

1. What does the author say is the difference between diversity and pluralism?
2. What are the three historical approaches Americans have taken to increasing diversity? How are they similar and how are they different?
3. The author defines five critical components of pluralism at the end of this article. In one sentence each, write the meaning of each component.
4. Why is discussion of American pluralism important today?

Excerpted from “From Diversity to Pluralism” from Harvard University’s Pluralism project

All of America’s diversity, old and new, does not add up to pluralism. “Pluralism” and “diversity” are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity. For example, on the same street in Silver Spring, Maryland are a Vietnamese Catholic church, a Cambodian Buddhist temple, a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a Muslim Community Center, a Hispanic First Church of God, and a Hindu temple. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship among the different groups it may not be an instance of pluralism.

. . .

From a historical perspective, the terms “exclusion,” “assimilation,” and “pluralism” suggest three different ways Americans have approached this widening cultural and religious diversity. The exclusionist answer to the tumultuous influx of cultural and religious diversity that seemed to threaten the very core of American civilization was to close the door, particularly to “aliens”—whether Asians, Catholics, or Jews. Assimilationists, like those who envisioned America as a “melting pot,” invited new immigrants to come, but to leave their differences and particularities behind as quickly as possible. The message was: come and be like us, come and conform to a predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture. For pluralists, . . . the American promise to immigrants was: come as you are, with all your differences and particularities, pledged only to the common civic demands of American citizenship. Come and be yourself, contributing in your distinctive way to the “orchestra” of American civilization.

. . .

Today, as in every era, Americans are [thinking about] the meaning of “We, the people of the United States of America...” What does “we” mean in a multireligious [multiethnic, multigendered] . . . America? How do “we” relate to one another, when that “we” includes Buddhist Americans, like the Hawaiian-born Buddhist astronaut who died on the Challenger, Muslim Americans, like a small town Texas mayor, and Sikh Americans, like a research scientist in Fairfax, Virginia? What exactly is pluralism?

First, pluralism is not the sheer fact of diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity. . . .

Second, pluralism is more than the mere tolerance of differences; it requires knowledge of them. Tolerance, while certainly

important, may be a deceptive virtue by itself, perhaps even standing in the way of engagement. Tolerance does not require people to know anything about one another, and so can let us harbor all the stereotypes and half-truths we want to believe about our neighbors. Tolerance is definitely important, but it does little to remove our ignorance of one another. It is too thin a foundation for a society as religiously diverse and complex as America's.

Third, pluralism is not simply relativism, but makes room for real and different religious commitments. Some people are wary of the language of pluralism, insisting that it effectively waters down one's own religious beliefs by acknowledging that others believe differently. Some mistakenly think a pluralist perspective assumes that there are no differences among various religious traditions and their values. . . . Pluralism does not require relinquishing the distinctiveness of one's own tradition of faith to reach the "lowest common denominator." In the public square of a pluralist society, commitments are not left at the door, but invited in. People of every faith or of none can be themselves, with all their particularities, while engaging in the creation of a civil society. Pluralism is the process of creating a society through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences.

Fourth, pluralism in America is clearly based on the common ground rules of the First Amendment to the Constitution: "no establishment" of religion and the "free exercise" of religion. The vigorous encounter of a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement on matters of conscience and faith, but on achieving something far more valuable: the relationship of ongoing debate and discussion. E Pluribus Unum, "out of many, one," envisions one people, a common sense of a civic "we," but not one religion, one faith, or one conscience: unum does not mean uniformity. . . .

Fifth, pluralism requires the nurturing of constructive dialogue to reveal both common understandings and real differences. Not everyone at the "table" will agree with one another; the process of public dialogue will inevitably reveal areas of disagreement as well. Pluralism involves the commitment to be at the table—with one's beliefs. . . Encouraging a climate conducive to dialogue is critically important for the flourishing of a civil society.

Accessed on 11.26.17 at <http://pluralism.org/encounter/todays-challenges/from-diversity-to-pluralism/>