Host: E pluribus unum … where have you seen that phrase? Do you know what it means? What does it have to do with America today? Stay with us and you’ll find out.

Announcer: Production funding for this program has been provided in part by the Shumaker Family Foundation – promoting social and environmental justice, education, spirituality and the arts.

Host: You’ll find it on the back of American coins. It’s a short phrase in Latin -- E Pluribus Unum -- “out of many, one.” Out of the diversity of people who live in the United States, we’ve professed a desire to achieve and maintain a sense of unity. It was once common to speak of America as a melting pot, where different cultures and traditions dissolve into each other. Now, we hear more common references to a salad bowl, where diverse cultures intermingle rather than melting together. At Harvard University, professor Diana Eck directs the Pluralism Project, focusing primarily upon the diversity of religious traditions currently found within the United States. She’s noticed some significant changes that have taken place in recent years….

Diana Eck (The Pluralism Project, Harvard University): In the late 1980s -- 1989, ’90, ’91 -- something remarkable began to happen at Harvard, and actually, all across the country, which was that we began to feel the demographic shift of American religious and cultural life here in the university. That meant that there were students from India … students of South Asian origin -- from India and Pakistan and Bangladesh, whose parents had been immigrants who had come to the United States maybe as students themselves in the ‘60s or early ‘70s … who had stayed … whose kids were born here … and whose kids entered college about 1990. And these were now the students in my classes. Harvard was a different place. We had Hindu students who had grown up in Pittsburgh and Muslim students who had grown up in Providence and Jains and Sikhs and Buddhists, and Harvard itself became a much more multi-religious environment.
**Narrator:** As Diana Eck has pointed out, these changes have been taking place all across America, not just at Harvard. She writes about this in a book called *A New Religious America*, where she also describes the origins of The Pluralism Project.

**Diana Eck:** The Pluralism Project really began with this realization that I had in the early 1990s that my own country had changed in ways that I did not really fully understand. I knew there were these students in my classes. I started looking around Boston. I saw the Hindu community finishing a great, big Hindu temple out in the suburbs and conducting their mahakumbhakam as they poured the waters of the Ganges mixed with the waters of the Mississippi over the towers of that temple and consecrated it as part of the religious life of Boston. I saw the number of mosques that were being built in this area. I visited Cambodian and Vietnamese Buddhist temples and Chinese Buddhist temples and a multitude of Euro-American, African-American meditation centers in the Greater Boston area. So I could see in Boston that things were changing and realized that this was probably true across the country and that we ought to look into this. So I began the Pluralism Project with students from Harvard and eventually students and colleagues from all over the country to begin to map this changing religious landscape; to look at cities and towns across the country and begin to understand how many mosques and temples and different religious communities had come to be part of our town, so to speak; to study the ways in which these traditions were and are changing in the American context; and finally, to study the way in which America is changing in the light of this new multi-religious reality.

**Narrator:** As the Pluralism Project continues to study and map the changes taking place in America, many other groups are engaged in efforts to facilitate communication between people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Some of them concentrate on promoting interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, an interfaith center has been established in the Presidio, a former military reservation that’s been turned over to the National Park Service. Although it includes some beautiful shoreline and forested areas, it’s not like a typical national park, as the director of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio, the Reverend Paul Chaffee, explains…

**Rev. Paul Chaffee (Interfaith Center at the Presidio):** The difference with the Presidio of San Francisco is that there are 800 buildings here. And there was a huge question about what to do with those buildings. The Park Service said ‘we do land; we don’t do buildings,’ so there were many citizen meetings about it, and one of the things that came up was that we were transforming a military base into a peaceful place -- swords to plowshares should be part of the theme. And members of the interfaith community back in 1992 heard that and they said ‘well, we should be there too,’ and started an organization that in 1995 was incorporated as the Interfaith Center at the Presidio. And we applied to be the manager or the steward of this chapel for all traditions and over the last 10 years we’ve had dozens and dozens of different religions who have used the facilities. Sometimes they come alone; sometimes they come together. I officiated at a Southern Baptist - Muslim wedding one day, and both families were so happy to have this sacred space that the other family didn’t own that they could share.
Narrator: The Interfaith Center at the Presidio participates in the United Religions Initiative, another organization based in San Francisco. With a worldwide network of locally organized “cooperation circles,” it has members in 50 countries representing more than 100 faith traditions. Still in its infancy, misconceptions about it sometimes arise.

Paul Chaffee: People think that’s a new church -- that it’s a united religion. We’re not talking about united religion; we’re talking about united religions, and it’s about being in dialog with each other; it’s not about changing each other. We’re really all motivated by what Hans Kung, the great German theologian, said – “there’ll be no peace among nations until there is peace among the religions, and there will be no peace among religions until there’s dialog among religions.” And that’s part of what we’re trying to facilitate -- not to start a new religion; not to look for a lowest common spiritual denominator; not to give up anything, not to give up our differences but to celebrate them. We really enjoy hearing the details and particularities of every person’s faith journey.

Narrator: Efforts to promote interfaith dialogue in the United States began long ago. In 1893, Chicago hosted the Parliament of World Religions. It has been hailed as the first formal gathering of spiritual leaders from both Eastern and Western traditions. A century later, in 1993, another such gathering took place in Chicago, stimulating more widespread interest in interfaith dialogue.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Professor of Islamic Studies, George Washington University): I’ve been involved in interfaith dialogue since I was the president of the Harvard Islamic Society in the 1950s.

Narrator: A professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., Seyyed Hossein Nasr frequently participates in interfaith gatherings. In the fall of 2006, he traveled to Montreal to take part in an international conference that developed as an outgrowth of the Parliament of World Religions.

Seyyed Nasr: And throughout my participation in religious dialogue the foundation of my approach has always been that the inner reality of all religions is the same. While each religion is sacred in all of its formal and even separative aspects, because they are given by God, and it’s not correct for us to put aside all that separates us in order to reach earthly peace, but at the expense of forgetting God’s sacred world. That is, I as a Muslim do not have the right to tell the Christian: ‘Alright, now you put your cross aside, because we don’t have crosses in Islam, and we’ll be able to understand each other better.’ My approach has always been that you have to understand what the cross symbolizes. What it symbolizes we have actually in Islamic metaphysics. But that metaphysical reality has not manifested itself in the Islamic universe in the particular geometry of the form of the cross that devout Christians put around their neck or on the churches or whatever it is. That’s what really religious understanding is.

Narrator: Joining Professor Nasr and several hundred others who attended this gathering, the British mythologist Karen Armstrong shared her perspectives on the world’s religions and the roots of religious conflicts.
Karen Armstrong (Author, “The Battle for God”): There’s a lot of infantile, bad and vicious religion about, which is a lot about identity -- preservation of the ego … a lot of it … instead of losing it: ‘I am a Christian.’ ‘I am a Muslim,’ et cetera. This is neither here nor there really, but it’s an assertion of ego, of self. And it often springs from great fear. In every one of the so-called fundamentalist movements that I’ve studied in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, each one is rooted in a profound fear and dread of annihilation. Even in the United States, fundamentalists are afraid that modern secular liberal society wants to wipe out religion. And so when we’re fearful for survival, our backs go to the wall and then we can lash out violently. So there’s a lot of that religion around at the moment. But there’s also one of the good things about our current world is our pluralism -- that we are beginning to discover, for perhaps the first time in history, the profound unanimity of the religious quest. Underneath all the revealing and significant and interesting differences, people are at one, whether they’re Buddhists, Christian, or Jewish, on many of the things that matter.

Narrator: People of many different faiths came to Montreal from around the globe. Rabbi David Rosen came from his home in Jerusalem to speak of his experiences in regard to the role he plays in representing the Jewish tradition in dialogue with other religions. He was asked if he could identify the main challenges involved in generating meaningful interfaith dialogue.

Rabbi David Rosen (International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations): That’s a very difficult question to answer because interfaith dialogue operates on so many different levels. My life operates on so many different levels. I often say that even if I’m speaking let’s say in Israel, Hebrew all day I’ll be speaking half a dozen languages because I have to relate to people in terms of where they’re coming from, their points of reference. I’m not going to achieve anything if I speak to a very conservative and cautious mind in terms of liberalism and pluralism, and I’m not going to be able to connect to a more … to a less-rooted mind if I speak in more traditional terminology, so I have to be able to adapt according to the needs. Now some might see that as disingenuous. I don’t see it as disingenuous. I see it on the contrary as being genuine in understanding where my interlocutor is and how I relate to her or him and hopefully move them in a constructive direction. So my work and range from what a colleague of mine calls ‘tea and sympathy,’ which is nothing to sneeze at because just the encounter -- the social encounter -- is often extremely important in breaking down barriers of suspicion, of hostility and of stereotypes, to the more rarified theological discourse of a more academic level. All of which for me is very important; all of which makes my life so wonderful because it’s not in any way monotonous and it’s not in anyway stuck in one particular dimension of human encounter.

Karen Armstrong: Religion has to be worked at. And a lot of people don’t realize that. They often think of religion as just hopping down to the church, synagogue or mosque once a week for a little mild spiritual uplift, so that they can then return to their ordinary lives of greed and selfishness and not be transformed by it. But if you take religion seriously, I think it can transform the world, but you have to be transformed, too. And
that means … and so there’s a natural reluctance to do that. But I think the pluralist movements -- the notion that we are all so profoundly one about these spiritual matters -- we haven’t begun yet to understand ho

**Diana Eck:** One of the great things that has happened in the United States over the last ten years, especially, is the beginnings of a very widespread interfaith movement. It takes many, many forms as a movement does. It has no one center. It has lots of different expressions. It might be an interfaith service project in Plano, Texas, where Muslims and Jews and Christians get together for a blood drive. Or it might be an interfaith organization in a place like Wichita, Kansas.

**Paul Chaffee:** I ask this question when I go out and talk about interfaith things. I say, ‘Where do you think the oldest, most integrated interfaith program in the country is?’ And if I were to answer that question, I would say Wichita. Wichita, under the leadership of a Methodist pastor named Sam Muyskens, has for nearly 35 years been doing interfaith service provisions, interfaith dialog, interfaith celebration.

**Rev. Sam Muyskens (Inter-Faith Ministries, Wichita):** This organization – Interfaith Ministries, is 120 years old … started really with the city. And back then it was because we weren’t relating to each other religiously. It was always within the Christian faith, but there needed to be stronger relationships. And we continued to grow from that, including other religious organizations and faith traditions as they became part of Wichita and Sedgwick County here. When the Mormons became more active here and wanted to join, they were welcomed and they became a part of our organization. And as the Baha’is and the Buddhists and the Hindus and the Muslims came to Wichita … because we are one of the most diverse communities in this whole Midwest. So we’ve got some 20 to 30 Buddhist temples here in Wichita. We’ve got a nice Hindu temple; we’ve got a Baha’i meeting room. We’ve got most all of the faiths represented here in Wichita today. And so that’s what Interfaith is today. It’s a mixture of all those different faiths.

**Narrator:** The Islamic residents of Wichita recently built a community center across the street from a newly constructed Lutheran Church. Not far away, a Buddhist temple has risen on the Kansas prairie, adding a bright splash of the East to this former cowtown in the West … in a region that not so long ago was dominated by Native Americans. Just as Wichita continues to change, the nature of the interfaith movement may also be changing.

**Sam Muyskens:** A lot of interfaith organizations throughout the country are dialogue only or they might be social justice only. We try to combine it all together. And I think you’ll find that the trend is changing – that most all of the interfaith organizations are now seeing that what they called at the Parliament of World Religions “gifts of service” … that gifts of service need to be the outcome of dialogue.

**Paul Chaffee:** I was there one day at a program report and a clergyperson from the Assemblies of God was making the report about this big urban renewal they were gonna do in downtown Wichita and he got to the end of the report and I said, ‘How did you get
‘cause there were Muslims, we had Zoroastrians, we had every kind of Christian at the table, and usually the Assemblies of God don’t come and participate in that. I said, ‘How did you get here?’ And he laughed and he said, ‘Well, 10 years ago Sam Muyskens came over and said their church was gonna stay downtown instead of moving to the suburbs. We’d just made that same decision. They were worried about the quality of life here in downtown and so were we. And he said why don’t we talk about it and work on it together? So we did, and then we spun off as our own 501-c3 and then we got a multimillion dollar grant to really renovate the downtown around city hall and we’re handling homeless issues and we’re handling food problems and doing AIDS work and we’re doing all that together now.’ So it’s possible, if you can create an environment that is not polarized.

Sam Muyskens: So at present time we have a good number of programs here … about a dozen … and they reflect the needs of this community.

Narrator: In the 1980s, a downturn in the local economy and changes in federal programs contributed to a significant increase in the number of homeless people in Wichita. Finding shelter and housing for them became the top priority for Interfaith Ministries.

Sam Muyskens: And so we began homeless shelters and began opening up basements and fellowship halls of churches to take care of the many homeless people in our community. We have been an acting voice in that ever since. We have developed an entire continuum of care. Across the street from us are housing units that are for the disabled and for the chronically mentally ill homeless. And we provide supportive services and we can take care of a chronically mentally ill homeless person for the rest of their life for some 3-400 dollars a month, where it costs 4-5,000 to put in to some kind of an institution. And that looks good to the business people and financially that makes sense to everybody and it also gives human dignity to the people. And it fits in to our whole faith concept of what we should be, whether we’re Christians or Muslims or Jews or whoever we might be, and so we say ‘let’s do it!’ And so we’re doing it. And a few months from now we’ll break ground on another $5 million project and we’ll do it, because our faith calls us to do that.

Diana Eck: There needs to be some of that engagement across the dotted lines, the borders of our faith traditions, so that we begin to have a deeper understanding of each other because we have lived for so many years in isolation. And we’ve lived in ways in which we’ve sort of made it, basically, made do with half-baked knowledge of each other or with stereotypical knowledge of each other. And in the kind of close relationship in which we live now in the United States and in many countries of the West, that simply won’t do anymore. We need to have a more accurate understanding of our religious neighbors -- all of us. They of us and we of them.

Narrator: Perhaps we might look upon this time of far-reaching cultural change as an opportunity to reflect upon the current meaning of our American motto -- “E Pluribus Unum.”
Unum.” What does it really mean to us today? Historically, it addressed a different situation, which involved diverse immigrant groups of European ancestry.

**Diana Eck:** But the issue ‘Out of Many One’ is no longer simply an ethnic issue, no longer simply a European issue. But it is the issue of thinking about our diversity in religious terms, as well. And certainly, we are not in the business in the United States of creating one religion out of many religions. Religion doesn’t melt in the way that ethnicity or language can sometimes begin to melt away with the tremendous currents of American assimilative life. Religious communities tend to remain. And for all of their transformation -- and they do become transformed in the American context -- we are now living in a new multi-religious America. So there’s a kind of bridge-building effort that needs to take place -- an educational effort. Part of it is the responsibility of teachers in public schools and universities, people like myself. Part of it’s the responsibility of clergy as well. I mean, I speak especially of Christian clergy because there are so many of us … so many of them. This is a big educational platform that every Sunday in churches across this country there are opportunities to understand what it means to be neighbors. I mean, that issue of what it means to be a multi-religious democracy is not only America’s issue. This is the issue -- whether it’s India, Indonesia, Iraq. Any place that democracy is to flourish is going to be a multi-religious democracy. And if America can’t provide the vision -- the imaginative and real vision of what that can be, we cannot support this in any other part of the world.

**Narrator:** We’ve just touched upon a small sampling of the interfaith activities in which people are engaged as they respond to the changing realities of a pluralistic society. As we’ve heard, those involved with interfaith work tell us it’s not necessary to leave one’s own religion behind in order to collaborate with people of other traditions. Looking beyond our theological differences, we might be able to discern the essential reality of E Pluribus Unum. I’m Charles Atkins, Jr. Thanks for being with us. We hope you’ll come back again next time as we continue our explorations beyond theology.

(credits roll)

**Host:** I’m Charles Atkins, Jr. Join me for the next edition of *Beyond Theology* as we explore the relationship between science and spirituality.

**B. Alan Wallace:** It’s often been an uneasy relationship. A lot of people have chosen one or the other. Quite a number of others have chosen parallel tracks that don’t intersect.

**Peter Russell:** What is coming, I think, is a synthesis of science with the core idea that underlies all spiritual traditions – not just the Judeo-Christian tradition or Islam, but Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism.

**B. Alan Wallace:** And it’s a point where science and spirituality, East and West, ancient and modern can really come together.
Host: Tune in for the next edition of *Beyond Theology* to explore the potential convergence of science and spirituality.

Announcer: Production funding for this program has been provided in part by the Shumaker Family Foundation – promoting social and environmental justice, education, spirituality and the arts.