

# Life with others

reviewed by [Thomas C. Berg](#) in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

The soaring modernist chapel at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, built in 1962, was intended to symbolize America's embrace of religious diversity and interfaith harmony: different spaces for Protestant, Catholic and Jewish services each "accommodat[ed] within a single enclosure," as one architectural review put it. Alas, the design's messages about religious equality were decidedly mixed. The Protestant chapel not only had 12 times the seating capacity of the Jewish chapel and nearly three times that of the Catholic, but it also occupied the 100-foot-high, cathedral-like main vault, while the Catholics, Jews and others were allocated to lower-level rooms with regular ceilings.

The story of the Air Force chapel is one of many vignettes in William R. Hutchison's rich and engaging book on the "contentious history" of religious pluralism in America. Hutchison, the distinguished Harvard historian, sees the story as a process of making good on the "promissory notes" of religious equality guaranteed in founding documents like the First Amendment and Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Although Hutchison thinks that the promises have been substantially redeemed over 200-plus years, he emphasizes that the process has been slow and halting.

After defining the ideal of pluralism as "the acceptance and encouragement of diversity," Hutchison posits three chief stages through which the meaning of religious pluralism expanded in America. At first pluralism meant mere toleration, permitting various groups outside the Protestant mainstream the right "to exist and even to thrive," but according them no role in defining the culture—and repressing them if they ventured too far from the mainstream. Analyzing the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s and the antipolygamy crusade against Mormons during ensuing decades, Hutchison argues that the bounds of acceptability were defined primarily by behavior; one could believe pretty much anything as long as one refrained from "socially threatening" conduct.

As a teacher of American church-state relations, I share his assessment. Even today the U.S. Supreme Court says that religious belief is absolutely protected by the First Amendment, but has held in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) that Native American Church members could be jailed for using peyote—the central act of their worship services—merely because such conduct is prohibited by a "generally applicable" law.

The second and third historical stages of pluralism, from the late 1800s through the present, expanded the ideal. First, formerly outsider groups began to be included in the cultural mainstream, but only if they adopted Protestant norms—the ideal of the melting pot. Then, from the mid-1900s on, pluralism began to allow outsider groups to retain their own character and yet "share responsibility for the forming and implementing of the society's agenda"—the ideal of full participation.

I found Hutchison particularly helpful as he recounted how the Protestant mainstream resisted pluralism "even while at some points nurturing and promoting it." His description of the Protestant establishment's "warp and woof"—its institutions, its shared values, its ties of family and friendship—shows why his reputation as a historian of Protestantism is unsurpassed. He also includes a significant excursus on the Social Gospel, which he argues encouraged pluralism indirectly by exposing comfortable Protestants to people in less-affluent faiths, and by turning attention from doctrine to ethics, where the principles of various faiths were more likely to converge.

The illustrations add much to the book. A kitschy mural from a Philadelphia church, commemorating the four World War II chaplains of various faiths who stood together on deck as their troopship sank beneath them, celebrates the mid-20th-century ecumenical faith. An anti-Mormon cartoon from a few decades earlier exemplifies the limits of interreligious sympathies, albeit through gentle humor: Brigham Young's 12 wives sit side by side on a gigantic bed weeping over his death. His space in the middle is empty, and the caption reads, "The place which knew him once shall know him no more."

The book does well at pitting pluralism against the competing ideal of cultural unity, but it does not explore some of the tensions and paradoxes within pluralism itself. Consider, for example, the currently contentious issue of vouchers for religious and other private schools. Do vouchers undercut the pluralist ideal because that ideal consists of inviting people of various faiths to participate in shared institutions like

the public schools? Or do vouchers promote pluralism by enabling people to educate their children in institutions that fully embody their diverse views and practices?

Hutchison sympathizes with the view, presented in different ways by writer James Baldwin and social psychologist Horace Kallen, that full pluralism means that individuals and groups contribute to the common life while maintaining their diverse identities. But to what extent does pluralism consist in a diversity of views within common institutions (e.g., public schools), as opposed to a diversity of institutions each of which may be nonpluralistic itself (e.g., many religious schools)? I would have liked to see Hutchison offer more historical resources for addressing this question.

Indeed, the book could have said more in general about education, which has been a primary battleground for competing conceptions of pluralism and community. From their inception in the mid-1800s the public schools have embodied a tension between pluralism (openness to all children) and assimilation (inculcating them with common American values). And Hutchison omits to mention, in his discussion of 19th-century anti-Catholicism, that among the movement's prime means for "Americanizing" Catholic children was barring state funding for parochial schools.

Finally, the book sometimes glosses over distinctions between legal and civic pluralism (all religions deserve equal treatment under the law and in civic debate) and theological pluralism (all major religions are equally good for their adherents and should not be attacked as inadequate). For example, Hutchison suggests that in overseas missions the 1960s shift away from seeking conversions and toward offering services was simply an extension of the logic of pluralism. But that creates a paradox. If pluralism means not seeking to convert people from other faiths, even by voluntary means, then are those who seek such conversions themselves excluded from the pluralist order—and if so, is that consistent with religious equality and diversity? The issue has arisen in public schools where evangelical groups seek to meet in school facilities on the same terms as other student or community groups. Should their proselytizing be excluded in order to preserve the status of other faiths, or would the exclusion itself be a discriminatory restriction on one form of voluntary religious activity? I do not suggest that such questions are easy to answer, but I wish that the book had pursued more thoroughly the tensions within pluralism that the disputes reflect.

Overall, however, this is a highly informative and readable account of how Americans, in religious matters, have tried to respect the *pluribus* as well as the

*unum.*