

The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

The wave of post 1965 immigration has brought a new religious diversity to the United States. Over the last few decades, Islamic mosques and Buddhist and Hindu temples have appeared in most major cities and in quite a few smaller cities and towns. New places of worship have been constructed, but many new churches or temples begin simply in storefronts, the “borrowed” quarters of other churches, or in the homes of members. New immigrants are also bringing new forms of Christianity and Judaism that have shaped the content and the language of services in many existing churches and synagogues. There were more than 800 Chinese Protestant churches in the United States in 2000, and by the late 1980s, there were 250 Korean ethnic churches in the New York City metropolitan area alone (Min 1992: 1375, Yang 2002: 88).

Although these new forms of religious practice may appear to be “foreign,” they represent the characteristic path of adaptation of newcomers to American society. Just as many immigrants come to learn that they are ethnics in the United States, a significant share of immigrants also “become American” through participation in the religious and community activities of churches and temples. There is not one monolithic interpretation of the role of religion on immigrant adaptation, just as there is no single path to assimilation in American society. Many old and new immigrants are indifferent, if not hostile, to organized religion. But many immigrants, historical and contemporary, joined or founded religious organizations as an expression of their historical identity as well as their commitment to building a local community in their new country.

Although the obituary for religion in modern societies has been written many times, there is very little support for the secularization hypothesis that religion will disappear with modernity (Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Institutional religion has withdrawn from its paramount position and ubiquitous influence in traditional societies to a more circumscribed role in modern industrial societies. However, religious faith and religious organizations remain vital to many, if not most, persons in the modern world. It is only through religion, or other spiritual beliefs, that many people are able to find solace for the inevitable human experiences of death, suffering, and loss. With the expansion of

knowledge and the heightened sense of control that accompany modernity, the inexplicability of death may be even more poignant in the contemporary world than in traditional societies where death is an everyday experience.

Churches, and other religious organizations, also play an important role in the creation of community and as a major source of social and economic assistance for those in need. In past times, individuals could turn to the extended family (and the larger community) for social and spiritual comfort as well as for material assistance. With smaller and less proximate families in present times, churches and temples can sometimes fill the void. Members in many religious bodies, similar to members of a family, do not expect immediate reciprocity as a basis for friendship and social exchange. The idea of community—of shared values and enduring association—are often sufficient to motivate persons to trust and help one another even in the absence of long personal relationships.

Immigrants, as with the native born, have spiritual needs, which are most meaningful when packaged in a familiar linguistic and cultural context. In particular, immigrants are drawn to the fellowship of ethnic churches and temples, where primary relationships among congregants are reinforced with traditional foods and customs. Immigrants also have many economic and social needs, and American churches, temples, and synagogues have a long tradition of community service, particularly directed at those most in need of assistance. The combination of culturally attuned spiritual comfort and material assistance heightens the attractions of membership and participation in churches for new immigrants to the United States.

In this essay, I begin with a review of the classical thesis of Will Herberg that new immigrants become more religious after arrival in the United States in order to maintain cultural continuity following the trauma of international migration. Although religious faith provides continuity with experiences prior to immigration, the commitment, observance, and participation are generally higher in the American setting after immigration than in the origin country. The argument is supported with the frequent observation that one of the first acts of new immigrants is to found their own church,

temple, or mosque. Many supportive examples can be cited from European immigrants in the early twentieth century and for contemporary immigrants from Asia and Latin America.

Many important issues, however, are not addressed in the classical model. Even though every immigrant community may found a church, there were significant variations in the religiosity of immigrants, as measured by the frequency of church attendance. The classical model assumes a high level of religious participation to be a characteristic American practice, but there appears to have been a secular increase in American religiosity over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both among natives and immigrants. An important element in the increasing religious observance in American society was the importance of churches as a means of collective and individual socioeconomic mobility for immigrants and second-generation ethnic communities. These themes are explored in this essay after an elaboration of the classical model.

THE CLASSICAL MODEL OF HERBERG AND HANDLIN

The classic account of immigration and religion in the United States was written by Will Herberg over 40 years ago in his book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Herberg 1960). Drawing upon the research of Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy (1944, 1952), Herberg argued that twentieth century America was not one big melting pot, but three, and that the three major religious faiths provide enduring ethnic identities that persist along generations. Herberg's account extended the interpretation of Oscar Handlin (1973), who claimed that immigrants become Americans by first becoming ethnic Americans. For example, an immigrant from Sicily learns after arrival in the United States that he is an Italian American. The development of national-origin attachments is more than just a symbolic expansion of local or regional identities, but reflects the communal life in the neighborhoods and cities, in which immigrants live, work, attend church, and develop personal ties. In the Handlin framework, these new affinities and ethnic identities are not substitutes for a broader American identity, but represent the typical way most Americans see themselves. An American identity, as with American society and culture, is not a

monolithic historical memory, but rather a variable mosaic of regional, national origin, social class, and religious beliefs, customs, and attachments.

Joining the logic of Handlin with the empirical findings of Kennedy, Herberg claimed that first generation national origin identities blend into religious identities in subsequent generations. Inter-marriage in second and third generation weakened the solidarity of national-origin groups, but rarely bridged the strong divides between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Simply put, immigrants and their children became Americans, over time, by settling in neighborhoods, joining associations, and acquiring identities of ethnic Americans defined more by religion than by country of origin.

To “become American,” according to the Handlin and Herberg model, does not require complete assimilation. New immigrants must acquire a new language, develop new loyalties, and learn the basic tenets of political culture, but they are not required to change their religion (Herberg 1960 : 22). This easy acceptance of varied faith communities as fully American has emerged over time. Although Protestant dominance and prejudice toward other religions has never completely disappeared, it has receded with the growing diversity of the American population.

As the country grew over the nineteenth century, the definition of American identity had to be sufficiently broad to include the wide cultural variations between town and farm, the north and the south, and the frontier and the more established regions of the country. Gradually, it was accepted that new immigrants and their descendants could find their place in the American mainstream by joining one of the already existing sub-cultures or by creating their own. This could be by adherence to one of the major European religious traditions, perhaps combined with a national origin culture. American society expands, not by adding completely assimilated persons into the old culture, but by broadening the definition of American culture. For example, the ever-expansive American culture could include German beer, Italian pizza, and Greek salad as a typically American dinner.

The classic thesis of Handlin and Herberg—of immigrants becoming American through their affiliation with an immigrant/ethnic church—can be illustrated from a number of examples from the past and the present. However, the thesis does not fully describe or explain the variable role of religion and religious organizations across different immigrant communities and historical periods. The primary limitation of the Handlin and Herberg thesis is that it is ahistorical—it does not allow for the changing receptivity of American society and the changing composition and structure of religious groups over the last two centuries. Moreover, the primary focus of the Handlin and Herberg thesis is on the psychosocial benefits of religious participation, which neglects the important role of churches and temples as information sharing communities, which enhance the socioeconomic opportunities of immigrants and their children. These issues are explored at length below, but I begin with a review of the classical idea that immigration is a “theologizing experience” (Smith 1978: 1175).

WHY RELIGION MATTERS TO IMMIGRANTS

International migration, even in this age of instant communications and inexpensive travel, can be a traumatizing experience. Immigrants become strangers in a new land with the loss of familiar sounds, sights, and smells. The expectations of customary behavior, hearing one’s native language, and support from family and friends can no longer be taken for granted. Even the most routine activities of everyday life—shopping for food, working, and leisure time pursuits can be alienating experiences for many new immigrants who find themselves in strange settings that require constant mental strain to navigate and to be understood. Smith (1978: 1174) cites the enduring contribution of Handlin in “his evocation of the anxieties...that resulted from the forsaking of an old home and searching for a new community.”

It is no wonder that most immigrants gravitate to the familiar—residence in ethnic neighborhoods, employment in ethnic enclave firms, and social pursuits pursued in the company of family and friends with similar backgrounds. Although national authorities worry about the reluctance of many immigrants to immediately join the mainstream of American society, assimilation is inevitably a slow process. For immigrants who were

socialized in another country and arrived in the United States as an adult, acculturation may take decades, and assimilation will always be partial. In most cases, assimilation to a new society, however defined, is typically a multigenerational process that requires education and childhood socialization in the new setting (Alba and Nee 2003: 215).

Religious beliefs and practices can serve as ballast for immigrants as they struggle to adapt to their new homeland. Herberg (1960: 12) claims the immigrants must confront the existential question of “Who am I?” In a new social context, immigrants could often find meaning and identity by reaffirming traditional beliefs, including the structures of religious faith that may have been taken for granted before. The certainty of religious precepts can provide an anchor as immigrants must adapt and change many other aspects of their lives and habits. Religious values can also provide support for many other traditional beliefs and patterns—intergenerational obligations, gender hierarchy, and customary familial practices—that are threatened with adaptation to the seemingly amoral American culture.

These sentiments were expressed by a member of the Korean American community:

We came here, of course, for our own personal and very human reasons—for a better education, for financial well being, for greater career opportunities and the like. But we now find that we do not wholly control our circumstances by ourselves. We find ourselves in a wilderness, living as aliens and strangers. And the inescapable question arises from the depth of our being: What is the real meaning of our immigrant existence in America? What is the spiritual meaning of our alien status? (Sang Hyun Lee 1980, quoted in Hurh and Kim 1984: 134)

Customary religious practices, such as attending weekly services, lighting candles, burning incense in front of a family altar, and reciting prayers are examples of communal and family rituals, which were brought from the old country to the new. However, these activities often take on new meanings after migration. The normal feeling of loss experienced by immigrants means that familiar religious rituals learned in childhood,

such as hearing prayers in one's native tongue, provide an emotional connection, especially when shared with others. These feelings are accentuated from time to time with the death of a family member or some other tragedy. For these reasons, Herberg and others believe that religious beliefs and attachments have stronger roots after immigration than before.

In addition to the psychological benefits of religious practices for immigrants, the social organization of churches, synagogues, and temples also serves the material needs of immigrants (Ebaugh and Chafetz. 2000: 8). Upon arrival, immigrants need to find housing and employment, enroll their children in schools, learn (or improve) their language skills, and begin to create a "new" social life. Churches and other religious institutions are one of the most important sources of support for the practical problems faced by immigrants. Helping others in need, including new immigrants and the poor, is considered as one of the missions of many churches and temples, and many of these charitable works are directed to fellow congregants.

RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

According to the model described above, most immigrants seek to maintain, or renew, their religious faith after arrival. If immigrants cannot find a church or temple with their religious traditions, and preferably in their mother tongue, the American custom is to start one of their own. Handlin (1973: Chapter 5) argues that religion was a bridge that connected the old world with the new. Faced with changes and challenges in every other aspect of their lives, immigrants sought to recreate the church and faith of their homeland in their place of settlement.

There are many examples to illustrate this model. Vietnamese Catholics began to settle in poor neighborhoods in New Orleans in the late 1970s and by the early 1980s they applied to the local Catholic Archdiocese to erect a church. In 1985, less than two years after approval, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church was completed, largely by the efforts of lay participants (Bankston and Zhou 2000). Many new Indian immigrant families to the United States meet regularly for Hindu religious services in private homes, even though

group religious activities are not a typical practice of Hinduism in India (Kurien 2002a). Based on their study of religious behavior of southern and eastern European communities in “Yankee City” in the early decades of the twentieth century, Warner and Srole (1945: 166) posit a general sequence of steps in the institutionalization of local religious traditions, beginning with the holding of religious gatherings in private homes, followed by the rental of temporary quarters, and finally the construction of a permanent church, temple, or synagogue

This model—immigrants starting their own churches or temples—is a reflection of the American context as well as the desires of new immigrants. The American context or tradition is thought to consist of two fundamental characteristics. The first attribute is of a historically religious nation, with high proportions of Americans who are members of a church or synagogue and who participate through regular attendance at religious services. The second attribute is “freedom of religion,” with the absence of an establishment religion that compels conformity. The first amendment to the constitution provided the basis for freedom of worship by erecting a barrier between government and religion.

This American tradition—pluralist yet religiously observant—is distinctly different from most European countries of origin and is often thought to be reflective of the desires for religious freedom of the early seventeenth and eighteenth century English settlers. According to the often-retold stories of America’s founding, the early colonists were fleeing religious intolerance in the Old World and they wanted freedom to express their deeply felt religious beliefs. Their own experience with religious persecution was thought to have created a social and cultural environment in which freedom of religion would eventually flourish.

The reality, however, was that colonial America was not particularly religious and quite intolerant. The creation of an American society that was highly religious—in terms of the proportion of adherents and high levels of participation—and pluralist happened slowly over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Based on careful study of the number of churches in the eighteenth century, Finke and Stark (1992: 15-16) conclude

that less than one in five persons—only 17 percent—in colonial America on the eve of the revolution were members of a church. Although the story of the highly religious Puritans as the first English settlers is part of American nostalgia, most of the new settlers, even in New England, were not affiliated with any church (Finke and Stark 1992: Chapter 2).

Well into the eighteenth century, colonial America remained a frontier society, which was shaped by the character of migrants who left settled traditional European societies to find their fortune and adventure in the New World. The attributes of a frontier society, including a youthful age structure and a surplus of men to women, usually reduce adherence to traditional conventions, including routine religious practice. Beyond the middle class of the settled populations in the large cities, most Americans, at the time of the founding of the nation, were probably “unchurched.”

There were, of course, well established churches in many parts of colonial America, but the majority were distinctive for their religious intolerance. In the mid 1600s, Puritans in Massachusetts hanged two Quakers who refused to quit their province. Although Catholics made up less than one percent of the population, most of whom lived in Maryland, Catholics were forbidden to practice their faith in every colony except Rhode Island and Pennsylvania in the seventeenth century. Massachusetts threatened to execute priests who were caught in the colony twice, and Virginia banned Catholics from public office (Archdeacon 1983: 11 and 21). The small number of Jews in colonial America, perhaps only 1,000, made them less of an object of fear and hatred than Catholics, but derogatory comments about Jews were commonly expressed by most leaders of colonial society (Dinnerstein 1994: 3-12). The degree of religious intolerance in colonial society was only exceeded by the prejudicial attitudes towards the one in five Americans who were of African ancestry and the American Indian population whose lands were coveted. “Indian wars”—an early and popular American tradition—were organized to wrest land from the Native American inhabitants for the expanding European origin settlers.

Freedom of religion (or of no religion) as mandated by the First Amendment does not appear to be a sign of tolerance among religious people, but perhaps the compromise that emerged from the rivalries among the many Protestant denominations and the majority of colonialists who were not adherents of any religion. If Americans did not begin as an especially religious people, they seem to have become so over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tolerance of different religious traditions was much slower to develop.

The American religious tradition was “created” slowly over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the proportion of the population who were affiliated with a church increased. By the middle of the twentieth century, this upward trended crested with about 60 percent of the total population affiliated with a church or a formal religious body (Finke and Stark 1992: 15-16). The increase in American religiosity over the past two centuries appears to be due to two primary sources. The first was the competition for church membership created by the “upstart sects,” most notably Baptists and Methodists, on the American frontier. Finke and Stark (1992) argue, convincingly in my opinion, that competition among churches for support and members increased the fraction of the total population that were churchgoers.

The other major factor was the ability of the American Catholic Church, especially after 1850, to retain a high degree of religious identification and practice among the descendants of immigrants from Catholic nations and regions in Europe. Since most of these immigrants were nominal Catholics in their homelands, the question is how the American Catholic Church was able to convert them (or their children or grandchildren) into practicing Catholics in the United States—an issue to be addressed shortly.

The upward trend in religious adherence was buoyed by demographic and socioeconomic changes in the American population. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the European population of colonial America spread across the country. Frontier areas gradually became settled areas with several generations of local history. Among the cultural changes that followed from the ending of the frontier are communities with

children, schools, and churches. People who live near relatives, and who expect to live in communities for their entire lives, are more likely to sink organizational roots and to join churches.

The other change in American society was an increase in the middle class or people with some claim to social status. A recurrent finding in research on religiosity is that persons with above average socioeconomic status are more likely to join a church and attend services regularly (Lenski 1963: 48, Roof and McKinney 1987: 115). As more and more Americans experienced upward mobility and joined the “respectable” middle class (most of their early immigrant ancestors were probably not respectable in their countries of origin and probably not in the early years after arrival in the United States), church membership and participation became more of a part of everyday life.

Although much is made over the inevitable conflict between religion and modern scientific rationality, there is little evidence in support of a trend in secularism or a decline in religiosity in the late twentieth century America. In their study of church attendance over the middle decades of the twentieth century, Hout and Greeley (1987) find only a modest decline for Catholics in the late 1960s following the ban on birth control, but no further decline among Catholics after the mid 1970s. There was no decline in church attendance among Protestants from 1940 to the mid 1980s.

Another aspect of the American religious tradition is the gradual “Americanization” of immigrant churches and religious practices in the United States. Although different religious rituals have not disappeared entirely, there is a trend to conformity, including features such as the use of the English language, holding weekly services, having a sermon as a focal point of the service, and an increasing role of the laity in managing the affairs of church activities. This process has recently been labeled as “de facto congregationalism,” which means a shift from traditional hierarchical religious organization to a model along the lines of a reformed Protestant congregation (Warner 1998, Bankston and Zhou 2000). Although many differences persist, there are striking

examples of the change in the structure and form of immigrant churches, temples, and synagogues in the American context.

In the predominately Buddhist countries of Asia, most young men enter the monastery to serve as a monk, typically for a few months, before becoming an adult member of the community. Among Buddhist communities in the United States, this custom has died, and the role of a monk has become a specialized and professional role, closer to that of a minister. In the American context, authority in the Buddhist community has generally shifted from the sangha (the order of the monks) to the laity along the lines of a Christian congregation (Zhou, Bankston and Kim 2002).

These features, and other aspects of traditional religious practices, are shaped by the many practical demands in the course of adaptation to American society by various immigrant communities. Warner and Srole (1945: 200-204) note that many second-generation Jewish immigrants found it impractical to observe the Sabbath as strictly as Orthodox Judaism requires. Many Jewish families were merchants and Saturday was an important business day. Even elder first generation Jewish immigrants who strictly observed the Sabbath themselves accepted the reality that their American born children had to keep their stores open. One informant in the Warner and Srole study, an elderly Jewish immigrant, noted that men now take off their hats in temples and that some reform temples have organs just like in churches and says “We are imitating someone else and forgetting that we are Jews” (Warner and Srole 1945: 204).

Even with these adaptations, however, there is no sign that Jewish identity or even religious adherence was declining in “Yankee City” in the 1930s. Even with low attendance at religious services, there was strong Jewish support for a campaign to create a more modern synagogue in a better part of the city. In the depth of the Depression, almost every Jewish family in the city provided financial support to create a new synagogue that would cater to social needs (youth activities) as well as the religious traditions of the community (Warner and Srole 1945: 211-217).

HOW RELIGIOUS ARE NEW IMMIGRANTS?

The founding of a church or temple by an immigrant community is one of the most common features of the “Americanization” process. As native-born Americans were becoming more religiously observant over the course of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, immigrants were probably more motivated to follow suit. There were also internal motivations for new immigrant communities to start their own churches or temples soon after arrival. As noted earlier, participation in religious rituals reinforces traditional cultural identities and provides comfort to those enduring the hardships of adjusting to a new life in a strange environment. However, it is important to distinguish between the creation of new ethnic churches and temples and the question of whether most immigrants are religiously observant. The evidence on the latter question is mixed.

There are examples of a very high level of religious participation among immigrant groups, of which the Korean American Christian community is the most widely cited. Korean immigrants to the United States were drawn disproportionately from the minority of Christians in Korea. Less than one fifth of Koreans (in Korea) is Christian, but over half of Korean immigrants were affiliated with a Christian church in Korea prior to immigration (Hurh and Kim 1984: 129-30, Min 1992: 1375-1376). There is also a very high degree of conversion to Christianity among Koreans after immigration. About 70 percent first generation Koreans in Los Angeles reported an affiliation with a Korean ethnic church in the U.S. (Hurh and Kim. 1984: 130). There was also an extraordinarily high level of religious participation among Korean American Christians with 83 percent of the church affiliated attending church once a week or more (also see Min 1992: 1371).

On the other hand, there are many examples of immigrant groups that were not very religious, at least not at the outset. The most frequently cited example at this end of the continuum was the so-called “Italian problem,” as it was labeled by Catholic bishops in the early decades of the twentieth century. Vecoli (1964) reports that Italian Americans showed little interest or enthusiasm in Catholic practice, and the standard refrain was that Italian Americans only entered churches to be christened, married, and buried (also see Cinel 1982: 209). Although estimates of religiosity are hard to come by, it appears that

upwards of half to two-thirds of Italian immigrants in the early decades of the twentieth century were not practicing Catholics (Vecoli 1969: 268-269). Italian peasants from Southern Italy brought with them a strong anti-clerical tradition, often viewing the Church as an oppressive landlord at home and a strong opponent of Italian nationalism.

There have been many other *ad hoc* reasons offered for the apparently exceptional case of Italian Americans. Many Italian immigrants were men who came as sojourning laborers, to earn money and to return home. Joining a church, which probably required contributing time and money, may not have been considered a terribly attractive “investment” for men who did not expect to continue their careers and begin family life in the United States. Another reason frequently mentioned in the literature is that Italians did not resonate with the Irish dominated Catholic Church, which the Italians found to be cold, remote, and Puritanical (Nelli 1980).

The Italian case, however, may not have been all that exceptional. Although there were sufficient numbers of religiously motivated immigrants to found ethnic churches in every city, many new immigrant groups appeared to be closer to the Italian model than that of the Koreans. Upwards of 80% of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles remained nominally Catholic, but only about 40% were observant, as measured by regularly attending Mass (Sanchez 1993: 165, also see Cammarillo 1979). Finke and Stark (1992: 115) report that most immigrants from Germany, Italy, and Poland were nominal Catholics in their homeland. In spite of major efforts to convert immigrant Chinese in the early twentieth century by several Protestant denominations, only two to three percent of Chinese immigrants ever became practicing Christians (Woo 1991: 216-217).

The question of how religious the new immigrants were depends, in part, on the definition of religiosity. In the American context, religious practice usually means attending weekly services on a regular basis. In most rural areas of Europe, as well as in Asia and Latin America, religion and folk beliefs were intertwined into a way of life. Spirits of nature and the souls of the departed were nearby, and the daily life of villagers included many rituals to bring good fortune, to cure illness, and to avoid dangers. Many

of these ideas were intertwined with formal religious beliefs in ways that religious purists criticized. For example, Polish immigrants are described as having a Polish version of Catholicism that was infused with animism and magical beliefs (Lopata 1976: 48). The characterization of Italians was that their Catholicism was “a folk religion, a fusion of Christian and pre Christian elements, of animism, polytheism, and sorcery in the sacraments of the Church” (Vecoli 1969:228). The Italian religious tradition of the *festa*, when the statue of a saint was paraded throughout the local community with the community following in a procession, was considered to be a pagan ritual by the established Catholic Church. Similar descriptions have been made about the religious beliefs and traditions of nominally Catholic immigrants from the Philippines and Mexico.

In spite of these tensions in the first generation, Russo (1969) reports that, over generations, Italian Americans were gradually acculturated and assimilated into the American Catholic Church. The first generation – labeled the “Italian problem” by the Church—was anti-clerical and encountered an Irish dominated Church that was conservative, preoccupied with fund raising, and unsympathetic and often hostile to poor Italians. As the second and third generation left the cities for suburbs, they often joined mainstream Catholic Churches. Other measures of religiosity, such as weekly attendance at Mass and frequent communion increased among the second and higher generation Italian Americans. This is due, Russo argues, to intermarriage, suburbanization, and increased exposure to American Catholic norms and practices

More recent evidence on religious conformity to Catholic strictures comes from a study of Hispanic migrants to New York. Fitzpatrick and Gurak (1979: 60-63) report that second generation Hispanics are more likely to have Catholic wedding ceremonies than first generation Hispanics—consistent with the thesis that religiosity (or religious practices) increases with exposure to American society.

One Catholic immigrant group, however, was very different from all the others. Upwards of 90 percent of the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in the United States population attended weekly Mass circa 1900. The case of the Irish is of particular significant because the Irish

clergy dominated the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church and defined the culture of the Church. This is not just an American phenomenon. Irish priests and nuns have played a significant role in the development of the Catholic Church throughout the English-speaking world:

Not only did Roman Catholic Churches in England and Scotland become essentially Irish, but the Churches in the United States, English speaking Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand were all strongly influenced by the developing values and mores of Irish Roman Catholicism (Larkin 1984: 9)

There are frequent observations about the negative reaction of many Catholic immigrant groups to the Irish dominated American Catholic Church, which created a very formal set of obligations and was not particularly receptive to the folk versions of Catholicism from other lands. Nonetheless, the American Catholic Church gained ground in the competitive American religious market, and eventually captured the children of most Catholic immigrants, even if the first generation rejected the Irish model of the American Church. By the middle of the twentieth century, about one-third of all Americans identified as Catholics.

Why were the Irish different? What made them so much more religious than other groups? To address these questions requires a digression into Irish religious history and Irish immigration the United States. The first point is that the late nineteenth century version of Irish Catholicism—which created American Catholicism—was a reversal of the trend in Irish Catholicism prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s. According to Emmet Larkin (1984), the formal practice of Catholicism was actually on the decline in Ireland for the first four decades of the nineteenth century. The number of priests could not keep up with the rapidly growing population, and less than 40 percent of Irish Catholics regularly attended Mass (Larkin 1984: 68 and 87). Widespread poverty and the growing immiserization of the Irish population contributed to a weak Church establishment. There were also accounts of lax discipline with avarice, lust, and drunkenness among some priests. These Irish examples were not too dissimilar to some

reports about some members of the Italian clergy who came to the United States after having been expelled from Italy because of sexual misconduct (Vecoli 1969: 240).

This account of nominal Catholicism in Ireland in the early part of the nineteenth century corresponds to reports of non-religious Irish immigrant communities at the same time period (Bodnar 1985: 151). The pre-famine Irish immigrants were not avid churchgoers and the “great body” of people received communion only once or twice a year (Dolan 1975: 55-56). At the Church of the Transfiguration—the largest Irish parish in New York City, only 10 to 25 percent of the 10,000 members rented pews, which might be interpreted as a sign of irregular attendance (Dolan 1975: 51). The problem was not just the Irish. A similar attitude prevailed among German Catholics in mid nineteenth century New York, where only about 50 percent of the parish community of the Most Holy Redeemer Church regularly attended Sunday services (Dolan 1975:85).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, nominal Irish Catholics were transformed into practicing Catholics, as were most Irish-American Catholics. Following the famine of the late 1840s, the Catholic Church in Ireland changed dramatically with the “Devotional Revolution.” The Irish famine had a devastating impact on the Irish population, which declined by more than two million, or by almost one-third, because of death and emigration in the space of four years from 1846 to 1850 (Larkin 1984:59). The depopulation of Ireland continued for the balance of the century, with annual emigration averaging from 50,000 to 100,000 per year. Although the psychological effect of the famine is generally thought to be a key reason for the increasing religiosity of Irish Catholics, there were a number of other contributing factors.

The demographic losses among the Irish population were not random, but were primarily among the poorest and least religious of the Irish population. The first order effect of depopulation in Ireland was a sharp shift in the ratio of clergy to the lay population. This meant more churches had regular priests. The change in the class composition of the Irish population following the Famine also left more middle class Catholics that had been the historical bulwark of the Church.

There was a gradual improvement in the incomes of middle class Irish Catholics in the decades following the Famine. Because of their strong religious convictions, and a lack of investment opportunities in the nineteenth century, the Irish middle class contributed a very large share of their discretionary income and their lifetime savings to the Catholic Church (Larkin 1984). These contributions enhanced the wealth and status of the Irish Church, which led to an ambitious building program of cathedrals, churches, chapels, monasteries, convents, schools, and hospitals in every part of Ireland in the later decades of the nineteenth century (Larkin 1984: 26-27). The number of Irish priests, monks and nuns almost tripled from 1850 to 1900 as the Irish Catholic population decreased by one third. At the same time, Ireland began to export clergy (and capital) in service of Catholicism around the world.

The Devotional Revolution—which began with the reform of the Church and led to the transformation of nominal Catholics into practicing Catholics within a generation—was larger than just a psychological response to the Great Famine (Larkin 1984: 82-85). Larkin’s interpretation is that Catholicism became the primary component of Irish identity as they lost their “language, culture, and way of life” under British domination. Although the trend toward the Anglicization of Ireland had been underway for more than 100 years, the Devotional Revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century crystallized Catholicism as the “symbolic language and cultural heritage” of Irish at home and abroad.

This historical evidence points to two reasons for the vigor of the Catholic Church in late nineteenth century America, both stemming from the Devotional Revolution in Ireland. The first is simply the export of Irish clergy. The American Catholic Church became Irish in character, not just because the Irish were the first major wave of Catholic immigration, but also because Irish priests and nuns staffed the American Catholic Church. The savings of the Irish middle class led to the expansion of seminaries in Ireland, producing far more priests and nuns than were needed in Ireland. Religious careers were one of the few growth sectors of the Irish economy that lagged far behind the rest of Europe. One

seminary alone, the College of All Hallows in Dublin sent 1,500 priests to the New World in the 60 years after its founding in 1842 (Blessing 1980: 534).

The second issue is the one of identity. Larkin's thesis is that after 300 years of English domination, the Irish had few cultural props left to define themselves. Catholicism, and clerical vocations, became their cherished ideal. This question of identity was especially important in the American context because of the growth of the Irish population in the United States and the hostile reception that most Irish Americans encountered. Catholic Americans rose from less than one percent of the population in 1790 to 7.5% of the 23 million Americans in 1850 (Archdeacon 1983: 74). Over the course of the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants, and to a lesser extent German immigrants, made Catholicism the majority religion in most large cities. Although the growing American Catholic population had the constitutional freedom to establish churches, there was not an increase in tolerance for Catholics in Protestant America.

Fear of Catholic immigrants and Catholicism dominated much of the nineteenth century political life. From the xenophobic Know-Nothing movement of the 1840s and 1850s to the anti-Catholic nativist American Protective Association of the 1890s, Catholics were under attack, both rhetorically and physically (Archdeacon 1983: 74-84, Higham 1988: 77-87). The great American inventor, Samuel Morse, was one of many nineteenth century voices, which claimed that that Catholics were preparing to overthrow the government. In May 1844, there were three days of rioting in Kensington, a working class Irish suburb of Philadelphia, which culminated in the burning of two Catholic Churches and other property (Archdeacon 1983: 81). This case was one incident of many during the 1840s and 1850s when Catholic churches and convents were destroyed and priests were attacked by Protestant mobs (Daniels 1991: 267-268).

These attacks provide another reason why new immigrants were highly motivated to start and join a church in the United States, namely self-protection from the hostility of the native born population. Although there may have been occasions when numbers may have been important to provide protection against mob violence, the primary advantage

of religious affiliation was to create a sheltered community where immigrants and their families did not have to endure the daily insults. Finke and Stark (1992: 115) conclude that “a major achievement of the American Catholic Church was to appeal to a broad spectrum of ethnic backgrounds and to prevent ethnic differences from producing major schisms ... (and to have) ... created a social structure that protected Catholics from the dominant and hostile Protestant environment.”

Periods of wars, perhaps unexpectedly, may have contributed to a reduction in religious intolerance. John Higham (1988:12-14) reports that the service of foreign-born Americans, especially Irish Catholics, on the Union side of the Civil War led to the erosion of the Know-Nothing Party in the North. It was much more difficult to demonize the new Irish immigrants as heathen and un-American when they were fighting and dying to preserve the American republic. This argument is consistent with the claim of Klinkner and Smith (1999) that the major political and economic gains for African Americans have occurred in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and in subsequent twentieth century wars when African American soldiers were an essential resource needed for victory. These gains were, however, often temporary as racial and religious prejudices generally returned as the memories of common alliances during wartime faded.

Churches were social communities as well as places of worship, with a variety of associations and groups for men, women, and children. In addition to their educational value and leisure time pursuits, church associations created opportunities for leadership and civic contributions that would not have been possible in the broader community. For many immigrants groups, starting with the Irish, identity as Catholics provided a sense of internal cohesion and status as they encountered prejudice and discrimination in the United States. In an odd way, generalized hostility from the majority population may have contributed to the American tradition of new immigrant communities founding their own ethnic churches.

Over the course of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church grew by continued immigration of Catholics from eastern and

southern Europe. But the creation of a practicing Catholic population in the United States in the twentieth century was created by the infusion of Irish priests, nuns, and resources. The example of an Irish Church that defined national identity became the model for other nationalities. For many European ethnic groups, identification with a religious tradition was also a form of nationalism, especially if there was no contemporary state with which they identified. “There were national churches, including the Irish Catholic, the Armenian Apostolic, the Polish Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, at a time when there were no Ireland, Armenia, Poland and Greece in the political sense” (Warner and Srole 1945: 159).

A major means of creating immigrant/ethnic churches was the promotion of national languages. The Catholic Church permitted two types of parishes: neighborhood and national. National parishes could be attended by members of a specific nationality from across a city. Between 1880 and 1930, 30% of new parishes in the Northeast were “national” (Finke and Stark 1992: 130). In 1916, approximately half of Catholics attended a parish where a language other than English was used in religious services. Mass were said in Latin in all Catholic Churches, but the sermon was given in the local language in national parishes (Finke and Stark 1992: 126-127). For many decades, the Italian American community was served primarily by national Catholic churches (Tomasi 1975).

Although the American Catholic Church allowed variations in language, the high standards for religious observance were set by the Irish Devotional Revolution. In doing so, they strengthened the Catholic Church and contributed to a more “churched” American society—a topic that will be reconsidered in the concluding discussion.

THE VALUE OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND COMMUNITIES TO NEW IMMIGRANTS

Although the value of religion is usually considered in spiritual terms, there are many social and economic benefits from participation in religious organizations. These aspects of religious participation are particularly salient to immigrants because they have many needs and few resources. Many evangelical efforts to win religious converts among

immigrants begin with the provision of needed services. For example Protestant missions offered English classes, medical, and social services in their efforts to convert Chinese on the Pacific Coast in the early twentieth century (Woo 1991: 214-215). Protestant missionaries offered clothing, food, jobs and even candy to lure Italian families and their children to Protestant churches (Vecoli 1969: 252). There was a counter effort to teach the catechism and offer social activities to children in Little Italy by the Catholic Church.

Almost all immigrant/ethnic churches make major efforts to serve the social and economic needs of their congregants, including information about housing, social and economic opportunities that facilitate their adaptation to American society (Bodnar 1985: 148-150). Min (1992: 1379) reports that some Korean ethnic churches in New York City offer language classes (both Korean and English), a full Korean lunch after services, and seminars on practical as well as spiritual topics.

Churches also provide opportunities for fellowship with co-ethnics. Korean Churches in New York City tend to be small (less than 100 members) and allow for extensive social interaction after services as well as celebrations for holidays, and birthday parties for children and the elderly—operating as an extended family for many Korean immigrants (Min 1992: 1382). Churches provide a means of continuity with the past through reaffirmation of traditional values as well as coping with the problems of the present.

Churches assist new immigrants with finding housing and jobs as well as language assistance and navigating the American bureaucracy. Churches are particularly helpful for parents who need counseling on how to handle their American born children and also provide special religious and education programs for children (Min 1992). The Korean Catholic Apostolate Church of Queens, with over 2,500 members runs a credit union that serves members of five other Korean Catholic churches in the New York City region. Bankston and Zhou (2000) note that the manifest purpose of the Vietnamese Catholic Church in New Orleans is to provide a place of worship, the latent purpose is to bring people together so that they can find out what opportunities are available, especially jobs and other economic opportunities. Religious participation in the Vietnamese community

is also a means to ease the social adjustment of children and adolescents into American society (Bankston and Zhou (1995).

Several thousand Laotian Americans live in a rural area of Louisiana, initially drawn by a government training program in pipe fitting, welding, and other skills needed in the Gulf Coast region in the early 1980s (Zhou, Bankston, and Kim 2002). They first lived in public housing, but over time, they began to settle in clusters in middle class neighborhoods. By 1986, the leaders of the community formed an association to build a Lao-style Buddhist temple in a rural area of the county, which became a place of residential settlement for many Lao families. In addition to providing cultural and spiritual continuity with their past, the temple served as a communication hub for economic opportunities.

As part of their research on the Lao community, Zhou, Bankston, and Kim (2002: 57) report an interview with a non Lao director of a firm that employed about 75 Lao as welders, fitters and other skilled craftsmen in constructing off shore oil structures and asked him how the firm got so many Lao workers. The director replied, “One of our foremen is the financial manager at the Buddhist ‘whatchmacallit’ People go to him for a job and he just refers them here.” Another member of the temple community provides assistance for housing through her position as a loan officer in a local bank.

Although the Catholic Church is usually not credited with providing the same array of social services as other churches, this perspective neglects the historical role of the Church in providing educational opportunities through parochial schools. With the advent of the public common schools in the mid nineteenth century, Catholics faced a crisis. In addition to the general anti-Catholic bias of nativist America, public schools communicated a distinctly Protestant culture that many Catholics considered demeaning (Dolan 1975: 101-102). The response was to create an alternative Catholic educational system. Although many (perhaps most) Catholic parents did not send their children to parochial schools, Catholic education was particularly attractive to the emerging middle

class. In particular, Catholic secondary education and colleges provide an upper class educational system with students from all ethnic groups (Dolan 1975: 111).

There was also a tradition of Catholic charities, including orphanages and hospitals which aided immigrants and the poor (Dolan 1975: 128). These institutions, as well as Catholic schools, were staffed primarily by nuns. Because nuns served for wages much lower than other workers, Catholic institutions were able to provide high quality services for a fraction of the costs of the market economy. Many of these nuns were immigrants, particularly from Ireland. From 1850 to 1900, the number of Catholic priests in the United States grew a bit more than ten-fold, while the number of nuns grew twenty-five fold (Finke and Stark 1992: 135). The ratio of nuns to the Catholic population more than tripled during this period. Church mutual benefit associations, such as the “Sons of Italy” provided insurance for sickness and death, which was a much need service for immigrants and the poor (Finke and Stark 1992: 132).

It is difficult to evaluate the long-term impact of Catholic schools, but they may have been critical for the upward mobility for the children and grandchildren of immigrants. James Coleman and his colleagues claim that Catholic schools provide stronger academic environments than some public schools (Coleman, James, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore. 1982). Because private schools have fewer discipline problems, it is possible for students to concentrate on academic studies.

CONCLUSIONS

The growing numbers of new immigrants in the United States in the latter decades of the twentieth century have sparked a religious resurgence, which has become the subject of popular and scholarly attention (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Min and Kim 2001; Warner and Wittner 1998). This phenomenon does not mean that all, or even a majority of, new immigrants are very religious or regularly attend formal services. But the creation of new immigrant churches and temples as well as the presence of immigrants in established American churches is leading to major changes in the American religious landscape. For example, in many small towns in the American South—a region of the country that is

experiencing its first wave of immigration since the 1700s—some Catholic churches have begun to offer Mass in Spanish.

The most visible manifestation of the impact of new immigrants on American religion has been the establishment of thousands of new churches and temples that serve the particular needs of immigrant communities. Some immigrant churches are in newly constructed buildings, which are financed by the hard-earned savings of immigrants. More often, immigrants hold their services in rented quarters in the basements of established churches or in storefronts that have lost their commercial tenants. Many immigrants simply gather to pray, sing, and socialize in each other homes. These patterns are quintessentially American. One of the first projects of most early twentieth century American immigrant communities was to start their own churches and synagogues. Indeed, the development of American religious traditions is closely intertwined with the history of immigration (Herberg 1955).

On many dimensions, the classic Handlin and Herberg model of reinvigorated religious beliefs and practices after immigration captures many features of the contemporary revival of religion among new immigrants to the United States. Just as religion played an important role in maintaining community and continuity in the lives of early twentieth century European immigrants, many new immigrants find comfort, security, and fellowship through participation in religious activities. There are many historical parallels to the present. The diversity of different sects of Islam and Buddhism, which often appear to be incomprehensible to outsiders, resembles the myriad versions of folk Catholicism brought by earlier waves of immigrants. Another feature stressed by Herberg was the tension between the first generation's need for a church with services in the mother tongue and the second generation's preference for a "less ethnic church" with services in English. This historical pattern offers a template for comparisons with the growing diversity among contemporary Chinese and Korean Christian Churches.

The Handlin and Herberg account, however, does not really provide a clear sociological explanation for the non-theological appeals of religious participation for immigrants.

Moreover, the Handlin and Herberg model, in my judgment, falls short as an explanation for some puzzles in the changing historical context of American religious institutions. By assuming a constant presence of religion in American society, Handlin and Herberg do not come to grips with how the United States became a more religious society over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the central elements in the “churching of America” has been the ability of the American Catholic Church to incorporate a large fraction of the children and grandchildren of southern and eastern European immigrants as practicing Catholics.

According to many accounts, the first generation was largely indifferent, if not hostile, to the organized Catholicism. Moreover, the Irish American Church appeared cold, unsympathetic, and puritanical to many new immigrants whose traditional forms of folk Catholicism did not require following Church strictures for regular attendance and receiving the sacraments. The Catholic Church was successful in the long run, by allowing the first generation to go their own way with national churches that allowed for variations in language and cultural forms. By the time the second generation was ready to make religious choices, the Catholic Church offered an incredibly good package—a respectable church that was free of Protestant prejudices; schools, hospitals and other social services staffed by caring and dedicated nuns, and demanding religious obligations that appealed to many people. Although intuition may suggest that lax and undemanding religions will be the most popular, recent research in the sociology of religion suggests the opposite (Finke and Stark 1992). Religious commitments are stronger if a faith expects conformity to principles, and enforces obligations by creating a strong sense of community.

The centrality of religion to immigrant communities can be summarized as the search for refuge, respectability, and resources.¹ The immigrant’s need for refuge from the trauma of loss and separation was a central theme in the classical writings of Oscar Handlin and Will Herberg. The process of adjustment following international migration varies across national origin groups, over time, and from person to person. For many immigrants, the

¹ I am grateful to Alejandro Portes for suggesting this formulation.

separation from family, language, and community often leads to a search for meaning and stability in their new homeland. Religious participation and rituals can often fill the psychological void and create a sense of belonging and community for newcomers. American religious pluralism allows (and encourages) immigrants to form their own churches or temples that fit with their unique sociocultural and linguistic needs.

At various times in American history, the search for refuge by immigrants has been for physical safety as well as for psychological comfort. American nativism occasionally turned violent, especially against Catholics in nineteenth century cities. Communities and neighborhoods that shared a common religious identity centered on church or temple could provide a sense of local protection against toughs from the outside. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, some liberal American churches created the sanctuary movement to protect illegal immigrants who had fled warfare in Central America. Churches are often symbolized as places of refuge from unjust secular power.

Churches can also provide respectability or opportunities for status recognition and social mobility that is denied in the broader society. Even though many immigrants (and their children) may be granted formal access to education and employment in the United States, they may still encounter informal barriers to intimate circles of friendship, clubs, and other social groups. Milton Gordon (1964) observed the persistence of “ethnolclasses” in the face of continuing discrimination by older stock Americans that blocked structural assimilation for the second and third generation descendants of immigrants. By creating a parallel set of social institutions, immigrants were able to find avenues for social advancement, leadership, community service, and respect that may have been impossible in the broader community. Many of these institutions were centered in ethnic churches and religiously affiliated associations, such as the Knights of Columbus, the Sons of Italy, B'nai B'rith, and comparable organizations for women and adolescents.

Churches and temples also become central to the lives of immigrants by catering to their needs through the provision of resources and services. The bonds of faith are reinforced when a religious community can provide non-spiritual fellowship and practical assistance

for the many problems that immigrants face. Almost all studies of contemporary immigrant churches and temples describe the multiple services provided to newcomers. Immigrants and their families go to church to acquire information about housing, employment opportunities, and other problems. Churches sponsor classes to help immigrants to learn English, to learn how to deal with their Americanized children, and how to acquire benefits for their aging parents. Young immigrants or the second generation can go to church for help with their homework, for social activities, and to meet prospective marriage partners that will likely meet with parental approval.

The social, cultural, and socioeconomic role of American churches, from potluck dinners to job referrals, are not limited to immigrant churches and temples. Most American churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques respond to religious and spiritual needs while also catering the everyday practical needs of their members. This model of religious organization has helped successive generations of immigrants and their children to become American. And in turn, the long history and diversity of immigrants to the United States have played a major role in creating a unique American religious landscape that is pluralist, generally observant, and very responsive to the cultural and socioeconomic needs of adherents.

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