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Introduction

Earl Lewis and Nancy Cantor

Every Mother's Day at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, New Jersey, the Alvin Ailey Dance Company performs *Revelations* to a packed audience of families, from children to senior citizens, as diverse a crowd as one can conjure—peoples of all hues, heritages, faiths, dress, and languages. Strongly identified with the particulars of the Christian spiritual tradition, the dance invokes a message that moved members of multiple faith traditions. There are universal elements to the story. There are those who see in it an affirmation of a particular struggle for civil rights, and those who identify with it from a less personally direct lineage but find its call to humanity and the human spirit compelling nonetheless. It feels like America at its best, and the moment is decidedly strengthened by the variety of personal histories in the room, as it is also by the commonality of the experience of uplift. There is always a loud and resoundingly prolonged standing ovation, as the audience holds out the hope that the moment of collective affirmation will last. Indeed, those are the moments that we want to last, in which diversity contributes powerfully to the strength of community. And although it surely isn't only a day a year that this is evident, it does seem that there are precious few demonstrations these days of what some might say is the distinctly American ethos, *E pluribus unum*.

The Fraying of *E pluribus unum* and the Bonds of Empathetic Citizenship

Arguably, we live in a time comparable to many of the most strained periods in our national history. It is a time when the human bonds

of empathetic citizenship—the openness to see value in others different from oneself and the concomitant responsibility for bridging those differences to create an interdependent whole—are deeply frayed. This fraying of the bonds of citizenship imperils the fabric of democracy itself, as we have seen from sea to shining sea. Who, after all, would have predicted that in the twenty-first century the signs, symbols, and rhetoric of the Nazi era would be on public display in crowds marching on a college campus in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting, “Jews won’t replace us” and “Blood and soil”? What do we say when nooses appear overnight on the National Mall in Washington, DC, directed especially at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture?

Where do we situate religion in this recurring clash of visions? Have we regressed to another bleak period of our national history, when we created Japanese American internment camps on our own soil in reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Following that playbook, will we lock up Muslim Americans, our neighbors in cities and towns across America, painting all with the brush of a threat from violent extremism? How do we reconcile the reluctance to label some violent acts of hate committed by white Christians (adhering to supremacist ideology) as domestic terrorism, on the one hand, with the speed with which we make that connection to hateful acts committed by other citizens but in the name of Islam, on the other?¹ Is it purely accidental that half a century after the bombing of children in a Birmingham church in 1963, a hate-filled supremacist murders nine people in a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015? Or is there something about the theology of hate that is more fully comprehended in the presence of the theology of inclusion?² Have we moved on so little from our racist, xenophobic, and religiously exclusionary past and progressed so little in expanding the narrative of who is American, even as the facts of our diversity become more pronounced and our aspirations for pluralism march resoundingly forward?

Even though some may express fear, our increasing diversity is indisputable. How we define and leverage diversity for the common good is not. It is against the backdrop of threats to social connectedness, to civic democracy, to moral neighborliness, that this book series considers the myriad dimensions of our compelling interests.³ We ask how we move beyond our worst history: genocide against Native Americans; Atlantic slavery and the long path traveled toward enfranchisement of African Americans; religious bigotry and exclusion. We question, even as we appear reluctant to relinquish this hibernating bigotry,⁴ what new vision is to be crafted of a diverse, pluralistic society where civil rights and generous civic behavior go hand in hand, where diversity and democracy mix well, as they also sometimes have in our history.⁵ We wonder how we will flourish as a nation without the full participation of our ever more diverse populace and the diversity bonus that such engagement brings to our knowledge economy, as well as to the classrooms that prepare our talent, the halls of government that make our policies, and the places of innovation that crisscross our communities.⁶

Expanding the American Civic Religious Narrative

In this volume, we turn to what has been foundational to our national identity, emblazoned in our initiating documents as the freedom of religion and the establishment of a government embracing our people's many faiths and traditions. We tackle what an expanded, inclusive, but not homogenized civil religious narrative might be in this twenty-first-century America, as Eboo Patel frames the central dilemma of our religiously and ethnically diverse nation. We start with the basic premise of his analysis, that the vibrancy of civic life is enhanced by religious participation and therefore by tolerance for religious diversity in its broadest sense. As his section and the commentaries in this volume detail, there is no guarantee that we are up to the challenge of matching religious diversity and civic

tolerance. On the contrary, there is every reason to wonder whether the American democratic project, built on a promise of religious diversity and freedom amid a reality of expectations of assimilation, can stretch and evolve sufficiently to reap the benefits of the insights and talents of new communities of faith in our midst.

The challenge posed by the demographic and religious map of America today may well tax the limits of an expanded embrace, as religion mixes once again with race and ethnicity and homeland, perhaps in ways less palatable to many than in the past. As both Patel and Robert P. Jones explicate, while the journeys into the fold of the American civic religious tradition may not always have been smooth, the assimilation of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, among others, was accomplished over time both by stretching the definition of whiteness and simultaneously by moving the prevalent religious narrative (from Anglo-Saxon Protestant) to an expanded Judeo-Christian one. Today this inclusiveness may be harder to achieve. In fact, the Cold War created a need for a rewrite of America's religious narrative. If the Soviet Union and China were godless, America was godly. This rewrite enabled the pivot from a narrative about Anglo-Saxon Protestants to one of a Judeo-Christian community. With growing (though still proportionately small) numbers of Americans identifying as Muslim (with many origins, including African Americans) and an increasingly pervasive political landscape of Islamophobia and American nationalism, American Muslims, some of whose families have been here for decades, if not centuries, as Patel ironically points out, test both the dominance of whiteness and the centrality of Christianity (even in its adapted version, where the symbols and language of faith are imported into a somewhat neutered public civic sphere). And the threat of losing predominance, of being displaced, as Jones characterizes it, is made worse for some by the growing populations of religiously unaffiliated Americans, particularly in younger generations. The threat of the unaffiliated is only exacerbated, as John Inazu's commentary delineates, as many push for a set of policies and laws that protect

rights and enforce responsibilities that some see as threatening religious freedom (if not religion itself), from contraception coverage to transgender bathroom choice. This growing divide is bolstered no doubt also by a prevalent narrative that lays the economic losses of rural white Christians at the feet of the largely metropolitan, and less Christian or less religiously identified, “elite,” who are said to welcome foreigners and not to care about the loss of American jobs to globalization.

This mix of exclusionary racial and religious sentiments with antiglobal paranoia, while certainly not new in our nation’s history, is finding new life in a range of public debates, from affirmative action to immigration, and a substantial uptick in acts of vandalism and violence in places of worship and community centers, especially those hosting Jews or Muslims. Patel poignantly documents, in telling the story of American Muslims, how they have become an all-encompassing blank screen on which to project anger and resentment about race, immigration, national security, and religion. At their core, these anti-Muslim expressions, often dragging in other minority identities in the process, belie a fear of the erosion of some foundational American identity and way of life—an existential threat that puts under siege the place and privilege of those who once dominated the landscape and controlled the narrative. This in turn sets a high bar to overcome in extending any kind of empathetic welcome or encouraging a sense of shared fate and purpose and, at the same time, underlines the urgency of doing so.

Building a Community of Communities

Yet still, we take as first principles that we must spread that empathy and cannot afford as a country to ignore the diversity in our midst, those whose civic, economic, and cultural participation will better equip us to face down the challenges of our contemporary world. It is very much in our compelling interests, as Patel outlines in his vision of an expanded, more pluralistic, civil religious narrative, to

pull together our diverse communities of faith to form a new, more textured unity, one similar to what Danielle Allen referred to in the first volume in this series as a “community of communities.” According to her analysis, strong intragroup bonds coexist and even reinforce equally strong intergroup bridges across diverse social identity allegiances.⁷ Pragmatic pluralism, to use the term provided by Laurie L. Patton in her commentary, can effectively position America far from either the religious nationalism or the radical secularism likely to splinter groups further. And even as Inazu tempers our optimism here with a call for a modest unity, and Jones’s commentary moves the narrative away from the sacred and toward what he calls a civic creedalism, some version of a unifying hymn will surely serve us well.

What will a modest unity look like? What foundation will it be built on, and how can we all encourage it? As all the authors in this volume agree, this modest unity departs first of all from our familiar, normalized Judeo-Christian tradition in that it is not to be easily built on a legacy of assimilation to whiteness and to a sacred melting pot—there is just too much difference now to easily accommodate. Instead, the new pluralism, which they all also believe can and must be accomplished through the hard work of moving from the facts of diversity to lived pluralism,⁸ will likely be built on the shared recognition that we really do live in a new world, on several levels.

First, and perhaps most important as a building block of unity, is the recognition by differing doctrinal groups of some similarities in their circumstances of life—the threats, the dreams, the obstacles, and the opportunities desired for their children, for example—even when there are distinct differences in beliefs or practices. Inazu calls this the embrace of *common ground*, even with differences in what is conceived as the *common good*. This recognition that comes from reaching across the religious aisle, so to speak, may well produce more in common than expected, moving us closer to Patel’s pluralistic harmony.

Working on common ground is what the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s did so well, as its participants walked hand in hand, and it is what we are seeing in communities across the country today, even as acts of hatred and violence aim to separate. In January 2017, a diverse group of thirty-five leaders from across the political spectrum formed the Latino Jewish Leadership Council to counter the rise of anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic rhetoric. Recently they sharply denounced the events in Charlottesville as confirming “what history teaches us: hate groups start by targeting a specific ethnicity, religion, or community, and then metastasize and end up attacking our broader society.”⁹ In a similar call to common ground, Jim Winkler, president and general secretary of the National Council of Churches, called on his “evangelical sisters and brothers” to join with his members, some thirty million Christians in more than one hundred thousand local congregations, spanning Orthodox, Anglican, mainline Protestant, and historic peace churches, to renounce the rise of white supremacists and neo-Nazis after Charlottesville.¹⁰

Such calls for an ecumenical denouncement of hate remind us that the concept of *neighbor* is about more than geographic proximity. It encompasses our moral obligations, our fundamental interdependence, as Newark’s famed rabbi Joachim Prinz noted in his speech delivered right before Martin Luther King Jr.’s awe-inspiring call to unity, “I Have a Dream,” at the 1963 March on Washington. Rabbi Prinz, by invoking as the core meaning of *neighbor*, “our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity,” implored us all to reach across the aisle to find that worthy soul in others.

As important as such broad and monumental moments of spiritual and moral common ground are, the everyday acts of solidarity matter too, and these should not be forgotten. In February 2017, the *New York Times* reported on a movement among Muslims to raise \$130,000 in a short period for the repair of Jewish graves desecrated in Saint Louis and Philadelphia.¹¹ Meanwhile, in a demonstration of

pragmatic pluralism, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported recently on how American Muslims are turning to Jews for help in thinking through how to secure their mosques and institutions, working to share lessons learned about the particulars of staying safe in a nervous climate.¹²

When these participants from diverse religious, ethnic, and identity groups come together and pool their knowledge and intelligence in pragmatic problem solving, as occurs now when communities face threats and work on safety, a robust diversity bonus emerges, enabling participants to uncover good solutions and develop a bolstered sense of being in these times together. This kind of broader community building is evident in many faith-based academic institutions too, as when Augsburg University, a Lutheran institution in Minneapolis, joined in common cause to contribute to the education and economic development efforts of its neighbors, a Somali Muslim community.¹³ These everyday acts of everyday ethics, as Patton calls them, involving intergroup problem solving, may well be as critical to forging a new modest unity as are the foundational legal and civil protections of freedom of religion that we all importantly count on to secure our place in a pluralistic America.

The everyday work of pluralism certainly occurs in spaces and places explicitly defined by religion and between groups specifically reaching out to build an interfaith geography. It also occurs, importantly, in more routine civil society organizations, as Patel describes. It can be found in our schools, on our sporting fields, and at our museums and hospitals, contexts not explicitly focused on spirituality or affiliated with one or another religious group but rather gathering a broad range of personal traditions together in public. In these shared public civil institutions, while the common purpose is focused elsewhere—on getting a college degree, on mounting an exhibit, on winning a game, on curing a disease—the ground can also be tilled, purposely or by chance, for building the respect, relationships, and commitments to some common good that Patel identifies as best serving our compelling interests. Within the safety of

these schools and community centers, there is fertile opportunity for structuring dialogue, as Patel's Interfaith Youth Core, and the intergroup dialogues pioneered by Patricia Gurin and colleagues at the University of Michigan, amply demonstrates.¹⁴ And dialogue, as simple as it sounds and as hard as it is to structure well, goes a long way toward stripping away the blinders of our identity-based stereotypes in order to see others for what they are and see ourselves as we are viewed by others. When, as Patton so persuasively encourages us to do, we listen to the stories of everyday people, adding to the inspiration from larger, heroic myths, something revelatory occurs. For the somewhat unexpected part of forging that pragmatic pluralism in dialogue and storytelling is that it serves to strengthen one's own understanding of self-identity, even as it signals how interdependent we are with other groups and traditions.

The Power of Expressive Symbolism: Uniting and Dividing

As we work to see what is common in our circumstances, the things we fear, and the aspirations we pursue, while still holding firm to our differences, there may come a time when we get better at publicly recounting heroic (and everyday) narratives of more universal struggle and redemption. These expressions in turn can become symbolic, forming a fabric for a civil religion that feels more egalitarian and less about dominance and exclusion. Throughout our history we have tried to do this, sharing universally motivating spirituals like "Amazing Grace" in times of national distress, as President Barack Obama did when he united a nation in grief at the memorial service for those slain in Charleston, centering his themes on grace itself, including the astonishing spiritual reserve of the family members of the shooting victims.¹⁵ Or when elders of a minority Muslim community in Fort Smith, Arkansas, a town that the *New York Times* describes as having a mix of libertarian and Southern Baptist sensibilities, turned out to support a young white man

who apologized for his part in the desecration of their mosque.¹⁶ The aftermath of 9/11 brought out similar expressions and gatherings that appealed to our caring national identity, even as the events themselves fed another strain of religious nationalism and exclusionary impulses.

Expressive symbolism has the power to divide or unite, and the future of our pluralism depends in large part on what we publicly embrace. Today, in the face of heated debates about the appropriateness of Confederate monuments in the context of an invigorated white supremacy movement, we hear the surprising, unifying voices of descendants of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson, all icons of that brutal, exclusionary past. In interviews in the *New York Times* after Charlottesville, they all agreed in one way or another that these symbols, as personally meaningful to their families as they remain, should not stand where they can associate the contemporary collective public square with a legacy of hate, racism, and religious nationalism.¹⁷ As Derek Black, a former white supremacist and the godson of David Duke, reminds us, a clear line must be drawn between personal ties (he made calls to both family who carried the neo-Nazi torches and friends who counterprotested in Charlottesville) and the public whitewashing of history.¹⁸ And while no good can come of forgetting that history, as we have systematically tried to do in regard to our Native American brethren, we can remember the tragic lessons of the Confederacy and slavery in museums and classrooms, rather than monumentalize them as part of the national civic religion, on which we depend to keep us moving forward, together.

As Patel compels us, let's search for experiences that unify across difference, turning to occasions when our creative expressions and public symbols can reinforce our solidarity. We very much need both the comfort and the inspiration, as we noted at the start of this introduction, of events that transport us, as when the Alvin Ailey Dance Company performs *Revelations* on Mother's Day to a resplendently diverse audience of Muslims, Jews, Christians, atheists, and

more. It matters that this happens in one of America's many global cities, with many plural traditions of faith and identity, but it also needs to happen across our country, in places where people may feel disenfranchised by diversity rather than motivated to unite. Let us go everywhere, even with our eyes fully open to the challenges, in pursuit of a "wider sense of we" that may get us through these trying times, as Laurie L. Patton intones.

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