

[Stirring Up the Melting Pot](#)

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COMMUNITY

## Stirring Up the Melting Pot

Harvard's Pluralism Project Delivers a Ground-breaking CD-ROM:

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You are about to go on a pilgrimage. Not to India's Kashi or Vrindavan, but to the sacred sanctuaries of the United States of America. You will visit the more than 80 Hindu temples scattered across the continent, including the towering Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Chola-style Meenakshi Temple in Texas, and America's oldest Hindu temple, located in Queens, New York. You'll also immerse yourself in every nuance of Hinduism as you listen to priests, devotees and second-generation youth talk about their faith. You'll see the rituals of puja, listen to the Ganesha Saranam chant and much, much more--all without leaving home.

All you need to embark upon this intriguing journey is a computer and the remarkable multimedia CD-ROM, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (1997, Columbia University Press, New York). A few hours of browsing will take you not only through the salient points of Hinduism in the US,

but also of 15 other world religions now thriving in this multicultural climate. Besides countless churches and synagogues, there are now hundreds of mosques, temples, shrines and meditation halls scattered through every town and city. Some even share the same street.

How are the traditions evolving, and what are the problems and issues facing faiths that alight in this land? How is America itself changing as a result? These are questions that Common Ground asks and answers. It is the fruition of fastidious work by Diana L. Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard, spent over three intensive years with her team of researchers to actualize this powerful social education tool.

Eck is convinced that the Eastern religions in the US have adapted and evolved, and that the influx of new immigrants has, in turn, transformed US communities. Once foreign, these transplanted cultures and their faiths are now integral. They have become American. "This is happening before our very eyes," Eck narates, "and historians of religion need to pay attention to it. It is the ongoing history of religion.... America is changing, too, as we begin to appropriate this much more complex religious pluralism."

The world's religions in your hand: On Common Ground documents the changing face of faith in over 18 communities in 400 centers, from Buddhist temples and Islamic centers to Christian churches and their diverse denominations. The CD is in three main parts. A New Religious Landscape investigates

the diversity in 18 regions of the US. At the click of a mouse one can access a comprehensive directory of mosques, temples and gurudwaras (Sikh temples). Maps locate the centers--and addresses and phone numbers are included! There are over 400 portraits of different centers. America's Many Religions covers 15 different faiths, giving in-depth information on core beliefs, practices and the challenges, historical overviews, timelines, discussions of religious practices and profiles of leaders. Encountering Religious Diversity takes on the hard issues faced by each religion as it tries to fit into the surrounding community. Hindus may be surprised to see and hear how other faiths face the exact same obstacles they do, such as zoning and traffic complaints as attempts to stop temple building. Encountering Religious Diversity engages one to consider how passive tolerance can be turned into truly interactive religious pluralism, and discusses the ups and downs of this path.

The CD features an abundance of movies that bring each religious tradition to life as real people tell their stories. Excellent photographs show devotees engaged in day to day practices. Music of the various traditions augments the cultural diversity even further. These real-life glimpses have a magical way of instilling a feeling of empathy, a distinct feeling that "We are all in this together" and "Those people are not so different from us." If the CD is taken up by schools across the nation as expected, the social impact of youth's increased understanding will be unprecedented. One scholarly reviewer affirms that, "Every social studies teacher in America should have this CD."

There's more, including over 100 technical documents--a

treasury of data for students and academics. All this is supplemented--get this--by a comparative thematic index, a glossary, bibliography and a guide written by Eck. Online updates and an expanding database are available at the Columbia University Press website (see end of article). The Pluralism Project offers affiliate grants for "professors and/or departments to involve themselves and their students in research on the changing religious life of their city or region...and the new patterns of religious and interreligious involvement in American civil society." Applications can be found online.

Media for the masses: CD-ROM was chosen as the most effective technology to give students and academics the prodigious findings of the Pluralism Project's years of massive research. As Eck points out, education is one arena where inter-religious encounters can be intense, because school and college communities most reflect the diversity of society. She says, "Teaching about religion is important in public school curriculums. For too long we have had the idea that it is less controversial to steer away from religion in curriculum. This is the moment in American history when we are trying hard to correct that."

This is a comprehensive teaching tool that makes it fun to learn about religion. In its fair and balanced way it gives answers to the many questions which minority children often ponder. Since religious and community leaders have given their own input, the information is correct and personable. Children and teenagers who may balk at being force-fed religion will certainly be drawn toward Common Ground. They can play the quicktime movies and learn an eye and earful

about Hindu pujas; see Cat Steven's call to prayer; or hear gospel music from San Francisco and on and on. It is an irresistible invitation to high school students to become interested in the religious diversity of their area. They can enter through the US gateway map to find out what's happening in their vicinity. Teachers, too, are empowered to explain religion fairly and accurately with this CD as the guide. Hindus will find many fascinating facts about their own faith, and parents will find answers to questions their children ask about the reasons for rituals.

The history of the growth of Hinduism and the other world religions in America makes for interesting reading. In the early days, when there were few temples and mosques, people would meet informally in each other's homes and pray at the home shrine. Yet, as each community established itself, a place of worship was established, and cultural life flourished around that hub. At first, many temples and mosques were in makeshift quarters or loaned premises spanning everything from a former mattress showroom in Northridge, California, to a YMCA in New Jersey. The Muslim and Hindu communities of Houston, Texas, gathered for prayers in the multi-faith Rothko Chapel until they built their own centers. The Houston Zoroastrians still gather in this chapel while they complete their own Dar-e-Mehr. Sikhs in Queens, New York, established their gurudwara in a former church while Muslims in Chicago started out with an old movie theater as their community center.

The CD shows how Hinduism is changing as it becomes counted as an American religion. While vast numbers of Americans converted to Hinduism through various

organizations, born Hindus living in America are becoming more Americanized in their ways. The CD defines the trend, "America's great new Hindu temples signal the presence of a religious community that has taken to American ways, with the spirit of volunteerism that is so typical of America's many religious traditions. Membership dues, annual fund-raisers, temple publications and newsletters, videotapes of temple festivals and audio tapes of devotional music are all now part of the American temple milieu."

Many of the newer temples are an amalgam of Hindu and American styles, incorporating just a few ornate touches, while others go for overt Hindu architecture. The magnificent Sri Meenakshi Temple in Pearland, Texas, for instance, echoes the architecture of South India. The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago has a complex which houses both a Sri Rama Temple and a Ganesha-Siva temple, with a 80-foot-tall temple tower. Indeed, the Hindu identity and what constitutes a Hindu is constantly being negotiated in America, as Indians from different regions and communities reside in close proximity. In Nashville, Hindus building a temple sent out a ballot to decide which would be the central Deity, since there are worshipers of Kali, Krishna and Shiva in their area. It was democratically voted to choose Lord Ganesha. In Livermore, the community decided on a joint Shiva-Vishnu Temple, thus appeasing the devotees of both Gods. In most temples, in deference to the many languages spoken by Indians, the literature is often in English. Where populations are largely from one area of India, the temples are more insular.

As Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis become America's next door neighbors, service providers, teachers,

physicians and friends, the Eastern religions lose their strangeness. Intercultural marriages, too, are adding to the climate of tolerance and pluralism. Hinduism is especially qualified to participate in this new drive. As explained in the CD, " 'The one and the many.' No other theme in India has played so constantly, like a continuously evolving raga, a musical scale with a multitude of variations. No culture on Earth has developed as complex an understanding of human and Divine as Hindu India. To say 'This is the one and only' may be a marker of importance to other cultures. Hindu India, however, has long taken a different measure of the meaning of plurality."

Although dotbusters, hate crimes, vandalizing of Hindu shrines and burning of mosques are realities, as are the bigoted statements of people like Pat Robertson, the truth is that there are a multitude of ways that America's civic life is changing because of new initiatives of inter-religious cooperation. After all, America was the site of the first World Parliament of Religions way back in 1893 and again, one hundred years later in 1993. In cities across America, there are sincere efforts at interfaith dialogue and experiments in living together. Observes Diana Eck, "We see both things happening in the US. We can see incredible religious chauvinism on all sides and also attempts at cooperation and bridge-building that are virtually unprecedented. I think the picture is more optimistic than not."

On Common Ground is impressively comprehensive, and it takes several long and focused sittings to absorb all its information. The same insight, depth and detail about Hinduism in American that we have just discussed is there for

each of the 14 other religions. Its many navigational options give freedom to wander off in diverse directions and explore as inspiration directs. On Common Ground's world of intriguing facts can be the starting point for dialogue, tolerance and, better still, advises Eck, religious pluralism. It clearly should be required browsing at schools, colleges and places of worship. "Part of the strategy of the CD," Diana explains, "is to give the teacher a company of friends and scholars from a variety of standpoints to be present in the classroom to talk about each faith. Since a variety of voices are included, you get the idea that these religions are not monolithic. You begin to understand each religious tradition as a conversation, and sometimes even as an argument. All the ideas we have about one another can actually be transformed when we meet one another. The CD is a way to meet one another in virtual space."

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