

Xenophobia: Closing the Door

Summary: In the early 20th century, during rising waves of immigration, white nationalist groups gained ground in American culture and governance, resulting in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which put low and strict national quotas on immigrants hoping to enter the U.S. This anti-immigrant xenophobia also supported the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, which incited anti-Catholic and antisemitic sentiments, and the forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. During this period, interfaith efforts between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews strove to combat rising American xenophobia.

The concepts of the “melting pot” and “cultural pluralism” were both responses to decades of massive immigration, both articulations of how such great differences could be shaped into a new American identity. Yet another voice in the public debate insisted that there were too many newcomers and too much difference to assimilate. This voice called for a more definitive response: to close America’s doors completely. America, in this view, could not bear the increasing burden of being forced to define itself anew along multi-ethnic and multi-religious lines.

The doors of Ellis and Angel Islands were effectively closed with the Johnson-Reed Act (1924), which established quotas for immigrants on the basis of national origin. It was the culmination of a decade of restrictive measures: “barred zones,” from which immigration was restricted, were established, including all of Asia; a literacy test was enacted; and in 1921 a quota system granted 82% of the immigration quota to Western Europe. The Johnson-Reed Act further restricted the immigration of a given nationality to only 2% of the number documented as living in the United States by the census of 1890. In the wake of World War I, a growing xenophobia—“fear of the foreign”—seemed to take hold. The sentiment of these new nativists was that if more people came to the U.S., they should be like those already here.

While the new policy mentioned only “national origins,” minority religious communities experienced the force of this constriction as if it were aimed directly at them. Since the great waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and Catholic immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe did not reach full force until after 1890, the numbers of those allowed entry to the U.S. was sharply restricted. Sikhs from India and Buddhists from China and Japan also felt the blow directly, since the bill limited new immigration to those eligible for citizenship. At this point Asians were still being declared ineligible for naturalization as citizens under a 1790 statute limiting naturalization to “free white

persons.” A Supreme Court decision of 1923 stripped a Sikh immigrant, Bhagat Singh Thind, of his naturalized citizenship when the court ruled he did not qualify as a “white” person. A similar decision had already determined that Japanese and other “orientals” did not qualify. Thus, with Asians ineligible for citizenship, the 1924 immigration act virtually stopped new immigration from Asia, including the wives and families of those already settled here.

This rising xenophobia was fed by fears that the “mongrelization” of American culture would weaken America. Political and economic unrest was compounded with the touting of race-based theories of character and intellectual ability in which the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians of Northern Europe were deemed to be superior to the swarthy Italians, Spaniards, and Eastern European Jews. Ideas about “race” were inevitably bound up with equally ill-informed ideas about religion. The reorganization and public resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan led to violent attacks on and intimidation of African Americans, and made public blatantly antisemitic and anti-Catholic statements on Main Streets everywhere.

The population of Jews in America had expanded from a quarter million in 1880 to 4 million by 1925, a number large enough to be perceived as a threat. In *Anti-Semitism in America*, Leonard Dinnerstein chronicles the spread of anti-Jewish sentiment in these years. Some, he writes, blamed urban economic and social problems on the Jews. In Christian Sunday schools, Jews were mentioned only in terms of their role in Christ’s death. Industrialist Henry Ford excluded Jews from Dearborn, the Detroit suburb he built to house his Ford Motor Company workers. Ford’s newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, regularly promulgated images of Jews that were in line with KKK propaganda and drew from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a book put out by the Russian secret police claiming that Jews were agents of the Devil seeking to overthrow Western civilization. As ambitious Jewish students began to be admitted to Harvard University in disproportionate numbers, even Harvard’s President A. Lawrence Lowell spoke of what he called a “Jewish problem” at Harvard, a problem only restrictive quotas could solve.

Catholics endured different versions of the same fear. Italian Catholics were condemned not only for looking culturally “different” from the more established German and Irish Catholics who preceded them, but also for religious rituals, such as the outdoor *festas*, that Protestants were quick to call “baroque” at best and “pagan” at worst. Italian Catholics were also criticized for their commitment to the Pope in Rome, which was perceived as a threat to American national security and stability. In 1928, when the

Democrats selected a Catholic, Al Smith, as their presidential nominee, the Ku Klux Klan drummed up severe opposition to him, bringing all the virulence and ignorance of the earlier Know-Nothing movement back to the surface of America's public life. Cartoons depicted a meeting of Al Smith's cabinet chaired by the Pope.

Fortunately, xenophobia was not the only impulse of this period. Pioneering efforts were made to bring Protestants, Catholics, and Jews together to work for common social and civic goals, such as improving conditions for industrial workers and resettling immigrants. The initiative came primarily from the Protestant establishment. The Federal Council of Churches, for example, formed a Committee on Goodwill between Jews and Christians. Over the course of a decade, the Goodwill Movement came to involve prominent and energetic Catholics and Jews. The Central Conference of American Rabbis formed a Committee on Goodwill as well, and in 1929, the Catholic-led Calvert Round Table brought some 500 Catholics, Jews, and Protestants to Harvard to discuss prejudice and mutual stereotypes.

The Goodwill Movement, as it was called, was not a unified movement but a loose coalition of what would now be called "interfaith" initiatives. The National Council of Christians and Jews (now the National Conference for Community and Justice) for example, had its genesis in this period. In dozens of statements and action initiatives, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews stood firmly together against the "hooded bands" of KKK supporters and their anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic rhetoric. There were those within all three religious communities who were suspicious of the Goodwill Movement, but it did publicly articulate an America which Catholics, Protestants, and Jews could all share, and to which all could contribute.

With the economic chaos of the Depression in the 1930s, the fault lines marked by restrictionist xenophobia and new, sometimes uneasy, interfaith alliances cracked and widened. For some, the economic crisis heightened resentment toward Jewish and Catholic immigrants perceived to be taking "American" jobs. President Roosevelt's New Deal came under attack as the "Jew Deal" because of the unprecedented number of Jews hired by the administration to implement its major reforms and the perception of Jewish control.

With the dawn of World War II, America's mistrust of ethnic and religious "others" peaked. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the reactive campaign against Japanese Americans had a devastating

impact on a community of immigrants, many now in the second and third generation. Forced into internment camps, they were now prisoners within their own country. The leadership of Japanese Buddhist communities was treated with special suspicion. Jodo Shinshu Buddhism emerged from the camps with a new, more American name: Buddhist Churches of America.

While holding some of its own citizens in internment camps, the American government was slow to recognize and respond to the existence of concentration camps in Europe. Some had even warmed to Hitler's antisemitic campaigns and felt sympathy with German assertions of Jewish responsibility for national economic hardship. In 1940, facing mixed public sentiment and a newly elected conservative House and Senate, Roosevelt hesitated to offer refugee assistance to European Jews fleeing certain death. The War Refugee Board was not established until 1944, only after Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury presented him with irrefutable evidence of both the systematic murder of European Jews and American indifference to it.

These are a few major examples of American xenophobia, which has existed throughout the country's history. Most recently, xenophobia is once again on the rise in the midst of a new period of immigration and increasing world refugees. Immigrants from the Philippines, Korea, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mexico, and Central America, and refugees from Mexico, Central America, the Middle East, and North Africa, have brought new cultural and religious traditions to the United States. However, some current conservative politicians in the country have adopted nationalistic theories of citizenship and belonging. Such rhetoric has once again raised the questions: Has the diversity of new traditions created a brilliant multicultural tapestry, or is it too much for the fabric of American society to incorporate? Are the foreign-born the source of America's problems or contributors to their solutions? Religious leaders have also contributed their views on refugees, proposing various answers for such questions as: How, and to what extent, should America admit refugees into its borders? What responsibilities does the United States government have to those seeking asylum? The perspective of history reminds us that the debate is not a new one. The Pluralism Project's [essay on stereotypes and Prejudice](#) provides a more thorough examination of contemporary xenophobia in America.