



# New Resources on Religion and Immigrants to Contemporary America

JENNIFER HORNYAK WOJCIECHOWSKI

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Emma Lazarus<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” Poetry Foundation, <http://tinyurl.com/y7vkozay>.

*There are many good resources to assist leaders and congregations in understanding the ways in which new immigrants are bringing their religious traditions to North America and how they are transforming them in light of their new conditions. This article lists many of the new books that can assist leaders and congregations in understanding new immigrant religious communities.*

**E**ven if one does not know the above poem in its entirety, countless Americans know the line: *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses*. Why is this poem, written in 1883, so well known? How does it speak so profoundly to an American public? The easy answer is that the poem is printed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. More than that though, the poem represents our history as a nation of immigrants.

The United States has a long and often rocky relationship with immigration. For roughly five hundred years, people have been coming to the Americas, either willing or unwilling, in the case of the transatlantic slave trade. For five hundred years, people have brought different cultures and religions to this land; every new group of people has added something to the story that is American history.

The waves of immigration have ebbed and flowed over the years. The period following the Civil War was a time of particularly high immigration. Historians estimate that an average of one million immigrants arrived in the United States every year during the 1880s, and by 1910 that number had doubled. In the forty years between 1860 and 1900, the population of the United States more than doubled (thirty-one million to seventy-six million people).<sup>2</sup> How was American religion affected during those years? The predominant change was the rapid increase in Catholic Americans. It is estimated that there were slightly more than one million Catholics in 1850 or roughly 5 percent of the population. By 1906, there were fourteen million Catholics, according to the US Census, making up roughly 17 percent of the total population.<sup>3</sup> Immigration then took a sharp decline around the beginning of the First World War.

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Things changed again in 1965 with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which opened up the flow of immigration once more. The United States is not quite back at those high immigration numbers of the turn of the twentieth century, but still estimates suggest that more than a million immigrants are arriving in the United States every year.<sup>4</sup> Today there are roughly forty million people living in the United States who were born in another country. In fact, immigrants make up about 13.5 percent of the entire population of the United States. Though just about every single country in the world is represented today in the US population, the top five home countries for immigrants are Mexico (11.6

<sup>2</sup> Christopher H. Evans, *Histories of American Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 199.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Fink and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 120.

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo López, Kristin Bialik, and Jynnah Radford, “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants,” Pew Research Center, November 30, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ycuqpant>.

million people), China (2.6 million), India (2.4 million), the Philippines (1.9 million), and El Salvador (1.4 million).<sup>5</sup>

Immigrants come to American shores with their own cultures, languages, and most relevant for us, religions. Long gone are the days of the Protestant consensus (if it ever even truly existed). American religion is diverse; new immigrants add to that diversity. Unlike the mass immigration between the Civil War and the First World War, new American immigrants tend to hail from non-European lands, and they bring with them a variety of religions. Some people arrive with different varieties of Christianity, but they might just as easily arrive with Islam, Hinduism, Shamanism, Buddhism; the list goes on and on.

There are many reasons to want to understand these new (and not so new) faiths that belong to the newest Americans. A basic religious literacy of faiths that surround you is always beneficial. A better understanding of your neighbor and their belief-sets and culture is both admirable and helpful. If you work or live with a particular population, better understanding of their beliefs may be an absolute necessity.

With so many different people, cultures, beliefs, and values, how does one describe immigrant religion? How does one even start to research immigrant religion? What follows are suggestions and reviews of books on immigrant religion that can help you navigate the ever-increasing literature on the subject. Some of the books look at general trends and others are more specific investigations of various immigrant groups categorized by place of origin or religious association. All the books tend to focus on groups that have largely come to the United States after 1965.

To learn more about all these faiths that new immigrants are bringing with them to the United States, a general book on immigrant religion would be a good place to start. Once the basic facts of religious trends are established, deeper investigation of particular immigrant groups will be easier to navigate.

An excellent introduction to immigrant religion is Phillip Connor's *Immigrant Faith: Patterns of Immigrant Religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). *Immigrant Faith* is more concerned with larger trends of immigrant religion in general. The book focuses on four main areas, as the author explains: "Few students of religion or international migration clearly understand the role of religion in moving people across international borders, the way religion changes upon settlement in the destination country, the help or hinderance religion can be in the struggle for immigrant success, and the way immigrant religion is transmitted to further generations."<sup>6</sup> It is these areas that the book goes on to explore in the four subsequent chapters.

This is the only book spotlighted that does not exclusively focus on the United States. Instead of being distracting or seemingly unnecessary, the immigration

<sup>5</sup> López, Bialik, and Radford, "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants."

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Connor, *Immigrant Faith: Patterns of Immigrant Religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 5.

statistics and stories from Canada and Western Europe provide helpful comparisons to our own context. The book primarily uses quantitative data to present a general overview of immigration in the West. Statistical and census information are taken from a variety of sources both North American and European, such as Pew Research Center's Global Religion and Migration Database, New Immigrant Survey in the United States, Pew Research Center's Global Religious Landscape, US General Social Survey, and various European country-specific surveys. There is a helpful methodological appendix that explains all the data sources used. Due to this heavy reliance on surveys and census information, the book will be less and less helpful as time goes on. Being only five years old, however, the book still feels highly relevant. As a general note, though there is lots of statistical information, there are enough personal accounts of immigrant experiences to keep the book interesting on a human level.

Of particular interest in this volume is the last chapter on transferring immigrant faith to children. Do the gods and faiths that come to America with new immigrants transfer to the next generation, who are often born and raised within the American context? According to Connor, it is somewhat common for the adult children of immigrants to have religious affiliation. It should not be terribly surprising that when adult children of immigrants have different religions than their parents, they tend to be associated with Protestant Christianity or no religion at all.<sup>7</sup>

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Another good general book on the topic is *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2005). The book takes an interdisciplinary approach to immigrant religion in America (history, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies) to examine a variety of religions, including Protestant faiths, Catholicism, voodoo, Hinduism, Buddhism, spirit worship, and Confucian ancestor worship. The introduction of the book claims that one distinctive feature of the volume is its questioning of conventional Western definitions of religion—in other words, moving beyond looking at the Judeo-Christian faiths and including other non-Western faiths, particularly Asian religions. As an example of their conscious shift away from this, Karen Leonard takes a 1960s definition of religion (1. Belief in divine or superhuman powers to be obeyed and worshipped as creator/s and ruler/s of the universe. 2. The expression of belief is construct and ritual. 3. Specific systems of state of mind or way of life expressing

<sup>7</sup> Connor, *Immigrant Faith*, 97–98.

love for and trust in God, and/or efforts to act accordingly to the will of God, as in monastic orders. 4. The practice of religious observances or rites<sup>8</sup>) and argues that this definition is outdated and that religions such as Hinduism would not fall within these parameters. The goal here is admirable, but few people would now argue for a definition of religion in our current day and age that was as limiting as this 1960s dictionary definition (in this regard, the book may be starting to show its age, though this definition was still forty years old at the time of publication). The book also puts emphasis on transnational religious networks and the changing relationship between immigrant, religion, and civic engagement.

The book will not give a general overview of immigrant faiths, but it will give specific examples of religions in various contexts. The book consists of different case studies written by various scholars with interesting titles like “Daddy Grace: An Immigrant’s Story,” “Changing Religious Practices among Cambodian Immigrants in Long Beach and Seattle,” and “Religion and Transnational Migration in New Chinatown.” The book also includes a robust bibliography at the end of each chapter, which could be useful to readers.

Latinos make up the largest segment of US immigrants today. Below are different books on Latino immigrant religion, the first focusing on Catholicism and the others focusing on Protestantism.

*Latinos and the New Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) begins with the following statement: “To fully understand Latinos in the United States, one must understand their unique, complex and ever-evolving relationship with the Catholic Church, the Catholic religion, and the various syncretisms born of Catholic interactions in the Americas.”<sup>9</sup> The book examines the history of immigrant communities in San Antonio, New York City, Miami, and Chicago, and the primary ethnic groups studied are Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. There is also special concern shown to popular religion.

The first chapter gives a broad history, beginning in Spain roughly a thousand years before Europeans found their way to the Americas. From there, the book takes a closer look at specific communities in the aforementioned American cities. The strengths of the book include a commitment to looking at these various ethnic groups as unique cultures that should not be clumped into one monolithic entity. David Badillo provides good historical context, and he fits these communities into a larger Catholic framework. He makes a note toward the end of his book that charismatic religions and Pentecostalism are on the rise, but the book is overwhelmingly concerned with Catholicism. Catholicism, however, it is not the entire story when it comes to Latino immigrant religion, and this omission of Latino Protestants is a weakness in the book.

<sup>8</sup> Karen I. Leonard, Alex Stepick, Manuel A. Vasquez, and Jennifer Holdaway, eds., *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2005), 2.

<sup>9</sup> David A. Badillo, *Latinos and the New Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), xi.

Although this may come as a surprise to some, 22 percent of all Latin Americans now identify as Protestants, and many of these Protestants are Pentecostals.<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon is not unique to Latin America as more Latinos living in the United States are identifying as Protestant. There has been a surge of research on this topic of late. Numerous books have come out examining this Latino Pentecostal phenomenon. One of the earlier books to address the topic is Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh's *Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Self, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). More recently there is *Latino Pentecostals in America: Faith and Politics in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) by Gastón Espinosa, who states that the book seeks to help fill a gap in the literature "by providing a history of the Latino [Assemblies of God Church] that can also serve as a case study and a window into the larger Latino Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Protestant movements along with the changing flow of North American religious history."<sup>11</sup> A third option in the area of Latino American Protestants is *Latino Protestants in America: Growing and Diverse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) by Mark T. Mulder, Aida I. Ramos, and Gerard Martí. Unlike the previous two options, this one does not focus exclusively on Pentecostalism but pays attention to all types of Latino Protestants.

While the recent literature may seem disproportionate to the number of Latino Protestants in America, the authors of these books are looking at an interesting and important trend. While religion in America in general is in decline, why is Latino Protestantism on the rise? In 2007, 19 percent of Latino Americans were Protestant; in 2014, 22 percent were. It is estimated that half may be Protestant by 2030.<sup>12</sup>

Asian Americans make up the second-largest category of new immigrants. This group, like the other broad categories, represents many different cultures, languages, and religions that should not be confused into one monolithic culture. According to the 2010 census, there were 17.3 million Americans of Asian descent. The largest groups represented are Chinese (3.8 million), Filipinos (3.4 million), Asian Indians (3.2 million), Vietnamese (1.7 million), Koreans (1.7 million), and Japanese (1.3 million).<sup>13</sup>

*Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), edited by Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, is a helpful and interesting book on the topic. As stated in its introduction: "This book focuses on the role of Asian American religions in negotiating, accepting, redefining, changing, and creating boundaries in the metropolitan

<sup>10</sup> "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region," Pew Research Center, November 13, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/naeav8q>.

<sup>11</sup> Gastón Espinosa, *Latino Pentecostals in America: Faith and Politics in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Mark T. Mulder, Aida I. Ramos, and Gerard Martí, *Latino Protestants in America: Growing and Diverse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 2.

<sup>13</sup> "Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month: May 2012," The United States Census Bureau March 21, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/z84e87q>.

areas of New York City, Houston, Los Angeles, and the Silicon Valley/Bay Area.” Specifically, the book focuses on Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Thai immigrants.<sup>14</sup> The introduction provides excellent general information on the subject of Asian American religion—describing who is coming, why they are coming, what types of organizations are successful, and offering generalizations between first and second generation immigrants. The following chapter, entitled “The Religious Demography of Asian American Boundary Crossing,” provides more specific information, including a fair amount of statistical information, which is beginning to be a bit dated, but still interesting.

What follows are fourteen essays written by different scholars broken into four general categories: Symbols and Rituals; The Boundaries of Time: Events, Generation, and Age; Political Boundaries; and Transcending Borders and Boundaries. The first chapter, written by Kenneth J. Guest, entitled “Liminal Youth among Fuzhou Chinese Undocumented Workers,” is a particularly moving chapter tracing the story of a young man who was smuggled into the United States, a first-hand account of his difficulties and his conversion to Christianity. Another particularly interesting chapter is “Gender and Generation in a Chinese Christian Church,” by Fenggang Yang. *Asian American Religions* would be an excellent place to begin research on the topic of Asian American religion. It has a good combination of general information, niche topics, and case studies.

While vastly different in content to many of the other books on the list, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), by Anne Fadiman, is a fascinating and tragic story that demonstrates the need for cultural and religious understanding. The book is the true story of the clash between a hospital in California and the family of a Hmong child named Lia Lee, who was diagnosed with severe epilepsy. While this book is often assigned to medical and nursing students, which makes complete sense given the subject, the book is worth reading outside of the medical community. For pastors or people working in ministry or the social services, this book could be incredibly helpful in better understanding Hmong culture and religion. Fadiman approaches the subject with great respect and care. In the third chapter, the reader learns what trouble befell baby Lia. “When Lia was about three months old, her older sister Yer slammed the front door of the Lees’ apartment. A few moments later, Lia’s eyes rolled up, her arms jerked over her head, and she fainted. The Lees had little doubt what had happened . . . the noise of the door had been so profoundly frightening that her soul had fled her body and become lost. They recognized the resulting symptoms as *quag dab peg*, which means ‘the spirit catches you and you fall down.’” The term *quag dab peg* is generally translated as epilepsy in Hmong-English dictionaries.<sup>15</sup> From this quote, it should be no wonder to the reader what types of cultural and

<sup>14</sup> Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 20.

religious clashes the Lees will have with the American medical community. The true strength of Fadiman's work, though, is showing the Lees not as *other*. In fact, there are times when the book makes the reader question American culture: "*Twix neeb*s (Hmong Shaman) knew that to treat the body without treating the soul was an act of patent folly; [American] doctors never even mentioned the soul."<sup>16</sup> This is a sentiment any person in ministry can understand.

Because African immigrants represent a somewhat smaller percentage of total immigrant numbers, the group has often been neglected in scholarship. However, since the late 1980s, there has been a large increase in African immigrants to the United States, and current US census data identifies more than one million African-born immigrants now living in the United States—certainly not an insignificant number. *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007) is a book written to fill an obvious hole in the literature on immigrant faiths.

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*African immigrant* is a broad term representing people from a variety of different countries of origin and practicing various faiths including but not limited to Islam, various Christian faiths, and African Indigenous Religions. However, the authors of the book were able to identify five overarching themes in their studies: social identities, transnationalism, migration as a process, civic engagement and political incorporation, and gender relations.<sup>17</sup>

The book includes chapters written by various scholars representing different African perspectives. "The book contains three chapters on African Initiated Churches . . . one on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church . . . four on the Pentecostal/charismatic churches . . . and two on Islam."<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately there are no chapters on African Indigenous Religion, which admittedly represents a small number of African immigrant faiths, but it is certainly a weakness of this book.

Of particular interest is the second chapter by David D. Daniels, called "African Immigrant Churches in the United States and the Study of Black Church History." Daniels addresses the questions of where African immigrant churches

<sup>16</sup> Fadiman, *Spirit Catches You*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Jacob K. Olupona and Regina Gemignani, eds., *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Olupona and Gemignani, *African Immigrant Religions*, 14.



should be “located on the U.S. religious map? Are they best categorized and defined as immigrant, black U.S. religion, U.S. continental African religion, a new development within the Black Church, or a new religious movement within the United States?”<sup>19</sup> This brings up an interesting characteristic of immigrant faith in general. Very few immigrant faiths are entirely new to the United States. Often it is the cultural component that makes the religion seem different.

The most misunderstood and feared immigrant religion in America today is certainly Islam. A few of the previous books discuss Muslim immigrants, but none deal exclusively with this religion. Below are a couple suggestions for books that are less specifically focused on immigrant faith (though both are written by second-generation immigrants) but are more generally books on Islam. One is an in-depth history of the religion while the other is a more reader-friendly summary of the beliefs and practices of the religion.

*No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 2011), by Reza Aslan, is a thorough and engaging examination of Islam. Aslan, a professor of creative writing, not of religion, writes a book that is decidedly less dry than some other religious-studies texts. He gives an informative history of pre-Islamic Arabia, thus setting the scene for all the changes that would come. Aslan goes on to give a description of the Prophet Muhammad and his life as the leader of the new Muslim community. Aslan follows with the history of Islam from its beginnings in the seventh century through to today. It will appeal to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, though it is also undeniably a heavy read. His chapter on Sufism is particularly enjoyable.

What this book will not provide is a simple and basic introduction to faith and practices. Yes, that information is scattered throughout, but it is not a reference book where one can simply look up, say, the five pillars of Islam. For a basic introduction to Islam, *The Muslim Next Door: The Qur’an, the Media, and That Veil Thing* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud, 2008) has much to offer.

The author, Sumbul Ali-Karamali, uses a mixture of personal memoir (she was a child of Indian immigrants, raised in Southern California) and general information about Islam. She begins her book with a general overview of how Muslims practice their faith before moving on to basic Islamic concepts, prayer, the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, religious structure, and then more misunderstood aspects of the faith, such as jihad and the headscarf.

While this book lacks the elegance of *No god but God*, it is undeniably an easier book to read. Its strength is making the content both understandable and approachable. Ali-Karamali is relatable, telling stories of culture clashes as a teenager or her (less than pleasant) experience fasting for Ramadan while remodeling her home. It is a good book for the average American wanting a basic understanding of Islam.

<sup>19</sup> David D. Daniels “African Immigrant Churches in the United States and the Study of Black Church History,” in Olupona and Gemignani, *African Immigrant Religions*, 49.

These are certainly not the only books on immigrant religion. However, these are suggestions in a variety of different areas that may prove helpful in your own research into it. There are a number of topics these books deal with. First, there is the issue of what religions are coming with new immigrants. Next, there is the issue of how the religions may change in this new context. Are immigrants becoming more or less religious once they get to the United States (the answer is often more religious)? How is institutionalized religion serving the needs of the new immigrant? Does the faith itself transform in the United States? Then there is the enormous issue of transference of religion to the second generation. Immigrant children do not necessarily follow the faith of their parents. They are deeply affected by the culture around them, and that can lead to conversion to another faith or an abandoning of all faith. The topic of immigrant religion is complex and multifaceted, but also deeply interesting and important in our current world.

The United States is always changing as we welcome new people to our shores. Once upon a time, Christianity was the major character in this story of religious history in the United States (though there was always great diversity within the Christian community itself). Christianity is still the majority religion, but other religions (and no religious affiliation, for that matter) are on the rise. Learning and understanding different faiths is rewarding; often we have more in common than one might think. ⊕

*JENNIFER HORNYAK WOJCIECHOWSKI earned her PhD in the history of Christianity at Luther Seminary. She has taught at Augsburg University and is currently an affiliated faculty member at Luther Seminary.*