

God's Melting Pot

Summary: The metaphor of the United States as a “melting pot” first gained prominence during the wave of European migration from the 1880s to 1910s. A simplistic assumption of the “melting pot” asserts that all American immigrants become the same, while a more nuanced understanding sees American diversity affecting everyone differently. Many critiques of the “melting pot” have been made throughout the 20th and 21st centuries: that the metaphor denies the presence of non-European Americans, that religion may not “melt away” as ethnicities seem to do, and that ethnicities do not disappear as quickly as expected.

The “melting pot” is one of the strongest images of America’s appropriation of diversity, melting differences into something new. The term has caught the imagination of Americans for decades, while it has also generated a significant critique from those who argue that the image sacrifices differences to uniformity. Its popularity surfaced during the massive migration of Europeans to America between 1880s and 1910. This was the largest movement of peoples in history, bringing to America a new religious and ethnic diversity on such a scale that it challenged oldtimers and newcomers alike to rethink what it meant to be “American.” Originally, the motto of the republic, *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of Many, One,” had described the bonding of the many colonies into one federal union. Now it became a new challenge: the bonding of one people out of many immigrant ethnicities and nationalities.

More than 100 years before the great immigration of the late 19th and early 20th century, a French essayist had described America’s “new race” of people in language that prefigured the melting pot. In *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Hector St. John de Crevecoeur described with astonishment the man whose grandfather was English, whose wife was Dutch, and whose son married a French woman. This, he says, is the American: “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.” He envisioned the melting away of divisive differences in religion too, as Catholics, German Lutherans, and Dutch Reformed farmers were now neighbors, not rivals. His book, though published in the late 1700s, gave future generations much to think about as they grappled with the issues of difference in American society.

It was a Jewish playwright, Israel Zangwill, who popularized the metaphor of the “melting pot,” evoking the image of the crucible of America’s great steel industry. His play, *The Melting Pot*, which opened in Washington D.C. in 1908, explores the intersection of Jewish identity and American identity. Its main

character, David Quizano, a self-taught musician and composer, has come to America from Russia, where he had escaped a *pogrom*, forever scarred by seeing his entire family murdered before his eyes. David's dream is, he believes, the American dream: that in this country of immigrants all the hatreds, the rivalries, the feuds of the old world will melt in the crucible that creates the new world. He proclaims, "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!"

But David's optimism is tested when he falls in love with Vera, a Russian who is also a Christian. His more traditional and pragmatic Jewish relatives are appalled that he would consider marrying a non-Jew, and Vera's family is horrified that she would consider marrying a Jew. The tension becomes a living nightmare when David and Vera discover that her father was the same Russian officer who supervised the *pogrom* in which David's family was massacred. Can they really leave all this behind, all these old hatreds? Can they cross over the "rivers of blood," as Zangwill wrote, that would separate them? Finally they do, but not without being challenged to their depths by the vision of the melting pot.

When Theodore Roosevelt saw the play on its opening night in Washington D.C., he said, "We Americans are children of the crucible." Zangwill's play thrust the image of the melting pot into public view in the midst of a record-setting decade of immigration. The image has come to bear many meanings of American identity. At its most static, it has meant the melting away of the customs and ways of the "old country" to conform with the new. Here the cartoons of the Detroit's Ford Motor Company's "English School Melting Pot" come to mind: Immigrants in their national costumes find themselves on the wheel of change, dipped into the melting pot and only to emerge as real Americans, wearing house dresses and business suits and carrying American flags. In this vision, having a share in America means shedding particularity.

At its most dynamic, however, the melting pot is an image of the process of change that both immigrants and native-born Americans undergo as they encounter one another on American soil. Both the immigrants and the nation are changed in the process. In this sense, the historian Philip Gleason has called it a "transmuting pot." This seems to be Zangwill's point, at least as he makes it in his afterword to the play. The melting pot does not mean the loss of one's ethnic, cultural, or religious identity. For him, "American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type." Rather, it is the "give and take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished."

It is also important to note what is missing from this vision of the melting pot. There were no African Americans, no Cherokee, no Chinese in the crucible of America as the image came to be used and popularized. Zangwill never imagined Asians as part of the melting pot where the “races of Europe” were being refined and reshaped into a new race. And in neither Crèvecoeur nor Zangwill is there mention of Native Americans as having a role in creating the new stock of people in the new world. And, as Nathan Glazer has pointed out, there is also no mention of blacks when the melting pot image is invoked or when it is criticized by the advocates of cultural pluralism.

The image of the melting pot has persisted through the 20th and into the 21st century, but not without serious criticism. In 1964, Philip Gleason summed up the many cultural uses of the term in his article, “The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?” He concludes that the “most serious distortion” of the melting pot image was the idea of “uniformity of product.” He writes, “Unconsciously, one suspects, many people came to feel that there was something wrong with immigrants if they did not visibly start ‘blending.’”

Religion was one area where blending had its limits. In the 1940s sociologist Will Herberg proposed a modification of the idea, the so-called “triple melting pot” theory. He claimed that while ethnic differences could—and often did—melt away in the fire of the crucible, fundamental religious differences simply did not melt. There were really three different melting pots in America, he argued: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. He referred to the research of Ruby Jo Kennedy on immigrant marriage patterns which found that, on the whole, Protestants tended to marry Protestants, whether German or Swedish in origin; Catholics tended to marry Catholics, whether Irish or Polish; and Jews tended to marry Jews, whether German or Russian.

A decade after Herberg’s claim, students of American culture began to question the “triple melting pot” as well. Nathan Glazer and future U.S. senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published a book about the new assertion of ethnicity called *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), while Michael Novak published *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1972). In the 1970s, with the new Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist immigration, the question of the melting pot was raised once again. In the early 1990s, a *Time* magazine cover story on America’s new ethnic diversity was titled, “Beyond the Melting Pot.” It cited the Census Bureau statistics from the 1990 census: one in four Americans was non-white—either Hispanic, African American, Native American, or Asian and Pacific Islander. Those numbers have only increased in the

first decade of the 21st century. Between 2000 and 2010, the growth in the Hispanic population accounted for more than half of the total growth of the U.S. population and during that same time Asians saw the largest increase by a single group identifying with one race, with an increase of 43%. The implications for America's religious traditions follow. Although data on religious affiliations is not captured by the United States Census, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2008 released the results of a landmark "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" (updated in [2015](#)), which offers a state-by-state snapshot of religious affiliation.

The questions of the first two decades of the 20th century are on the agenda once again. What is the process by which people of diverse cultural backgrounds become Americans? How does it occur? How much will Vietnamese, Thai, Tamil or Pakistani culture begin to melt? Will Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim identity fade or become stronger in the American context? Will religious identity prevail over ethnicity and produce, once again, multiple melting pots—Hindu, Muslim, Jain? These are the questions a new generation now brings to the critique of the melting pot.