

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>1</sup>

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President Barack Hussein Obama affirmed that the American “patchwork heritage is a strength not a weakness” in his inaugural address in January 2009. In this statement, he recognized the fundamental diversity of American society. The first elements in this diversity that he identified were religious in nature: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and non believers.”<sup>2</sup>

Religious diversity is an important part of life at the beginning of the third millennium. Global connections among all humans are intensifying, and inter-religious relations are a significant part of social and political action in every country. Humans are increasingly aware of the many different societies in the great networks of global interactions, and differences in worldviews can be causes for both conflict and constructive cooperation. The extended international networks of peoples result in more than interactions *among* different societies and cultures. These intensified interactions also result in greater diversity *within* the major societies of the world, as immigrations bring new peoples and cultures into established societies. In the contemporary world, these experiences reflect two extremely important, and sometimes contradictory, developments: expanding globalization and an intensified sense of identities among communities and believers.

The United States experiences the dynamics of this diversity in many different ways, and historically, American society experienced major religious diversity. However, the nature of that religious diversity and the responses to religious diversity have changed and evolved over the past three centuries of North American history. The

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<sup>2</sup> The text of his inaugural address is available in many sources, including *The New York Times*, 21 January 2009, pp. P2-P3.

American experiences illustrate important modes of responses to diversity in which, over the long term, the identities involved in the diversity change and often become more inclusive. However, this expansion of the definition of identities does not bring a reduction in diversity, it only changes the basic nature of how the diversity reflects broader societal developments.

During the twentieth century, as people began to consider the implications of industrialization and globalization, many feared that these processes would result in a standardization of human life and that diversity would be lost. This concern resulted in classic movies like *Metropolis* (1927) and novels that were very influential in the West, like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938). The development of the mass media was seen by many as opening the way for the standardization even of the way humans think. By the middle of the century, "most of the studies of modernization in general... stressed that the more modern or developed different societies become, the more similar will they become in their basic, central institutional aspects."<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is possible to see many aspects of this inescapable standardization, ranging from the similarities of airports around the world to the increasingly ubiquitous cell phones.

However, at the same time that you have this kind of standardization, because of the globalizing technologies, individuals and groups have much greater mobility than at any time in human history. No society has avoided the arrival of new peoples. As a result, even though new technologies are creating standardized human environments, you also have greater varieties of peoples interacting, creating a complex sense of diversity. The result is two different interacting developments – globalization leading to standardization, but also globalization leading to diversity within individual societies.

These trends are an important part of world history, especially

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<sup>3</sup> S.N.Eisenstadt, "Convergence and Divergence of Modern and Modernizing Societies: Indications from the Analysis of the Structuring of Social Hierarchies in Middle Eastern Societies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8, No. 1 (January 1977): 1.