



The Impact of Immigration on American Christianity

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There are few issues in the contemporary United States that are more contentious than the question of immigration and its impact on the country. Though this is an issue that is of particular importance in the early twenty-first century, it is a perennial question that goes back at least two hundred years. Americans have been arguing about the size and scope of immigration, and its impact on the country, especially since the beginnings of mass immigration to the United States in the 1830s and 1840s. The question of the religious impact of immigration has been of special concern, as it touches how Americans see their country as a particular religious society and how the arrival of newcomers will affect this vision. Americans have long celebrated the religious freedom and pluralism of the country, enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution, but have also worried about how the religious traditions brought by newer immigrants will affect this carefully wrought balance of religion. How widely, it is wondered, can religious freedom and pluralism go before the boundaries of society are stretched too thin and civil discourse breaks down into conflict between religious tribes? Just because this has not happened to date in the United States is no guarantee that it will not happen in the future, and a brief glance at religious conflicts around the world is not comforting. Can the American religious experiment be maintained?

Much is being thought and said about the impact of immigration on the contemporary world of the United States. One important question in these conversations is the effect that immigration is having on American religious life. This article is one attempt to draw from the current work being done on this topic and form some sort of preliminary answer.

Despite the religious pluralism of their country, Americans have often posited that there is a sense of religious uniformity or religious destiny to the country itself. Even though there were many different Protestant denominations in the United States in the early nineteenth century, it was possible to view the country as a whole as a Protestant nation. A large number of Roman Catholics began to immigrate to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, with a significant number of Jews coming later in the century. This caused tremendous interreligious tensions, although it was still possible at the time to envision the United States as a Christian, or at least a Judeo-Christian nation. Americans continued to see the activity of their country in religious terms, whether as the Puritan's "City on a Hill," the nineteenth-century's "Manifest Destiny" or "Redeemer Nation," or the religious, political, and economic visions of America's mission to the world in the twentieth century. But by the 1960s, when large-scale immigration resumed, now primarily from Asia and Latin America (and later Africa), with significant numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other Eastern religions in the mix, it became increasingly difficult to "stretch" the religious "tent" wide enough to maintain some sort of common religious vision. Pluralism alone, for its own sake, is hard to imagine as the means of a coherent society without some sort of identity to hold things all together.

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THE CURRENT RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Currently in the United States about two-thirds of all Americans are reckoned to be members of an organized religious group, although how accurate this is and what constitutes a "membership" in such a group are open questions.¹ The Christian population of the United States is measured at about 170 million, which breaks down to about 100 million Protestants, 65 million Roman Catholics, and 5 million Eastern Orthodox. If the question is asked about American religious "preference," a much less precise number, about 50 percent of Americans claim Protestant, and another 25 percent indicate Roman Catholic. The number of American Jews has

¹ Two-thirds is a long-running figure in the annual Gallup polls of American religion, going back to the 1930s. But "membership" is a very Protestant category and does not always work well for measuring other religious groups.

been stable at about 6 million; the number of “observant” or religious Jews is much lower, which begs the question of whether Judaism is considered a religious or an ethnic category.

When it comes to the population of non-Judeo-Christian groups in the United States, the numbers are quite a bit less precise. The most germane questions are whether a designation for these groups is primarily a religious or an ethnic one (as with Judaism), and what the term *membership* means for such a group. For Muslims in America (as one example), a person is born into the Muslim community and remains a Muslim throughout their lives, regardless of their participation in the mosque or their level of observant practice. This is the case with a number of other groups, and as a result, the local mosques or temples often do not keep “membership” records. Traditional forms of polling (telephone and other surveys) also do not often work very well, so the figures for some of these groups are based on estimates, which can vary widely. Here are the range of estimates:²

Latter Day Saints	6 million
Hindus	1–2 million
Buddhists	3–4 million
Muslims	3–4 million
Jains and Sikhs	1 million
Pagans	500,000

In this category it might well be imagined that there are about 15–18 million Americans.

So, what about the rest of Americans? The numbers of those who claim to be atheists is actually relatively low; polling data by Gallup and others suggests that they are roughly 2–3 percent of the American population, a figure that has not appreciably changed over the past decades. This leaves a considerable number of Americans somewhere in the middle, between atheism and formal affiliation; this number could be upward of 25–30 percent of the population. Considering the softer number of religious “preference,” perhaps as many as 80 percent of Americans would claim some sort of identity, vague as this may be. Included in this quarter of Americans would be those who consider themselves *agnostic* or *spiritual but not religious*, two rather amorphous categories that are interesting in and of themselves. Also in this area would be those who are counted as *nones* or *donees*, two categories about which much has been written lately. As these are a rather recent designation, and it is hard to track their trajectories over time, it is not clear

² The sources for these estimates can be found on Adherents.com. The most contentious estimate, as might be imagined, is the number of Muslims in America, which ranges from two to ten million individuals. The category of “Pagans” is a self-designated one, measuring those who adhere to forms of earth or goddess worship, including Wiccans and others.

how these categories are trending and whether they represent a significant trend or simply people being more honest with their polling responses.³

When it comes to the religious impact of immigration to America, especially the more recent immigrations, the numbers above can provide a relative baseline from which to measure this impact. Certainly the great immigration of the period 1840 to 1920 had a major impact on religion in America. The population of the United States in 1840 was roughly 17 million people, and in the next eighty years about 30 million immigrants arrived in the United States. By 1910, the population of the country had expanded to over 92 million people. These immigrants were overwhelmingly from Europe, and mostly Christians, with an appreciable number of European Jews later in this period. The smaller immigration of Chinese and Japanese, primarily to the American west, was religiously and ethnically threatening to the dominant population and led to federal legislation to limit Asian immigration in the later nineteenth century. After World War I, immigration of all types was severely limited, which remained the case until 1965, when the Immigration and Nationality Act (the Hart-Celler Act) in Congress lifted the strict quotas on immigration imposed in 1924. The relative opening of immigration has meant that larger numbers of immigrants have been allowed into the United States. The portion of Americans who are “foreign-born,” which had peaked at almost 15 percent in 1900, and had dipped to under 5 percent in 1970, rose to 13 percent in 2010, which is roughly a total of 40 million persons.⁴ Of course the areas of origin for the latter immigration has shifted; the largest number of legal immigrants since 1965 have come from Latin America, followed by Asia, and a small but growing number of immigrants from Africa. In terms of those immigrants without legal status, the vast majority of these individuals, perhaps 12 million in number, are from Latin America.

LESSONS FROM THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY IMMIGRATION

Before considering the impact that this immigration is having on the religious complexion of the contemporary United States, it is important to survey what is known about the religious aspects of the significant nineteenth-century immigration to the United States.

Americans developed a distinctive religious system, marked by a free-church, voluntary pluralism, and a diverse religiosity that has been engendered by it as a result. Having grown up with this system, most Americans do not realize how peculiar their country is, religiously. But immigrants do understand this, as they face the bewildering religious landscape of the United States and attempt to build their communities, including their religious communities. The nineteenth-century

³ As cultural pressure fades (the idea that one ought to have a religion), it may well be that many of those who had been very nominally counted in particular religious groups now would admit that they are, in fact, of no religious affiliation whatsoever. The significant numbers of those in the category of “spiritual but not religious” would indicate a lingering social ideas that one ought to have a religious identity, even if one never formally acts on it.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population, 1850 to 2000*, and the *American Community Survey, 2010*.

immigrants came from societies that were much more religiously monolithic, and often from some form of state church or other politically supported religious system. American religious pluralism, and the voluntary nature of religious organizations, were tremendous conceptual barriers for them to overcome. Freedom of religion meant that these immigrants could choose any form of religion that they wanted or, significantly, no religion whatsoever. The “myth of the boat” suggests that immigrants got off the boat and immediately headed toward the nearest ethnic congregation representing their homeland, but this simply was not the case. In studying the Scandinavian Lutheran immigrants of the nineteenth-century, only between 10 and 30 percent of the immigrants ever formally joined their ethnic denominations.⁵ Others may have lurked on the edges of these congregations, but many others may have switched affiliation or joined no religious community whatsoever. The idea is commonly held that immigrants came to America for freedom of religion, but probably many more indulged in freedom *from* religion when they settled in the United States. Still, the religious organizations formed by immigrants in the United States, then as now, are by far the largest ethnic organizations within immigrant communities and central to their lives.

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So when immigrants come to the United States, it is not self-evident that the religious identity they had in their countries of origin will necessarily be the religious identity that they maintain in the United States, if indeed they maintain a religious identity at all. Given the dramatic shift in religious practice and experience that the United States poses to the new immigrants, and the difficulties they have in establishing their own ethnic denominations, it is certain that there will be major differences in the transition. This can work both ways, for it is clear that some individuals are coming with, at best, a nominal religious practice, and they become much more observant in the United States. Or they come with no real religious identity at all (for example, in the case of some Asian immigrants) and find a religious identity in their new country. While it is probably much less likely to happen, there are some immigrants who switch religions altogether; America is a country where it is possible to reinvent oneself, if one wishes.

⁵ See Mark Granquist, “Exploding the ‘Myth of the Boat,’” *Lutheran Forum* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 15–17; and Mark Granquist, “A Comparison of Swedish- and Norwegian-American Religious Traditions, 1860–1920,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 299–320.

THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE CURRENT IMMIGRATION

The new, post-1965 immigration differs from the earlier nineteenth-century immigration primarily in two aspects: first, in the countries or regions of origin, and second, in the religious complexion of the immigrants. First, as to regions of origin:⁶

Region	1992	2012
Latin America-Caribbean	44%	38%
Europe-North America	15%	9%
Asia-Pacific	36%	38%
Sub-Saharan Africa	2%	9%
Middle East-North Africa	3%	6%

The figures on the regions of origin of the immigrants without legal status are less clear, but it is certain that the vast majority of such individuals are from the Latin American-Caribbean region, perhaps in the range of 80–90 percent. This is due to the relative ease of accessing the United States from Latin America as compared with the other regions.

These figures are relatively reliable because they come mainly from the United States Census Bureau. Figures on the religious complexion of the immigration and the foreign-born population are much less reliable because the Census Bureau has not asked questions about a person's religious affiliation since 1936.⁷ So data on the religious affiliations of immigrants and the foreign-born population comes mainly through surveys conducted by foundations and other non-public entities. Overall, this is the data on the religious affiliation of legal permanent residents of the United States:⁸

Religion	1992	2012
Christianity	68%	61%
Other Religions	19%	25%
Unaffiliated	14%	14%

⁶ Office of Immigration Statistic-Department of Homeland Security, 1992 and 2012.

⁷ This has not always been the case. In the early twentieth century, the Census Bureau conducted very detailed religious censuses in 1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936, which are historically very valuable surveys. The planned religious census of 1946 was cancelled due to concerns by many groups that the information was open to potential misuse (this was the era of the Nazis) and because Congress refused to appropriate the money for such a survey. Since then, the Census Bureau has not asked questions about religion.

⁸ Based on estimates from the New Immigrant Survey (2003) and the Pew Research Center, "The Global Religious Landscape Study" (2012).

Given the regions of origin of the immigrants and the foreign-born population of the United States, these figures seem to be appropriate, although they are based on a much smaller sample population.

Since these categories are rather large and general, breaking them all down further is very important. One additional aspect is that these figures do not include those without legal status in the United States. The estimates from 2011 are that of this population of approximately 11 million people, 83 percent are Christians, 7 percent are in non-Christian groups, and 9 percent are religiously unaffiliated, which would raise the Christian percentages of the total group.⁹ When it comes to a further breakdown of the category of non-Christian groups, the figures look like this:¹⁰

Religious group	1992	2012
Muslims	5%	10%
Hindus	3%	7%
Buddhists	7%	6%
Other Religions	3%	3%

This roughly correlates with the estimates of other surveys, which show that approximately one-quarter of all new immigrants and the foreign-born population affiliate with some group that is not Christian. This also means that at least two-thirds of all immigrants and foreign-born people are Christians, a figure that can be moved significantly higher with the possible inclusion of those who are not legal residents of the United States.

A much smaller, yet more detailed survey was the New Immigrant Pilot Survey of the 1990s and 2003, which surveyed new immigrants about their religious preferences. This survey divided the immigrants along religious and gender lines to give a further delineation of their religious preferences.¹¹

Religious Preference	Men	Women	All
Jewish	2.4%	2.8%	2.6%
Roman Catholic	40.7%	42.9%	41.9%
Protestant	18.2%	18.8%	18.6%
Orthodox	4.2%	4.1%	4.2%
Muslim	8.1%	7.8%	8.0%
Buddhist	4.1%	4.0%	4.0%

⁹ Based mainly on the Pew Hispanic Center Survey (2011) and the New Immigrant Survey (2003).

¹⁰ Based on estimates from the New Immigrant Survey (2003) and the Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape Study” (2012).

¹¹ This is based on the New Immigrant Surveys, on about one thousand responses.

Hindu	3.8%	3.0%	3.4%
Other	2.1%	0.8 %	1.4%
No Religion	15.1%	14.8%	15.2%

So in these surveys, about 63 percent of all new immigrants belong to some form of Christianity, with the Roman Catholics being the largest number at about 40 percent. Only about 20 percent were some form of non-Christian religion, and 15 percent had no religion recorded. These responses are in line with the other survey responses and indicate that roughly two-thirds of all new immigrants and foreign-born people are Christians, while 20 to 25 percent are non-Christian.

FURTHER EXAMINATION OF IMMIGRANT RELIGION

These figures themselves, while significant, do not tell the whole story about religion among immigrants, as they measure only static elements of the subject. What is equally important is the internal developments within the immigrant communities over time and the effect that the American religious world has on the immigrants themselves and their communities. From the experience of the nineteenth-century immigrants, it is clear that there were substantial shifts and other internal developments among the immigrant religious communities over time, as individuals found their own place within the American religious world. This includes a fair amount of individuals shifting their religious affiliation, generally (but not exclusively) within their religious families—including Protestants shifting from one denomination to another, or from an ethnic denomination to an “English” (Americanized) denomination, or shifts from Orthodox to Conservative to Reform Judaism.

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The example of immigrants from Latin America to the United States, who are roughly 40 percent of the total, also shows these tendencies. Given that most Latin American countries are between 90 and 95 percent Roman Catholic, it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of immigrants from those countries enter the United States as Roman Catholics. But just because they enter as Roman Catholics does not mean they will stay that way. A 2013 study shows considerable “melt” as Hispanic Americans explore their religious options in the United States.¹²

¹² Pew Research Center Survey of Hispanic Adults, May–July 2013.

Religious group	Percentage
Roman Catholics	55%
Protestants	22% (16% Evangelical, 5% Mainline)
Other	4%
Unaffiliated	18%

These figures correlate with other surveys that indicate that between 20 and 25 percent of Hispanics are Protestants. The same survey shows that 30 percent of them changed their religious affiliation (presumably from Roman Catholic to Protestant), 16 percent switching after they entered the United States, and 13 percent switching before they entered the United States. Of further interest in the area is that the percentage of Roman Catholics among Hispanics has been falling over the first decades of the twenty-first century, down from 67 percent to 55 percent. The growth of their numbers in the “unaffiliated” category, at 18 percent, is also significant, especially when that figure is 31 percent of Hispanics aged eighteen to twenty-nine.

This is a good example of the malleability of immigrant religion. Coming from a nearly monolithic Roman Catholic religious culture, the immigrants from Latin America have formed a multifaceted immigrant religious culture in the United States. The formation of a significant Hispanic Protestantism, mainly ethnic Baptist and Pentecostal congregations led by entrepreneurial pastors, shows the influence of American voluntary Protestantism. The rate of unaffiliated Hispanics, especially among the youth, mirrors their non-Hispanic counterparts. The difficulties that the Roman Catholic hierarchy is having in trying to conserve this population are self-evident. In terms of Hispanic American religions, this population is becoming diverse and pluralistic at a rate that mirrors the general population.

When it comes to Asian American immigration, these factors are even more evident. Half of the world’s population lives in Asia, and this continent is the most religiously diverse of all. The Asian population is about 20 percent Muslim, 20 percent Hindu, 10 percent Buddhist, and 8 percent Christian, with a large number of secularized nones, especially in Japan. It is extremely hard to know reliably about religion in China; the old Chinese religions such as Confucianism and Daoism, overlaid by Buddhism, were severely damaged by Chinese atheistic Communism, but they still hold sway. Many Chinese are nones, but there is a rapid and significant growth of homegrown Christianity that may reach upward of 100 million people. Asia is also religiously very differentiated by region; many countries are 70 to 90 percent of one religion or another, but overall no one religion even approaches a majority.

When it comes to the religious composition of Asian Americans, however, the results are skewed in favor of Christianity.¹³

¹³ Pew Research Center, Asian-American Survey, 2011–12.

Religious Group	Percentage
Christian	42%
Buddhist	14%
Hindu	10%
Muslim	4%
Other	3%
Unaffiliated	26%

Given the fact that Christianity only counts for about 8 percent of the population in Asia, it is quite remarkable that some 42 percent of Asian Americans are Christians. The other figure that is notable is that 26 percent of all Asian Americans have no religious designation whatsoever.

Breaking this down by the Asian countries from which the largest number of Asian Americans come from is also helpful. China is the largest source of immigrants, and over 50 percent of Chinese Americans are unaffiliated, with 33 percent Christians. Filipino Americans and South Korean Americans are a large majority Christian, at 89 percent and 71 percent respectively. Indian Americans are 51 percent Hindu but 18 percent Christian; Vietnamese Americans are 43 percent Buddhist but 36 percent Christian; and Japanese Americans are 38 percent Christian and 29 percent Buddhist. Among all these Asian American communities, the percentage of Christians is significantly higher in the United States than it is in their home countries, with the exception of the Philippines.

Whether Americans think so or not, around the world the general perception is that the United States is a Christian nation, and it might be that Asian Christians are more likely to consider immigration to the United States than their non-Christian counterparts.

There are several possible explanations for the high numbers of Christians among Asian Americans. One of the most likely explanations is the prevalence of self-selection when it comes to immigration to the United States. Whether Americans think so or not, around the world the general perception is that the United States is a Christian nation, and it might be that Asian Christians are more likely to consider immigration to the United States than their non-Christian counterparts. Asian Muslims especially are underrepresented among Asian Americans, and this may be due to the perception (perhaps deserved) that America is a hostile place for Muslims. There are also special relations between the Philippines and South Korea, on the one hand, and the United States on the other, which privilege immigrants from those nations. Finally, there is the factor of aggressive evangelization by Christians among Asian American populations, whether by European

Americans or by Asian American Christians. The Chinese American Protestant churches are by far the largest institutions in their immigrant communities, and they have been especially effective in evangelizing within their sphere, to the point where one-third of Chinese Americans are Christian. In the case of the Hmong populations from Southeast Asia, the work of Christian missionaries in their refugee camps was also effective, to the extent that perhaps half of all Hmong Americans are Christians.

The experience of the Muslim American community shows perhaps the aspects of self-selection, but in a negative fashion, where it may well be that Muslims are underrepresented in the American immigrant population (in terms of numbers worldwide) by a fear of coming to a perhaps hostile and definitely Christian-majority country. A large number of Muslims in America have come as refugees, especially from Sudan, Somalia, and other war-torn countries, but might not have otherwise chosen the United States. The relatively small percentage of immigrants who are from Africa might also be a factor in limiting Muslim immigration. The number of Muslims in America is as high as it is (3–4 million) due to the conversion of a significant number of African Americans to Islam in the twentieth century, who constitute at least 25 percent of the total Muslim American population. Significantly, the change factor in the American religious world is evident in the rate of religious shifting that goes on in this community; one estimate is that 20 percent of all Muslim Americans were not raised in the faith, while another 20 percent of Americans who were raised as Muslims no longer have that identity.¹⁴ There is again a self-selection process going on among immigrants to the United States from the Arab world; a 2002 estimate by an Arab American source states that the Arab American community is 63 percent Christian, 25 percent Muslim, and 13 percent other/none.¹⁵ These figures are far from the popular perceptions of Arab Americans, which usually estimate them as overwhelmingly Muslim (as they would be in the Arab community worldwide). Certainly, the American religious world has had an interesting impact on Muslim immigration, as well.

CONCLUSIONS

To return to the initial question, what is the religious impact on America of the current, post-1965 immigration? This question can be addressed in three points.

First, there is no doubt that the new immigration is broadening the boundaries of religious pluralism in the United States. The new immigration, especially from Asia and Africa, is introducing new groups into the American religious scene, especially non-Judeo-Christian groups that have never been seen there

¹⁴ Besheer Mohamed, "New Estimates Show U.S. Muslim Population Continues to Grow," Pew Research Center, January 3, 2018.

¹⁵ Zogby International Survey, 2002.

before. This widening of the religious pluralism is most apparent in the larger metropolitan areas, to be sure, but even in the smaller cities and towns, and even in the rural areas, this increase is becoming obvious. There is not, however, much evidence that such widening pluralism is threatening the delicate balancing act that is the American religious system. The immigrants certainly seek their own rights, but for the most part they are busy enough with the difficult internal tasks of establishing and maintaining their faith communities and do not seem to pose too much of a problem.

Second, this new immigration is keeping America a majority Christian nation. The kinds of Christianity they bring and develop here may not be familiar, but they are legitimate forms of the Christian faith. This author has, over the years, presented much of this material to church groups and others who are often very surprised by this assertion and the facts backing it up. The people in these groups generally overestimate the numbers of non-Christians in the new immigration and underestimate the numbers of Christian immigrants. This may be explained by the difference factor, whereby people are prone to notice the presence of those groups who are different from them while ignoring those who are like them. So when a Muslim mosque or a Hindu temple opens in their area, people notice this; but when a Hispanic Pentecostal church or a Korean Methodist church move in, this does not register in the same way. But the figures are clear: the new immigrants are likely to be predominantly Christian at a rate equal to, or even greater, than the general population, and this trend does not seem to be changing.

Third, as much as the new immigrants are changing American religion, it is clear that American religion is changing the new immigrants in ways that are equal, or even greater. Just because the new immigrant comes from a distinctive religious culture does not mean that they will continue this tradition in the United States. The new immigrants are constantly shifting or changing their religious traditions and affiliations because of their interactions with American religious culture. With Hispanics developing a significant Protestant sector within their community, or Hmong and Chinese immigrants becoming Christians, or young immigrants moving into the *none* category, it is clear that new immigrant religion is not a static thing but is growing and changing in the American religious marketplace. Because of the American system of voluntary religion and lay participation, Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist laypeople are taking new leadership roles in their communities that have transformed their religious traditions. The new immigration is yet young, and the full effect of such developments will not be apparent for decades, but it is clear that, just like the rest of American religious groups, the new religious immigrant communities are constantly growing and adapting to their new situations.

None of this is to support, necessarily, any particular side in the great American immigration debate; questions of the number of immigrants admitted, the countries from which they come, and the means by which they become a fuller part of American society are important and often difficult. But this is to say that

simple answers about the new immigrants and their religious impact on American religious culture are not helpful in the larger debate and should be avoided. The new immigrant religious communities, like the ones that have been here longer, are dealing with a culture of change and development, one that has been a part of the United States from the very beginning. ⊕

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