

A New Multi-Religious America

Summary: The lightening of restrictions on immigration starting 1960s allowed for new waves of diverse immigration to America. As recent immigrant religious groups become more established in America they often build places of worship by either blending with existing organizations or forming new ones. Recent developments have thus created new opportunities and challenges for the American experiment in religious pluralism.

Today America is more religiously and ethnically diverse than ever before. The wave of immigration in the early part of the 20th century made America a microcosm of Europe. But since 1965, with the new period of high immigration, America has become a microcosm of the world. The new multiculturalism has important religious implications, as new communities of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others put down roots in American soil. For all Americans, creating a truly pluralist society will mean more than just acknowledging this diversity; it will mean engaging this diversity in building a common society. Some doubt that it is possible and have argued once again for immigration restrictions. In the early 21st century, as in the last, the issues of immigration and xenophobia have once again risen to the top of the American agenda.

What sparked the new period of immigration? In the 1950s, America began to struggle seriously with its deep racial divisions. The movement for the civil rights of American blacks was already underway when John F. Kennedy was elected president. As Americans became critically aware of the deep structures of racism, they also saw that racial discrimination continued to shape American immigration law, excluding people from the “Asia-Pacific triangle.” President Kennedy prepared legislation to “eliminate discrimination between peoples and nations on a basis that is unrelated to any contribution immigrants can make and is inconsistent with our traditions of welcome.” In 1965, after his assassination, a new immigration act was signed into law by President Johnson.

In the half century since 1965, immigrants have come to the United States from all over the world. They have come from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, from Africa and the Middle East. A significant new Jewish population has come from the former Soviet Union. Muslims and Zoroastrians have come from Iran. However, the highest percentage growth rate has been in immigrants from Asia and the Pacific. As diverse as Asia is diverse, they have brought with them the many religious traditions of their homelands.

From India have come Hindus with all the many streams and strands of the Hindu religious tradition. They have gradually moved from makeshift quarters and rental space into elaborate and beautifully designed temples in such cities as Pittsburgh, Nashville, Atlanta, and Detroit. The Jain community, also from India, has created a nationwide network, building temples and launching a youth movement. Sikhs have built *gurdwaras*, sponsored Red Cross Blood Drives, and struggled to claim the right to wear their turbans, whether on hard-hat jobs or in the armed services.

Muslims have come from Pakistan and India, joining other Muslims from the Middle East and Africa to form Islamic centers. They have met their African American cousins and the Lebanese immigrants already settled in America, and together have worked to articulate an Islamic voice in American public affairs. They have both participated in public schools and established private Islamic schools. Today, mosques make their home in New York, Toledo, Houston, Phoenix and dozens of other cities.

From Taiwan and Hong Kong have come Buddhists, who have built some of the largest Buddhist temples in the Western hemisphere—the Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California, the Jade Buddhist temple in Houston, and the Chuang Yen Monastery in New York. From Korea have come both Pure Land Buddhists and Zen Buddhists, the latter attracting a large Euro-American following as well. Thais have established a network of over forty Thai temples in various American cities. Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian Buddhist communities have sprung up in all the cities where those who came as refugees in the wake of the Vietnam War have settled.

Christians have also been among the new wave of immigrants to America, with Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese and Chinese bringing new diversity to American Christianity. They have nested for a time in the space of older, established churches and then gradually moved out into their own space, with burgeoning congregations. Hispanic immigrants have brought vibrant Catholic traditions to the United States, as well as a growing Hispanic Pentecostal movement. The Catholicism of immigrants from Cuba and Haiti is often subtly and seamlessly blended with Afro-Caribbean traditions.

No longer “Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish,” America is now appropriating a new multi-religious reality. Houston has over forty Islamic centers or *masajid*, fifteen Hindu temples, and Buddhist temples from every tradition of Asia and new Euro-American Buddhist communities. The city is home to eleven Sikh *gurdwaras*, a Jain temple, a Zoroastrian center, and a number of Bahá’í groups. In Silver Spring,

Maryland, just beyond the Washington D.C. Beltway, is a stretch of New Hampshire Avenue just a few miles long that has come to symbolize this new multireligious reality. New neighbors sit side by side, one after another: a Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery, a large mosque and Muslim Community Center, a Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a Disciples of Christ church, a Hindu Chinmaya Mission, a Ukrainian Catholic Church, and a Gujarati Hindu temple. Along the way, Hispanic Pentecostals, Vietnamese Catholics, and Korean evangelicals share facilities with more traditional English-speaking Presbyterian, Methodist, and Catholic congregations.

The new religious landscape of America has created new challenges for the American pluralist experiment. From the time of the first encounters of Native peoples and Christians, America has been challenged by the facts and tensions of religious difference. Never before, however, has the challenge of understanding been as great as it is today.