



Religion and Immigration, Old and New

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The American humorist Will Rogers once observed that while his ancestors did not come over with the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower*, they were there to “meet the boat.” While true, Rogers’s own Native American ancestors were, themselves, immigrants to North America, though they migrated here thousands of years before the Europeans did. The history of the United States is then, in essence, the history of waves of immigrants, each one following the next to the Western Hemisphere. Each group of immigrants had to adapt to this new world and had to figure out how to maintain some of their distinctive ethnic and religious heritage within the pluralistic storm of cultures that is the United States. Once they had arrived and “made it” in this New World, these older immigrant groups had to deal with the arrival of newer groups of immigrants; the process just repeated itself. Tensions inevitably arise out of the interaction between older and newer immigrants, although the contributions of newer immigrant groups to the whole nation are often substantial and beneficial.

TWO WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

Though immigration has been a constant in American history, there are two major waves of immigration that have transformed the United States. The colonial

Two great waves of immigration since the middle of the nineteenth century have had great impact on United States culture and religion. While there have been tensions and conflicts, the benefits to both the civil and religious communities continue to be striking.

immigration of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was important for the formation of the United States, but this immigration paled in numbers compared to the great immigration to this country during the eighty years between 1840 and 1920, one of the largest mass migrations in recorded human history. Pushed by ambition and economic pressures, and aided by advances in communication and transportation, at least 33 million people (mainly Europeans) left their home countries to settle in the United States.¹ Correspondingly, the population of the United States grew dramatically, from about 17 million people in 1840 to 106 million people in 1920, aided greatly not only by the immigration itself, but also by the natural increase within the “foreign-born” population. These new immigrants also greatly increased the religious diversity of the country, mainly within the Christian traditions, although several million Jews arrived late in this wave of immigration and thousands of Japanese and Chinese Buddhists immigrated to the West Coast and Hawaii. The bulk of Lutheran immigrants to the United State arrived during this period, and many American Lutheran institutions grew out of this immigration.

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By the end of this great wave of immigration around 1920, the immigrant community (foreign born) constituted nearly 15 percent of the American population. This rapid influx of new peoples, with their own languages, cultures, and religions, caused no little social unrest within the United States. Outside of the Irish coming in the 1840s, the initial stage of this immigration was largely Protestant groups coming from the United Kingdom, Germany, and Scandinavia. Because their religion was roughly similar to that of resident Americans, there was little turmoil caused by their arrival. But as the immigration continued after 1890, the ethnic and religious composition of this migration changed dramatically; the bulk of the later immigrants were Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews from southern and eastern Europe, along with Japanese and Chinese Buddhists. This immigration caused a sharp reaction from settled American Protestants, with organized anti-immigrant groups such as the Know-Nothings in the 1840s and the American Protective Association and the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War. Increasing legislation and regulation sought to reduce or eliminate this immigration, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the building of the Ellis Island facility in 1890 to

¹The statistics on this page and the following pages are from the census records of the United States. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850–1990*, Population Division Working Paper No. 29, prepared by Campbell J. Gibson and Emily Lennon of the Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, February 1999. This working paper accessed April 28, 2009, at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/twps0029.html>.

screen (and reject) incoming immigrants, and congressional legislation in 1921 and 1924 to severely restrict immigration. After 1924, a combination of restriction, depression, and war kept immigration to the United States at a trickle.

The current great wave of immigration began after World War II, with the resettlement of displaced persons and war refugees from Europe and Asia, but then dramatically expanded after Congress liberalized immigration laws in 1965. The national composition of this newest wave of immigration is quite different from that of the previous wave; whereas most nineteenth-century immigrants were from European countries, this newest wave comes primarily from Latin American and Asia, with a smaller (but increasing) number from Africa. When there are Europeans among these new immigrants, they are generally from the former communist nations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Approximately 25 million immigrants have entered the United States since 1965. Though this is impressive and has been influential in modern American society, it is still less dramatic than the nineteenth-century immigration, given the current total United States population of 300 million people. Whereas the percentage of foreign-born immigrants in the United States in 1910 was nearly 15, the number rapidly decreased and stood at about 11 percent in 2000. Certainly there have been social tensions within the United States over this most recent immigration, between longer-settled populations and the new immigrants, as well as between groups of newer immigrants, but these tensions are no greater than similar tensions in the nineteenth century and are perhaps even less. These conflicts do, however, remain a significant social tension within contemporary American culture, and influence life within our communities, schools, and religious organizations.

RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

The religious dimensions of these two great waves of immigration are equally important. The nineteenth-century immigration brought a host of new religious groups to a United States that, up to that point, had been dominated by varieties of Protestantism from Great Britain and had developed a distinct American Protestant identity in this country. Newer Protestants from Europe brought continental Lutheranism and Reformed traditions, but the major components of this immigration were European Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish groups. By 1890, the Roman Catholic Church was the largest single religious denomination in the United States, although there were (and continue to be) more Protestants in aggregate. There are currently some 6 million Jews and 3 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, mainly as a result of this immigration.

The newer immigration of the late-twentieth century has broadened the American religious scene even further. There are now sizable communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in the United States. Although reliable figures are often difficult to obtain, reasonable estimates place the numbers of these groups in the millions: between 1 to 2 million Hindus, 2 to 3 million Buddhists, and 3 to 4

million Muslims.² Yet, as visible as these new, non-Christian groups are within the North American context, their numbers are dwarfed by the numbers of new immigrants who are already Christians or who become Christian when they arrive here. Again, statistics are difficult to obtain (because the census is forbidden to collect religious data), but one recent survey has concluded that up to two-thirds of all recent immigrants to the United States are Christian.³ Given the work of immigrant Christian denominations in America, the numbers of immigrants (especially Asian) who convert to Christianity once they arrive in this new country are also impressive. No doubt the numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in the immigrant community have added to the religious diversity of the United States, but they represent at the most only 15 percent of all recent immigrants; another 15 percent list “no religion” and are probably from communist countries. As a whole, recent immigration is helping to maintain Christianity as the dominant religion within this country and could even push its dominance further. Yet it will mean change for Christianity, what R. Stephen Warner calls the “De-Europeanization of American Christianity.”⁴

This aspect of the newer, post-1965 immigration results from the rapid expansion of Christianity outside of the North Atlantic region during the twentieth century, to the point where now 60 percent of all Christians live in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.⁵ Latin America has been predominantly Christian for five hundred years, but, in the twentieth century, Christianity has grown dramatically in Africa (from 9 million Christians in 1900 to 365 million in 2000). At about 10 to 12 percent of the population, Christianity in Asia is still a minority religion behind Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but 10 to 12 percent of 3.5 billion people is approximately 350 to 400 million believers. Christianity is growing rapidly in Asia—there is a strong majority in the Philippines, an emerging majority in South Korea, and an increase in the Indian subcontinent. No one can tell about the

²The estimates on the numbers of non-Christians in the United States vary widely. On the website Adherents.com, there are twenty-four entries for Muslims in the United States, ranging from 1.3 million to 10 million. The figures I have included are in the moderate range for all categories, from the most widely respected estimates. For all estimates, see <http://www.adherents.com> (accessed January 27, 2009).

³The best recent survey, from which these figures are drawn, comes from the “New Immigrant Survey—Pilot” project at Princeton University, done in 1996. For the results, see Guillermina Jasso et al., “Exploring the Religious Preferences of Recent Immigrants to the United States: Evidence from the New Immigrant Survey Pilot,” in *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Experiences in the United States*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and John L. Sposito (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2003) 217–253. The cited chapter is also available at <http://nis.princeton.edu/downloads/papers/jmrsrel.pdf> (accessed April 28, 2009). Another survey from 1996, the *General Social Survey*, found an even higher percentage of Christians, at 82 percent.

⁴This is the title of his perceptive essay; see R. Stephen Warner, “The De-Europeanization of American Christianity,” in *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America*, ed. Stephen Prothero (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 233–255. Warner’s work here and elsewhere is a valuable corrective to the book by Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), which virtually ignores the majority of new Christian immigrants to focus on the other 15 percent.

⁵For these and the following figures, see David B. Barrett, George Thomas Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

growth of Christianity in China, but, if reports are correct, there could be between 30 and 100 million Chinese Christians. Overall, there are more Christians in Asia, Africa, or Latin America alone than in the United States, and many of the newer immigrants to America reflect that reality.

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By a wide margin, the largest number of immigrants to the United States since 1965 has come from Latin America, especially Mexico. These immigrants come from countries that are overwhelmingly Roman Catholic (generally on the order of 90 to 95 percent) and bring with them a folk-Catholicism that is based on centuries of cross-influences between the religion of the Spanish invaders and pre-Columbian religious traditions. But Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity are on a sharp rise in Latin America, and homegrown Latin American Protestant churches are found everywhere in the United States; one estimate is that 25 percent of all Hispanic Americans are Protestant.⁶ The next largest number of contemporary immigrants to the United States is from Asia, and they reflect the religious diversity of that continent.⁷ Yet, two of the leading countries contributing immigrants to America are the Philippines and South Korea, majority Christian nations. Immigration from Africa is much smaller (yet growing) and reflects the fact that Christianity is now the largest religious group in Africa, ahead of Islam and tribal religions.

Another factor explaining why two-thirds of all new immigrants are Christian may be a matter of self-selection by African and Asian Christians of the United States as a choice for immigration, on the basis that it is a majority Christian nation. A number of Christians in Asia and Africa, especially those who live in minority Christian communities or in areas where there is interreligious strife (usually between Islam and Christianity), see the United States as a place of refuge. The presence of Christians from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq in the United States would explain the dramatic statistic that between 50 and 70 percent of Arab Americans are Christians of one form or another.⁸ This pattern would also be seen

⁶On Latin American religion in the United States, see David A. Badillo, *Latinos and the New Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), and Arlene M. Sanchez Walsh, *Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Self, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁷On Asian American religions, see Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

⁸This figure of 50 to 70 percent is widely circulated. A Zogby International Survey from 2002, whose data was used for a chart titled "Religious Affiliations of Arab Americans" on the website of the Arab American Institute, has results listing all forms of Christianity among Arab Americans at 63 percent, Islam at 24 percent, and other religions/none at 13 percent. Scroll down to see the chart on their website at <http://www.aaiausa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics> (accessed April 29, 2009).

in immigration of Christians from Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and some other African countries, as well as from parts of Asia.

CONVERSION OF IMMIGRANTS

The question of the conversion of non-Christian immigrants to Christianity after their arrival in the United States is also a matter of interest and speculation. There is not much numerical evidence of Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims converting to Christianity after immigration, but there is some evidence that there are conversions among other immigrants, especially those who claim “no religion” on the new immigrant religious affiliation survey. The supposition is that most of the 15 percent of immigrants who claim “no religion” are new arrivals from Eastern Europe, Russia, and mainland China. (China is the second largest source of new immigrants to the United States.) Coming from countries where state-advocated atheism held sway for decades, many of these immigrants were raised with no religious background at all. Still, among immigrant communities from these countries are very strong and active Christian denominations, especially the Chinese American Christian churches, and, given their growth and power within the immigrant ethnic community, it seems clear that they are making many converts out of their fellow immigrants. Estimates are that up to one-third of all Chinese Americans are Christians, many recent converts.⁹ Evangelistic activity in refugee camps and Christian congregations sponsoring refugee resettlement are also factors in the growth of Protestantism among southeast Asian immigrants, especially Vietnamese, Hmong, and Laotians.

TENSIONS AND DIFFICULTIES

The fact that two-thirds of all recent immigrants are Christians does not, however, make the religious aspects and transitions of immigration any easier for the newer arrivals. America may be a majority Christian nation, where religiosity is encouraged, but the nature of religion in the United States is quite different from what many immigrants have known or expected.¹⁰ Obviously, the non-Christian immigrants feel marginalized in this predominantly Christian nation, but Christian immigrants, too, find that the American form of Christianity is strange to them. Structurally, all immigrants must deal with the voluntary nature of religion in the United States, where they are free to practice any religion they wish, but where they must also pay for their own religious communities and take responsi-

⁹See Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, Cohesive Identities* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

¹⁰For the ways in which new immigrants deal with the American religious situation, see Karen I. Leonard et al., eds., *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2005); Haddad, Smith, and Esposito, *Religion and Immigration*; and Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, eds., *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000).

bility for operating them. Immigrant religious leaders play an important role in supporting their communities but often are unused to having laypeople with the large degree of control over religion that they have in the United States. All groups struggle for funding of their congregations, as financial resources are tight, and immigrants often work long hours simply to make ends meet.

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The religious pluralism of the United States also means that some immigrant communities are divided religiously, reflecting either the situation of their homeland or, more often, the new religious situation of America. Tensions between Russian Orthodox and Russian Evangelical Protestants, Hmong Christians and those who practice traditional animistic rituals, Hispanic Roman Catholics and Hispanic Evangelical Protestants, or Christian and Muslim Arabs in the United States are just some examples of immigrant communities where the normal religious dynamics of the old country are transformed, often bringing about internal divisions. The normal generational tensions seen within immigrant communities are also often a source of religious tension, as the children of immigrants, more familiar with American customs and mores, push for substantial changes and acculturation within immigrant religious communities. Important as religion is to most immigrants, it can also be a source of great tension and strife, both internally and externally.

Another aspect of tension within immigrant religious communities is the question of gender relationships, especially the role of women in the group. Most newer immigrants come from cultures where gender roles are expressed in traditional forms; men and women have separate and well-defined positions in society, and men are in the dominant role. Current American culture is quite different from their tradition and often clashes with the norms of the immigrant community, leaving immigrant women in the middle, seeking to be loyal to their community but also enjoying the greater freedoms that American society affords. The opportunity (and often economic necessity) for immigrant women to work outside the home also allows them to interact with the wider culture and equalizes their power with that of men. Voluntary religious organizations offer immigrant women another avenue to power and opportunity, as these groups are often heavily dependent on the contributions of women for their survival.

Older, settled populations in the United States often view the newer immigrants with suspicion and distrust. For some, the presence of the immigrants is a direct competition for employment and resources, though this is not usually the case, as immigrants tend to fill jobs that other citizens do not want to do. The hostility toward the newer immigrants (nativism) more often springs from a reaction

against their “foreignness” and a fear that they will take over the country from the older, settled populations. The ability of immigrant and ethnic populations to gain power politically through their numbers is also often a source of tension. Ethnic tensions even occur between groups of otherwise like-minded people; examples include the nineteenth-century divisions between the earlier Reform-minded Jews from Germany and the later Conservative and Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe, and the current tensions between African Americans (descendants of enslaved persons) and newly arrived immigrants from Africa.

The tensions between older, settled populations and the newer immigrants are often seen in American religious life, even within communities of coreligionists.¹¹ While the two populations may share a common religious heritage, that heritage is often structured and expressed in very different ways (such as the Jewish example above). The newer immigrants are often socially and religiously more conservative than their settled American counterparts and can often be suspicious and resentful of the moral freedoms of the older American denominations, especially within mainline Protestantism. This is seen in denominations such as the Methodists and Presbyterians, where newly arrived Korean immigrants often clash with their settled American counterparts over moral and religious issues. The issue of language is also often a complicating factor, because the settled denominations in the United States are unable to communicate in the immigrant language, and the immigrants are conflicted internally over transition to the use of English. Styles of worship and patterns of personal and social religiosity are also common points of contention; in American Roman Catholicism, this has been a continual issue since the arrival of the Irish in the 1840s and is widened today by the influx of Roman Catholics from countries around the world.

BENEFITS OF IMMIGRATION

It would be wrong, however, to express the relationships between older and newer immigrants solely in terms of tension and conflict, as there are many obvious benefits of continued immigration to the United States, religiously and otherwise. The newer immigrants bring ambition, skills, and a desire to work hard to add to the U.S. economy, and their presence enriches our culture with new ideas and patterns. The presence of younger immigrant labor might well mitigate the demographic “graying” of the settled American population, and the influx of immigrant children has meant that some local schools, especially in small towns and rural areas, are able to keep their doors open. Immigrants often take positions that might otherwise go unfilled and make possible a thriving economy in the United States.

There are also many benefits for religious life from the presence of new immigrants. Especially for American Christian groups, the presence of new immigrants,

¹¹On these and other tensions, see Bruce B. Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

mainly Christians, means a growth in their own numbers; the complexion of the new immigration will continue to keep the United States a majority Christian nation for the foreseeable future. Some American denominations benefit directly from this immigration; newer immigration means that the Roman Catholic Church continues to maintain its numbers, even while losing European American members. Other denominations—the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptists, the Methodists, and the Presbyterians, among others—continue to gain members and congregations as a result of immigration. The newer immigrants often bring an enthusiasm and buoyant worship style that enlivens and expands the religious lives of settled denominations. Immigrant religious entrepreneurs start new congregations and new denominations, usually for their own people, but sometimes for settled populations as well.

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Ever since the beginnings of mass immigration in the 1840s, settled religious groups have looked to certain newer immigrant populations as a source of new members or, more recently, for multicultural congregations and denominations. These hopes have usually been illusory, however, as differences in language, moral outlook, and religious style usually mean that immigrants prefer to form their own ethnic congregations and denominations rather than joining with settled American populations. Truly multicultural congregations are rather rare in the United States; even in the big-city Roman Catholic parishes with immigrant Catholics from around the world (Hispanic, Vietnamese, Filipino, Ghanaian, Nigerian, and others), immigrants tend to form separate ethnic congregations or to worship as groups at a separate service from other immigrants.¹² Perhaps in the future they will come together in mixed congregations, but ethnicity has proven in the past to be a tenacious factor, as one look at American Lutheranism will attest. At least, in the short term, the benefits of immigrant religion to the more settled American groups will mostly likely be in terms of partnerships and cooperation, rather than in fully integrated and multicultural congregations and denominations.

It is clear that while new immigration inevitably means a certain increased level of religious tension within the United States, this is transitory and something we have dealt with before. The American system of religious freedom and

¹²In their survey of thirteen different immigrant religious congregations in Houston, Texas, Ebaugh and Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants*, found that only one of these groups, an Assembly of God congregation, even approached the definition of a multicultural congregation.

pluralism is robust and adaptable and has shown over the years that it is very able to contain and benefit from the presence of all sorts of new immigrant religious groups. Settled religious congregations and denominations, themselves a product of previous waves of immigration and acculturation, should welcome these new arrivals as fellow citizens and coreligionists, as they, themselves, may benefit from the newcomers' presence in our society. There may be tensions and there will be inevitable adjustments, but these certainly will be outweighed by the benefits that the new immigrants bring. ⊕

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