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Ethnic Studies 100

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Pluralism in the 21st century

Planet earth has physically remained about the same size as it had been a thousand years ago, but socially and politically it has become much smaller. Through different means such as: travel, internet, communication lines, trade, etc... people of different ethnic and racial groups have begun to work together due to the benefits one receives from the other. However, each group is vastly different, both culturally and religiously, and ethnic conflicts are bound to occur. As time goes on and different people become more and more connected, the livelihood of some ethnic groups begins to depend on collaboration with other ethnic groups, and a way of managing conflicts and differences must be formed. Thus, the pluralist theory is created and implemented into the modern century. Although the ideal pluralism can never be achieved, pluralism serves its role in preventing differences between ethnic groups from escalating into mild or life-threatening conflicts. [Thesis] In the coming future all ethnics groups who wish to progress and develop in the competing world must engage in pluralism. Although pluralism is not essential for survival of an ethnic group, it is essential for its success.

Before examining the pluralist theory, it is important to look at its roots in the constructionist approach in identity. Steven Maturin, a nineteenth century surgeon in the Royal Navy spoke about his identity:

The identity I am thinking of is something that hovers between a man and the rest of the world: a midpoint between his view of himself and theirs of him--for each, of course, affects the other continually. A reciprocal fluxion, sir. There is nothing absolute about this identity of mine (Brain 249).

There are two points to be taken from this statement. First, similarly to circumstantialism accounts, identities are changeable, contingent, and diverse. Identities change throughout a person's life. Maturin's identity was not decided at birth, nor at a ceremony, nor at any one point in his life, but it was continually decided throughout his life by many different things and therefore he states that "There is nothing absolute about this identity of mine". The second point that he makes is that there is a "reciprocal fluxion". The change of identity happens at the intersection where his claims about himself meet with the claims other make about him. These two variables, the comprehensiveness of an identity and the degree to which it is asserted or assigned, offer useful ways to begin the process of identity construction (Cornell 76). This is also where the theoretical foundation for pluralism was laid out; in the interaction between others and one's self.

The standard dictionary definition for ethnic pluralism is "A condition in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups are present and tolerated within a society". The practical definition of pluralism is much deeper. Diane L. Eck, founder of The Pluralist Project at

Harvard University, gives a detailed definition of what pluralism means through the following four points: “First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*” (Eck). Contrary to the dictionary definition, distinct or diverse ethnic groups cannot just be present in a given community for pluralism to apply. Diversity happens whether or not effort is applied, but pluralism requires work and is an achievement of collaboration. There must be real encounters and relationships between the different groups, otherwise, as it has happened again and again over the years, there will just be diversity with its tensions and conflicts.

Her second point also collides with the dictionary definition; “pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*”. Although tolerance is widely publicized by today’s society as the essential approach to people’s differences, it doesn’t correctly apply to pluralism. In pluralism Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularist need to understand and know about one another. Ignorance of one another is not encouraged, and tolerance does not remove stereotyping, half-truths, and misunderstandings that lead to fearful doubts and eventual unresolved conflicts. Professor Eck also says that “In the world we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly”. Tolerance of one another can only be considered a temporary solution until real communication and understanding occurs on both sides of conflicting ethnic groups.

Addressing the idea of isolation, or keeping one’s beliefs and interest to one’s self, Professor Eck writes, “pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*”. By no means should and ethnic group isolate their personal beliefs and commitments from others. Instead, they must hold on to their commitments, including religious differences, and practice them in relationship to one another.

Finally the most important point about pluralism is that “pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism”. This includes both speaking with others and listening to them. There must be a willingness to share and orally communicate with one another, especially with people who are different. Only through this process can common understandings and real differences be made clear. Of course, there are bound to be disagreements and everyone will most likely not agree with each other, but there must be a willingness and commitment to come to the “table” and talk.

These four points not only clearly and effectively define pluralism, but also provide the answer to the following question: Why do ethnic groups develop pluralism? Dr. Victoria Harrison, Professor at University of Glasgow, writes, “In our increasingly multicultural society there is an urgent need for a theory that is capable of making sense of the various philosophical difficulties presented by religious and ethical diversity” (Harrison). This “urgent need” is the reason why ethnic groups are turning to pluralism, because it is one of the most successful ways of managing ethnic conflict.

An anonymous blogger wrote the following answer to a question pertaining to the number of religions that exist in the world. “How many religions are there? In my opinion there are only two. The right ones and the wrong ones.” It is this mentality that will eventually lead to a conflict and clash of different religions. That is why it is essential, both for minority and majority ethnic groups, to develop a way of not only tolerating one another, but understanding one another. Otherwise, (as it has been witnessed in the past) the people who think that their religion, culture, or whatever difference they have is right will try to force that on another which

may end up an unpleasant experience for both groups. For both groups to be able to succeed and grow they must understand one another's right and wrongs.

Raimundo Pannikar, a Spanish Roman Catholic who has done a great amount of work on inter-religious dialogue, says that "What to do with the barbarian?" is the central question for religion in the time of pluralism. No two people have the idea of a Barbarian and how to deal with a Barbarian is also different from person to person, but, the question still remains, what should be done with a person who is radically different from another. It may be said that Barbarians meet different sorts of Barbarians everyday and the only way to avoid conflict would be to learn to understand one another. A person who is surrounded by Barbarians, or simply thinks that everyone around him is a Barbarian cannot hope to exist in peace. This is where pluralism is essential.

Steven Glazer and Huston Smith, authors of *The heart of learning: spirituality in education*, say the following. "Let us ask how it is that we make a relationship with that which is other or different from ourselves" (Glazer). Pluralism respects the differences that reside in the variety of ethnic cultures, religious traditions, and personal beliefs, without leading into conflict. Pluralism is willing to rest in the ambiguity of difference and it is from this point of view that pluralism becomes a very courageous practice; an engagement with the *fact* of diversity in the world. (Glazer).

However, Pluralism is not a necessity for survival of an ethnic group. If survival is the only thing a certain ethnic or racial groups is concerned about, then pluralism is not essential; mere tolerance will suffice in those cases. However, the reason why pluralism is accepted and developed is for the advancement of an ethnic group. In a systematic way of thinking about their

lives, interests, and goals, ethnic groups tend to favor the benefits that pluralism offers them. In a world where everyday communication happens between people of difference, any group that lives in ignorance and isolation of one another will have boundaries and walls that will prevent them from succeeding in social, political, and economic levels. Politicians, for example, cannot hope to be elected if they do not understand the multitudes of diverse people who may or may not vote for them. Business entrepreneurs cannot hope to be successful if they cannot target a market that goes beyond their own ethnic or religious group. Similarly an ethnic group cannot hope to be successful in their very own neighborhood if they do not understand the neighbors that live around them.

In the coming future, ethnic pluralism is inevitable for the growth of any ethnic group. Any ethnic group who is not willing to cooperate and learn about other ethnic groups will not be able to grow. As society continues to change and the economic market evolves further, ethnic groups will tend not only tolerate one another, but to actually work with each other. As the livelihood of a ethnic group becomes more and more dependent on the livelihood of another, radically different, ethnic group, it is inevitable for both side to form a reasonable relationship and engage in some form of pluralism.

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