

# Finding Common Ground | *A Short Guide to Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement Using the Resources of the [Pluralism Project at Harvard University](#)*

The [Pluralism Project](#) is a two decade-long research initiative that engages students, academics, and community members in studying the new religious landscape of the United States. The religious demographics of America are changing as immigrants from all over the world take the oath of citizenship and claim the United States as their home. From the beginning this has been a nation of religious diversity, but today it is one of the most religiously diverse nation on earth, despite its overwhelming Christian majority.

We invite you to reflect on this diversity during **World Interfaith Harmony Week**. As we gather to mark this international event with neighbors and friends, old and new, we invite you to use this resource as a conversation starter. This brief guide offers a preview of the resources available at [pluralism.org](#). In particular, this guide is a roadmap for navigating [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#), an interactive web resource based on over two decades of research by the Pluralism Project and our affiliates. By exploring and discussing these resources, we hope that you will be inspired to investigate the religious landscape of your own city or town.

## [What is pluralism?](#)

“Pluralism” and “diversity” are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism.

For example, in Silver Spring, Maryland 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 share the same street. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship among the different groups it may not be an instance of pluralism.

Diana L. Eck, director of the Pluralism Project and a professor at Harvard University, defines pluralism with four points:

- Pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*.
- Pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*.
- Pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*.
- Pluralism is *based on dialogue*. Pluralism is not a “given,” but an achievement.

To read more about this definition, please visit [What is Pluralism?](#)

## [What is interfaith?](#)

Since its inception in 1991, the Pluralism Project has followed the development of America’s fast-changing religious landscape and studied new forms of civic and interfaith relationships. In 2011, we embarked on a pilot study, [America’s Interfaith Infrastructure: An Emerging Landscape](#), to look closely at interfaith efforts in twenty cities across the United States.

This pilot study sought not to define anew the terms “interfaith” and “city” but rather to engage with these terms as defined by local practitioners. We invite you to explore this resource, read and discuss the [promising practices](#) and [case studies](#), check out the [profiles of local leaders](#) and consider for yourself: *What does it take to be an interfaith leader? Who are the interfaith leaders in your own community? What challenges might they face?* You can also browse our [summary report](#). We invite you to ponder: *How does your own local context impact the kind of interfaith engagement that happens in your city or town?*

## Three Ways to Explore Diversity + Build Pluralism in Your Neighborhood

The celebration of **World Interfaith Harmony Week** provides a great opportunity to learn more about religious and ethical traditions other than your own, explore the religious landscape of your hometown, and find out more about how people of different faiths encounter one another in the public square. Looking for a place to start? [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) is an excellent online introduction to the historical dimensions and current realities of a multi-religious America. We invite you to:

**Explore the landscape** of religious diversity in your hometown. The American Constitution begins with the words, "We the People of the United States of America..." Over the past two centuries, the "we" has come to include Buddhist Americans, like the Hawaiian-born Buddhist astronaut who died on the Challenger, and Muslim Americans, like the Muslim mayor elected to office in Kuntz, Texas. Our "we" embraces Hindu and Jain engineers and surgeons, Zoroastrian social workers, and Sikh political advisors. It includes Native American legislators, activists, and educators. It includes Christians of all races and denominations—Hispanic Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, United Methodists, Vietnamese Catholics, Korean Presbyterians. It includes Jews from black-coat Lubavitchers to Reform women rabbis. It includes Bahá'í and Unitarian Universalists, Wiccans and Earth Spirit communities, and Afro-Caribbean practitioners of Santería and Vodou. And it includes a wide range of people who cherish the freedom to stand outside all of these religious communities—as ardent secularists, as ethical humanists, or as committed atheists.

**Take a few minutes to explore the twenty interactive maps in the [Landscape section of On Common Ground](#). In addition to U.S. Census data, these maps are populated by data from the Pluralism Project's online [Directory of Religious Centers](#). Is your community in our database?**

**Learn about the many religions** represented in America today. Today, there are numerous rivers of faith flowing through the landscape of America. Some have been here for centuries, and some are finding their way through a landscape that is relatively new for them. All of these religious traditions will continue to change in the new context of multireligious America. The history of religions is not over, but is an ongoing history, taking place today before our very eyes as new religious traditions begin to grow and flourish in the context of the United States. As a Vietnamese Buddhist monk told a Pluralism Project researcher in Phoenix, "We must take the plant of Buddhism out of the pot and plant it now in the soil of Arizona." What is Buddhism becoming as it grows in the soil of Arizona? How are American Muslims passing on their most cherished values in Houston or Seattle? How are American Hindus reshaping the complex religious and regional traditions of India in Nashville? And how are America's Christians and Jews changing as they encounter new neighbors of other faiths and learn to work together on school boards and interfaith councils?

**Visit the [Religion section of On Common Ground](#) to follow the development and life of seventeen traditions in the American context. There you will find a general introduction to each tradition, along with an introduction to the history of the tradition in the United States. There are glimpses of the experiences of people in each tradition and discussions of some of the issues people in each tradition are grappling with. We invite you to dig deep into this section on your own and to use the grid below to learn something new about your neighbors—and maybe even yourself.**









**Encounter diverse voices** in the public square. The public square is a place of meeting. America has long had many kinds of meeting places—the town greens, meeting houses, and commons of New England, the gracious plazas at the heart of Spanish towns like Santa Fe, the great green malls of Washington D.C. that have seen so many demonstrations and celebrations. Legislative halls and courthouses, zoning boards and city council meetings, schools and sports facilities may also be considered part of the public square. These are spaces that symbolize the free encounter of peoples and ideas that is at the heart of civil society. These are spaces in which people gather together for the work, the ceremony, the celebration of the whole, leaving for a moment the privacy of their homes and churches, synagogues and mosques, temples and *gurdwaras*.

**Wherever you gather for 2014 World Interfaith Harmony Week, you are creating spaces of encounter for your own community's diverse voices. We want to hear about that! Please tell us your story at [www.pluralism.org/interfaith/share](http://www.pluralism.org/interfaith/share).**

# Exploring Our Diversity + Our Common Ground

Each tradition represented here so neatly by a symbol has its own internal complexity. Religious traditions are dynamic and far more like rivers than like static squares. Nourished by mountain springs, they gather tributaries, flow in full flood through the plains, divide into multiple branches, merge in confluence with other streams, and spread into vast deltas. Some eventually spend themselves and dry up, leaving behind the traces of an ancient riverbed. Others become so extensive and complex they constitute an entire river system. It is important to remember, then, that living religious traditions are in motion as each new generation makes that tradition its own—in its own time, and in its own ways. Religions are not simply sets of ideas or practices passed in a box from generation to generation, but living traditions of faith that must be appropriated anew.

Reflect on the countless ways and reasons America’s many traditions find common ground. This resource contains links to *On Common Ground World Religions in America* ([pluralism.org/ocg](http://pluralism.org/ocg)) where you can learn even more about these religions.

 <p><b>Afro-Caribbean</b></p> <p>Many different streams of tradition and culture in America <a href="#">are linked to Africa</a>. These include Cuban “Santería,” Haitian Vodou, Jamaican Revivalism, Rastafarianism and Christian and Muslim traditions shaped by particular African contexts. Many traditions, like <a href="#">Vodou</a>, are often misconstrued in popular imagination, while embraced by some as a way to connect with ethnic heritage.</p>	 <p><b>Bahá’í</b></p> <p>A common type of Bahá’í meeting is the <a href="#">fireside</a>, which generally has two elements: hospitality and discussion of the Bahá’í faith. The “classic” fireside described by Shoghi Effendi (head of the Bahá’í faith from 1921-1957) involves a Bahá’í inviting someone to his or her home to discuss the faith in an atmosphere of service and friendship.</p>	 <p><b>Buddhism</b></p> <p>One of the most popular and prominent images in many Mahayana Buddhist temples is that of the <a href="#">Bodhisattva Guanyin</a>, the <i>bodhisattva</i> of compassion. <a href="#">Bodhisattva</a> means one who aspires toward universal Buddhahood or Enlightenment. Guanyin and Mahayana Buddhism first came to the United States with <a href="#">Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush</a>.</p>	 <p><b>Christianity</b></p> <p>Christianity across the United States is broad and diverse. <a href="#">Greater Boston’s many churches</a> include <a href="#">Roman Catholic</a>, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, <a href="#">Evangelical</a>, <a href="#">Charismatic</a>, and <a href="#">Pentecostal</a> congregations, and the <a href="#">Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints</a>.</p>
 <p><b>Confucianism</b></p> <p>One of the vital lessons <a href="#">Confucius</a> taught was that all humans are historical, social beings whose self-realization can only occur through participating in a cooperative, ongoing quest for communal flourishing. Many predict that renewed interest in <a href="#">Confucianism</a> on the part of Chinese living in China and abroad will contribute to a kind of “Confucian Revival” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.</p>	 <p><b>Daoism</b></p> <p><a href="#">Won-Lim Temple</a>, also known as Weaverville Joss House, is part of a state historic park in California. Today, it is estimated there are around 30,000 practitioners living in the United States. Also, American Daoists are highly decentralized, a factor that contributes, at least in part, to their vastly divergent forms of practice.</p>	 <p><b>Hinduism</b></p> <p>The word <i>bhakti</i>, from a root meaning “to share,” conveys the sense of “sharing” inherent in the love of God. Not only does the devotee love God, but God, they say, loves the devotee. <i>Bhakti</i> is expressed in many ways—in songs and hymns, in temple worship, in dance and in plays—and is one of <a href="#">several streams within the Hindu tradition</a>.</p>	 <p><b>Humanism</b></p> <p><a href="#">Humanists</a> often emphasize the idea that everyone is fundamentally of equal moral worth and that, by working together, people, regardless of belief, can build a better world. The number of Humanist communities that regularly meet for discussion and fellowship has ballooned in recent years. One such example from Texas is <a href="#">Houston Oasis</a>.</p>



### Islam

Both joy and faithfulness bring millions of Muslims from all over the world to Makkah for the [hajj pilgrimage](#), one of the five pillars of the faith. It brings together the worldwide [ummah](#), making clear that Muslims of all races, ethnic groups, and cultures are equal in God's presence, all wearing the same simple white garment, walking and praying and eating together in the most holy places. The other pillars are [shahada](#) (profession of faith), [salat](#) (prayer), [zakat](#) (purification of wealth), and [sawm](#) (fasting during Ramadan).



### Jainism

When Jains ask themselves how faith, knowledge, and conduct can be brought into harmony with one another and realized in everyday life, they start with the [five basic vows](#). [Aparigraha](#), one of the vows, means not clutching possessively. Cultivating attachment to worldly objects, and even to people, binds the soul to the cycle of birth and death. Love should be balanced and constant, rather than a volatile force that turns life into a sequence of extremes.



### Judaism

Torah is [one of the central symbols of Judaism](#) and is often seen as embodying the tradition's focus on study, understanding and interpretation of sacred texts. The weekly [Torah reading](#) is the heart of the synagogue service. The scrolls of the Torah, considered the direct utterance of God, are kept in the holy ark at the front of the synagogue, often covered with velvet. On the holiday of [Simchat Torah](#), the yearly reading of the Torah is complete and celebrated with singing and dancing.



### Native Traditions

In none of the Native American languages do we find a word that translates well into the English word "[religion](#)." One of the few common denominators underlying the diversity of Native traditions is the sense that all dimensions of social life are profoundly integrated. The term "[religion](#)" seems to suggest an artificial separation of their spiritual traditions from their economy, government, art, law, medicine, and landscape.



### Paganism

Many [Pagans](#) see divinity as both present in the physical world and as multiple. [Pagan rituals](#) commonly focus on honoring a deity or deities; observing natural cycles, such as seasonal changes or the waxing and waning of the moon; or celebrating rites of passage. In 2013, the 34<sup>th</sup> annual "Spiral Dance" in San Francisco honored the dead during [Samhain](#). The event regularly draws over 1,500 people.



### Shintō

Shintō is indigenous to Japan. As early as the 1930s the high priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine engaged in [dialogue with Unitarians](#), both American and Japanese. At this shrine and at Shintō shrines globally one of the most important rituals is [Harai](#). A priest waves a simple wooden wand with paper streamers toward the shrine and over those assembled to sweep away impurities and restore the harmony of life.



### Sikhism

The very first words of the [Sikh scripture](#), the Guru Granth Sahib are [Ek Onkar](#), God is One. It is a universal and inclusive affirmation. The one God can only be the God of all humanity, not the Sikhs alone. Another Sikh virtue is the state of optimism, or [Chardi Kala](#). A [youth camp](#) by the same name has been run by the Sikh Youth Federation of North America since the 1970s.



### Unitarian Universalism

Unitarians and Universalists joined in 1961 to form a new and dynamic faith that affirms freedom of thought, religious diversity, and seven guiding—but not binding—principles. These include justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Many UUs seek to find themselves "[Standing on the Side of Love](#)".

### Zoroastrianism



The [eternal flame](#) is a key symbol in Zoroastrianism; the element of fire is respected and must never be extinguished. One of the most common misunderstandings is that Zoroastrians are "fire worshippers." While the fire solemnizes the prayers, the worship is directed to Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Life and Wisdom. In America, most fire temples have flames equivalent to that of a small household fire, or may maintain a small, continuously burning flame.



ON COMMON GROUND  
Landscape Religion Encounter



### Your Turn:

1. What is one thing that surprised you (or, what one new thing have you learned) from reading about these traditions? Why?
2. What inspires you to find common ground?
3. How are *you* building common ground?