

The Idea of Pluralism in the United States

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Pluralism as a way of thinking emerged with the ancient Greeks. The philosophers Democritus and Epicurus posited a “plurality of worlds.” The historians Herodotus and Xenophon emphasized the cultural differences between Greeks, Egyptians and Persians. The history of human civilization across the ensuing centuries confirmed the Greeks’ view of life as the interaction of diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural groups.

In the American context, the development of pluralism as an idea is intertwined with questions of democracy, religion, race and ethnicity, and assimilation.

The founders set out to create a political system that could accommodate a multitude of different groups and interests while producing collective agreements that commanded allegiance. Equal rights to liberty were to be secured through universal, general laws within a constitutional framework. James Madison in the [Federalist No.10](#) makes the argument that the political mechanisms created by the new constitution were specifically designed to balance internal conflict between competing factions and interests. Political pluralism—understood as the representation of and participation by numerous and competing groups organized around class, racial, ethnic, and cultural interests—is often taken as one of the hallmarks of American democracy.

The constitutional framework that enables political pluralism in the United States also ensures the existence of a variety of religious traditions. The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution ensures the free exercise of all religious beliefs. The implications of religious diversity were addressed by the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, an advisor to John F. Kennedy during his campaign to become the first Catholic president of the United States. Religious diversity implies disagreement and dissension, noted Murray, but it also implies a community within which there must be agreement and consensus. The challenge for a plural society—containing diverse ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups—is to establish common principles without hindering the maintenance of diverse group identities.

Murray addressed from a Catholic perspective the challenges posed by religious pluralism in a democratic setting. More recently, [Umar Faruq Abd-Allah](#) urged Muslim Americans to consciously establish a unique cultural identity that reflects the American tradition of tolerance for diverse races and ethnicities. There is an essential compatibility, argues Abd-Allah, between American pluralism and the Islamic tradition that respects ethnic and cultural differences.

Immigration to the United States during the last decades of the 19th century and early 20th century forced a reconsideration of American ethnic identity. Cultural pluralism was frequently recognized and defined in ethnic and racial terms.

Horace M. Kallen and Randolph S. Bourne argued for the application of democracy's individual rights to the right of groups to be culturally different. Writing in 1915, [Kallen](#) called for a "democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind." [Bourne](#), in 1916, called for a "cosmopolitan federation of national colonies" within which ethnic groups "merge but they do not fuse." Kallen and Bourne sought to supplant the traditional notion of Anglo-Saxon identity in the U.S. with a recognition of the ethnic and cultural diversity that was a consequence of the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

The construction of an American national identity has been a contentious undertaking. Native Americans were displaced by Europeans who believed they were creating a new kind of civilization in the American wilderness. For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the "typical American" was white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. By the late 19th century, that self-image no longer held. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East—indeed, everywhere—changed the make-up of U.S. society and redefined American culture. Different ethnic groups, languages, community customs, religious beliefs and cultural practices came into contact with one another. Immigrant and minority groups became part of American society through a sometimes halting process of assimilation, though who and what is "American" is not always easy to define in general terms. For that reason, some celebrate the diversity of the United States, others bemoan it.

The openness and differentiation that characterizes American society has been a mixed blessing. Bias, prejudice and discrimination have privileged some and deprived others. Pluralism means divided loyalties—competing values and commitments, moral codes, principles and goals, distinctive regional and ideological outlooks, rival ethnic and religious claims—but it also implies strength in diversity.

The reconciliation of contending identities and loyalties is an ongoing challenge. In a democracy, the just balance between freedom and equality is part of a never-ending discussion. The pact that holds plural societies together requires agreement and consensus on certain principles: respect for different ethnic and cultural groups and for the rights of individuals, and a commitment to counter prejudice and discrimination with support for the values associated with toleration. We would like this project to raise awareness of the contributions made to American society by ethnic minorities and immigrant groups, and to increase understanding of both the unique and shared experiences of all Americans.