissidents from the 17th century on. The very experience of putting an ocean between oneself and one’s ecclesiastical authorities may have had something to do with that. The result was a steady proliferation of organized religious traditions – from high church Episcopalians to simple Quakers, from slave churches to new religions like the Latter-day Saints. Jon Butler has argued that the diversity of eighteenth century American religion is one of the primary reasons the Constitutional framers did not seek to create an established church in the first place. There was already then as much diversity in North America as in the whole of the European continent and far more than in any one European society (Butler 1990). Having set loose the possibility of religious liberty, what followed in the early nineteenth century was what Nathan Hatch has described as “a period of religious ferment, chaos, and originality unmatched in American history. Few traditional claims to religious authority could weather such a relentless beating. There were competing claims of old denominations and a host of new ones. Wandering prophets appeared dramatically, and
supremely heterodox religious movements gained followings. People veered from one church to another. Religious competitors wrangled unceasingly..." (Hatch 1989, 64). When we look at American diversity today, it stands in a long line of religious inventiveness and experimentation. And in spite of the fact that dozens of groups would argue that they and they alone have the true way to live, all that inventiveness has taken place with relatively little overt or violent religious conflict (Demerath 2001).

An interesting consequence of this long history of religious diversity is that majority-culture Americans seem remarkably unperturbed by its more recent expansion. While a significant minority of “religious exclusivists” carry negative images of their new Muslim and Hindu neighbors, most who have actually had contact with someone of another faith have found the contact pleasant (Wuthnow 2005). The stated willingness to accept people of other religious traditions in all areas of public and private life continues to expand (Fischer and Hout 2006). Among more educated Americans, tolerance and an appreciation for diversity have become signal virtues, even as the dominant reality is that most live among like-minded and like-situated others and appreciate the beauties of cultural diversity from a distance (The Big Sort 2008). U.S. society, then, structures spaces for religious diversity by way of a relatively benign cultural appreciation, alongside legal protections for religious organizations and an organizational tradition of voluntarism (Warner 1993). Those cultural and structural supports, in turn, make it possible for new immigrant religious groups to find their own ways of being American by organizing their own religious “congregations” and “denominations” (Warner 2005).

I am suggesting, then, that an explanatory model for religious pluralism needs to take account of at least three critical macro-structural realities. One is cultural. What is the history of ideas and values present in a society, and how do those ideas structure how religious diversity is
perceived? The second is legal. What are the historic and current laws surrounding the freedom to organize and practice various religious traditions? Sociologists have too often left this legal and political domain to others, but it is a crucial part of the social world in which religion is more and less plural. Finally, we must pay attention to variations in traditions of organizing, especially in the third sector. What are the available models for more and less robust production of religiously-infused social territories. No explanatory model for “religious pluralism” can do without accounts of those cultural, legal, and organizational dimensions at work in any given society.

Cross-cutting each of these questions is the issue of how dominant religious traditions are intertwined with and often indistinguishable from dominant economic, nationalist, and military interests. The intertwining of religious and worldly power is seen most dramatically where religiously-infused violence pits one group against another. The issue is rarely simply a matter of conflict between people with different beliefs. Religious pluralism, as such, cannot explain the complex intermingling of political, economic, cultural, and internecine rivalries at play in incidents where religious symbols are invoked as rationales for violence (Appleby 2000). Here our questions, it seems to me, are best asked in terms that seek the range of factors at work along specific troublesome boundaries between religions or between religion and irreligion. The challenge is not “pluralism,” but specific encounters between specific religious enemies. Nor is it a monolithic “religion as such” that can explain things. Rather, specific beliefs, stories, symbols, practices, and relationships come into play.

Where religious diversity is perceived to be a problem, then, it is likely intermingled with all the other dimensions of communal self-definition faced by the world’s myriad nations and ethnic groups. Whether “Christian” Europe faced with “Muslim” immigrants or a Shi’a majority
flexing its muscles in Iraq or indigenous peoples in the Americas reclaiming ancient rituals as an expression of their cultural power, religious expressions of who we are respond to and are shaped by the power of the other groups who surround us. And sometimes the direction of change is toward less tolerance rather than more, less religious diversity rather than more. Where plural religious groups once thrived, the cause of “nationalism” has sometimes turned a religiously-plural society into one defined by religious hegemony. We might point, for instance, to Bosnia (Perica 2002), Iraq (Iraq Report - 2008 2008), or on-going struggles in Lebanon or Nigeria. If we are to understand the challenges of religious pluralism, then, we must enlarge the scope of our questions to encompass these realities of civil unrest and state building, recognizing the complex ways in which religious differences are intermingled with other differences.

**Concluding Summary**

For sociologists of religion, I have argued, the challenge of religious pluralism is simply the normal state of affairs inherent in the complexity of this complicated subject we have chosen to study. Religion itself is multi-dimensional, and those dimensions of belief, belonging, practice and experience can be combined in myriad ways across the individual lives we study. Religion is also multi-sited, finding expression across the multiple social institutions that were once thought to be destined for religion-free rational calculation. Those multiple sites shape and are shaped by the religion that happens there. The same practice – prayer, for instance – takes on different meanings and effects depending on whether it is a family blessing over a meal, a secret petition whispered in the workplace or an invocation at a presidential inaugural. And all of this is before we get to the plural religious traditions with which most people come in contact and the plural producers of the goods and services and events that embody and transform religious tradition. Nor can any of this be studied without taking into account the structures of power and
privilege that allow some religious ideas to be given free voice, but limit the practice of other religious rituals or the gathering of dissident religious communities. None of these dynamics is inherently new. Religious pluralism is, I have claimed, endemic in the human condition. The challenge for us is to do our work with the full range of that diversity before us.
REFERENCES


