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Religion by Lottery

During the holiday season of late November and December a traveler exiting Interstate 5 onto La Paz Road toward Mission Viejo, between Los Angeles and San Diego, is soon greeted with a religious display unlike that found in most American cities. What makes it unusual is the diversity of peaceful messages from Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Bahá'í, and, for the first time this past year, Hindu traditions. Located at the intersection of La Paz and Chrisanta Drive—the so-called Four Corners, itself symbolic of many paths—the display reminds us that there is more to this country religiously than the Judeo-Christian heritage, and that globally diverse faith communities can and must coexist. Despite the media's violent images of religious populations clashing with one another around the globe, here there are neither swords nor the sounds of battle.

But this display is far more unusual than initially meets the eye. Mission Viejo's residents offer the vision of—or better, experiment with—the possibility of an amicable religious pluralism and have gone further than most other communities to implement it. Decades ago the Four Corners was host to Christmas trees and Santa Claus, but as this upscale, planned residential community grew into a city of roughly 100,000 residents and became more ethnically and religiously diverse, the situation changed. What had been largely an unquestioned Christian space became a contested public site with religious groups vying with one another for a spot to make public their presence within the community.

This occurred in part because of demographics. The city's religiously affiliated population is reported as 45 percent, less than California's overall 54 percent. In California generally, Catholics account for 61 percent of the religious population; evangelical Christians 18 percent; mainline Protestants 9 percent; and “other” religious constituencies—mainly Jews, Mormons, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus—amount to 12 percent. Compared with the country as a whole, Catholics and members of eastern religions have a greater representation both in Mission Viejo and in California as a whole; evangelical Christians and mainline Protestants somewhat less. Plus, a large unaffiliated sector includes varieties of agnostics, atheists, privatized believers, nature lovers, and those who identify themselves as

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Mission Viejo's Four Corners, December 2010: at right is a Christian nativity scene, sponsored by a local Evangelical Christian church, with a Bahá'í display in the background.

spiritual but nonreligious. Overall, the mix is that of an emerging “new religious America” of increased diversity, as Harvard’s Diana Eck describes it.¹ California, it is said, stretches the definition of what constitutes the religious and the spiritual, and there is certainly some truth in this claim in Mission Viejo.

Pluralism—that is, a culture that embraces diversity—requires not just believing, but doing: cultivating a spirit of acceptance that moves beyond mere tolerance. Faith groups vary in the ways and degrees to which they buy into a pluralist ideology: exclusivists resist recognition of the truth claims of others; moderates respect others; and the most inclusive celebrate the religious other as contributing to their own spiritual well-being and growth. Of course, always looming in the background of any consideration of the practice of religious pluralism are thorny issues: What are its limits? What defines a group as religious? Where do the nonreligious fit into the scheme of things?

The experiment at Mission Viejo has had its share of challenges. In 2000, city officials decided to allow, for the first time, an Islamic display to accompany Jewish and Christian displays. The following year, there were complaints about including the Muslim decorations (no doubt connected with feelings about the then-recent September 11 terrorist attack) and the planners feared that too many additional groups might demand a presence in the limited space at the Four Corners, so the multifaith display was called off. The city council voted to return to the earlier plan of showcasing Santa Claus, American flags, and a winter scene—all deemed secular and noncontroversial. But they misread the sentiment of the community, and after a week of complaints the city reversed its decision: it would permit religious groups to have displays, but only at a nearby park. But even this was not enough to satisfy the residents. In 2002, pressure from them led to the return of the multi-faith celebration to the Four Corners.



The Bahá'í display marks the holiday celebrating the birth of Bahá'u'lláh.

Over the years concerns have arisen from all sides. “Why should the city recognize these religions?” asks an evangelical Christian pastor. “We are a Christian nation. Why are we embarrassed to proclaim it?” Exclusivists find shared space problematic. Secularists and strict interpreters of the legal separation of church and state question why city property is used to showcase religious exhibits of any kind, and still others have wondered if atheists should be allowed to have a display—some saying yes, because their voice should be heard, but most adamantly opposing the idea. Nor has it gone unnoticed that the timing of the holiday celebrations fit Christian and Jewish calendars far better than those of other traditions. (This led the Hindu community in 2010 to put up and take down their exhibit before Thanksgiving.) There have also been acts of vandalism: once the Baby Jesus was stolen and a year ago the Muslim display was defaced, which led to complaints by Muslim organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union about the city’s failure to patrol the exhibits at night.



The Jewish holiday display is a giant dreidel.

But despite setbacks, complaints, and vandalism progress has been made. Over the years, as a Bahá'í told me, “dealing with one another became a public matter, pressure was on us to do something that would be as open

as possible to all religions.” Public discussion brought forward practical questions about how to be open to all groups, given the limited space at the Four Corners. In effect, how would the city choose which groups could set up holiday exhibits?

The solution: “Religion by Lottery!” Mission Viejo decided to try to accommodate the growing number of religious groups while retaining the Four Corners as the location of the event. Faith groups desiring a presence on this spot would have to apply for one of eight available spaces. In doing so, they agreed to exhibit seasonal messages within a cooperative multifaith event. The spaces would be assigned by a double lottery system in which numbers identifying spaces were drawn at random from one container and matched with applicant groups drawn at random from another container. If there were more applicants than spaces, those unsuccessful in getting a space at the Four Corners would be selected, again by lottery, to exhibit at a nearby park. Minority religious spokespersons played a big part in pushing for the lottery. Hamid Bahadori, an Iranian-American Muslim resident, was reported to say in 2001, “If we want to celebrate our sense of community, then let’s be as inclusive as possible.”²

Asked recently about how well the system is working, David Cendejas, in the city’s Office of Community Development, responds, “Pretty well. People like the fairness of it, although so far it really hasn’t been all that tested since we haven’t had more than eight groups applying in any year.” If that were to occur, the present relaxed tone of the process might not endure. Imagine a December religious holiday display in Mission Viejo without a Nativity scene. This might well occur, should the number of applicants continue to increase. Based upon what both city officials and clergy have told me, this eventuality would most definitely challenge the lottery system.

Yet the mood of the nation may be working in Mission Viejo’s favor. Despite the tensions created this past year

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with the proposal to build an Islamic cultural center and mosque in lower Manhattan, not far from the site where the Twin Towers once stood, and threats to burn the Qur’an in several places across the country, a recent Pew Forum survey documents a general tendency among Americans not to assert that “my religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life.”³ This is a shift in mood we might expect in diverse, well-educated communities like Mission Viejo. National surveys point as well to greater openness to gaining spiritual truth from religions of all kinds—perhaps just a matter of curiosity for many, yet for some a genuine interest in learning from other traditions.

Both the city’s effort to embrace religious diversity and the willingness of most religious groups to play by the rules for this holiday celebration signal that a civic-minded culture is widely shared. Despite the unpredictable nature of a lottery—or perhaps because the luck of the draw is perceived as fair to all in the long run—the system appears to be favored by many in the community.

Of course, pluralism is always a fragile culture, easily disrupted by those hostile to it. Yet every year in Mission Viejo, when these rules are followed, when this public experiment is carried out, thousands of citizens and visitors affirm fundamental democratic principles. More than simply trying to avoid conflict, as was the original intention, religion by lottery is a positive force, providing a procedure that reinforces notions of religious equality and freedom; by bringing order and fairness to the process of choosing religious groups to represent the community it also neutralizes fears of Christian dominance and discrimination against other faiths. “I ride up La Paz during the holidays,” says one of the electricians helping to set up the lights at the intersection, “and even though I’m not so religious myself it helps that people here get along pretty well. In fact, I think they are beginning to really like the event.” **B**

Notes

- ¹ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001).
- ² The remark was made in the comments to a newspaper article, "Santa In, Religious Symbols Out at Season's Exhibit; Mission Viejo: Muslim leaders question decision to end three-decade holiday display tradition," *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 2001, online at <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/oct/31/local/me-63863>.
- ³ *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, February 2008, 174–75; online at <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>.