

# My opinion about the pluralism project

[Religion](#)



## **The New Project**

The United States of America of the 1950's was many things; prosperous, family oriented, racially divided, and most importantly for this paper, Christian dominated culture wise. While Christianity is still the most popular religion here by far, other religions have a presence that is much more noticeable than before. Spanning far more than simply seeing a menorah here and there, there are many religions that are known by all Americans. While there are some very public clashes between the different religions, for the most part it does seem that the different religions are able to coexist. To gain more insight on this, Harvard researchers launched a project titled the Pluralism Project. Over the last 25+ years, they researched the religions that now have notable presences in the USA that barely existed fifty years ago, and they saw how they engrained into American society and how they were received by the longstanding religions that were already here. While some groups certainly pushed back on the expansion of these new religions, many religious organizations welcomed these new religions with open arms and formed councils that sought to bring similarities together. The Pluralism project is an effective way to promote the academic study of religion because it gives a fair assessment of many different religions and although it does have an American bias, given that the project is specifically concerned with the religious landscape in the USA, it seems to be a fair bias to have.

## **Religious Participation**

A big part of the project was religious participation. It would be an uphill battle for the researchers at Harvard if they were facing a different religious climate where the religions that were sizeable in following, but not quite

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mainstream, wanted to shield themselves from the limelight. A very important part of the study is that it take place in a country where religious deviation is tolerated, and even encouraged. Although I am not trying to claim we live in some utopia where all religions are treated equal, even spanning back 100 years ago this is what Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu, had to say: “ Sisters and Brothers of America, It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us.” (VIVEKANANDA) In his speech he did go on to talk about the disagreements etc., so as I stated I would not call the USA a utopia, but is I included this quote to set up the background; that this is a country where it is safe to talk about one’s religious beliefs. If it was not, it would bring into question the findings of the pluralism project. One could not be sure if the answers that the different religious leaders were giving to the researchers were their true opinions or if they felt pressured to answer a certain way due to fear. A lot of the project is based on interviews, which are inherently opinionated, but that is also true of religion as a whole. While there are religious texts for almost all religions, separating what is written from what is truly believed and followed by an average follower is a different battle, and one that requires really talking to many followers for each religion.

### **Simplification Is Not So Bad**

For anything as broad as “ religion,” it is important to narrow down one’s search. If one wanted to say that world religions meant literally every religion in the world, the purpose of the project may have been just coming up with a list. Steven Ramey argued that “ the assumptions behind [world religions] often serve to promote European dominance that people present

as simple descriptions. A recent animated presentation on Business Insider illustrating the spread of the five major world religions becomes the object of a range of critiques.” (Ramey) I do agree that when talking about world religions, major simplifications occur, and some religions are omitted from study entirely. The fact is that much of the world primarily follows one of the major religions, and when it comes to studying religions I see nothing wrong with making the simplified statement as such. I also don’t see how this promotes “ European dominance,” given that Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism are not considered European religions. If the Business Insider map were made halfway across the world, besides being in a different language I think that there is a good chance that it would materially be the same map. While I am sure that the Pluralism project takes liberties when it comes to the simplification of religion, I don’t believe that it did more than necessary and I don’t believe that the simplifications that took place hurt the project. It is important to see how Hindu’s (as an example) integrated into America on a holistic basis, not how one specific person who is Hindu is doing.

## **Is It All About Profits?**

An argument against the current study of World Religions which I consider to be more far out is that it is all about profits. According to Tomoko Masuzawa: ‘[College] Units that do not generate sufficient total student enrollment numbers in their courses in proportion to the number of faculty positions are liable to be marked as not carrying their weight and, by implication, are less fiscally responsible. In the unapologetic free market and entrepreneurial climate pervading universities and colleges in the nation, it is clear that the consistently large enrollment figure in world religions courses... has been the

single most powerful argument and justification for maintaining the steady budget line and faculty positions in the religious studies departments and programs.’ (Masuzawa)

This argument makes very little sense to me, due to a few reasons. One of which is that colleges force students to take a class that is either directly religion, or similar to religion. I am currently studying finance, yet I here I am writing a paper on religion. If religion classes were not forced, then enrollment would likely drop by significant numbers. This argument could be then made for literally any required class. While this argument would make more sense if it was geared towards actual religion majors (although I would assume that upper level religion classes are much more focused and therefore escape much of the “ world religion” criticism), it is hard to see how people being forced to sign up for world religion classes has to do with why we study world religion the way that we do. As a matter of fact, if one is going by the capitalism argument, it would make more sense to me to have ever changing ways of studying world religion so that textbook companies can sell more textbooks as an ever changing methodology would render old editions of textbooks useless. The fact that the pluralism project studies religion in much the same general way, but they aren’t trying to get enrollment in classes, to me shows that they truly believe that this is the best method of studying religions that is available to them.