



January 2007

“The Languages of the Public Sphere: Religious Pluralism, Institutional Logics, and Civil Society.”

Rhys H. Williams

Loyola University Chicago, rwilliams7@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/social_justice



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Rhys H., “The Languages of the Public Sphere: Religious Pluralism, Institutional Logics, and Civil Society.” (2007). *Social Justice*. 55.

https://ecommons.luc.edu/social_justice/55

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centers at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Justice by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

The Languages of the Public Sphere: Religious Pluralism, Institutional Logics, and Civil Society

By
RHYS H. WILLIAMS

The increase in religious diversity in the United States since the early 1970s has led to concerns about American national identity and the health of American civil society. Part of this concern emerges from the recognized, but usually unarticulated, parallel between the organizational forms dominant in American civil society institutions and those found among Protestant religious organizations. These organizational forms have an accompanying discourse and institutional logic, premised on voluntarism, individual authenticity, and localism. The question facing civil society from the diversification of the American religious landscape is the extent to which civil society can expand its repertoire of languages and/or traditionally non-Western religious traditions can adapt to these cultural forms.

Keywords: public discourse; voluntary organizations; religious immigration

One can easily argue that the degree of religious diversity in the United States currently is unlike any that has gone before it. And one can argue, albeit not quite so easily, that American society is more riven by political, social, and economic polarization, with more individual isolation and alienation and less collective social trust, than at any time in its history. Some social observers, and many ordinary Americans, suspect that these two social trends are related, with the first a significant factor in causing the second.

Certainly plenty of evidence shows that religiously motivated politics has produced conflict, violence, and extremism in many parts of the world. Many scholarly works are devoted to the consideration of the direct effects of religion on state power, political mobilization, political

Rhys H. Williams is a professor of sociology at the University of Cincinnati. His research interests have focused on the intersection of religion, politics, and social movements in American culture, most recently studying second-generation Muslim and Hindu youth. He is currently editor of the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716207301140

tactics, or political values.¹ Most of this scholarship involves study of how religion relates to the state, to involvement in government, or to the involvement in social movements that challenge state power.

This article angles the concern with religious diversity and public life a bit differently, by considering “civil society” and the extent to which American religious diversity is challenging, reinforcing, and transforming it. The clashes, and potential clashes, of religious cultures, ultimate values, and orientations to participation in public life that exist within a single country that contains many different faiths can lead to a number of questions with both scholarly and practical import. In such a situation, what will count as acceptable public discourse for participating in public life? What issues or realms of life will be available for public review and decided upon by using religious criteria? What types of organizations will orient social life? What forms of social capital will be created within and between these organizations?

A critical dimension of these issues, I argue here, involves the languages of the public sphere and the institutional logics those languages embody. How we talk about our public life is more than just “mere words.” It is “rhetoric” in the classic sense of that term—not as empty words of little significance or cynical intent, as popular usage often implies—but rather, rhetoric as language meant to persuade others. To that end, I use a broad definition of language to include nonverbal symbols, ritual practices, and the logics that justify and support organizations and how they operate; in each case, I am thinking of language as a set of symbols, originating in a particular social group and its (sub)culture but not existing solely there, that expresses the group’s identity and explains and justifies the group and its existence both to itself and to others. Religious language is obviously one ubiquitous and powerful version of this general social and cultural property, but it is not the only one, nor does religious language exist in society as “purely” spiritual. Religious language and meanings become entwined with culturally approved ways of thinking, acting, and being. Religion helps legitimate cultural forms and, in turn, becomes a legitimate mode of expression within a culture.²

In one sense, I am thinking of ethno-religious groups, particularly those relatively new in U.S. society, as “communities of discourse” in Robert Wuthnow’s words.³ They are social groups that must “articulate” their understandings of themselves with salient features of the dominant host society (in the case being discussed here, civil society understandings and institutions) and with other social groups (in this case, other religious groups and traditions). Although forms of discourse may originate within any given group or religious tradition, they often do not remain there—they can become forms of “public” discourse available to a number of different actors.⁴ Thus, I am interested here in how religious diversity—and the extent to which that *diversity* is being transformed into a culturally valued “*pluralism*”—affects the languages and the cultural and institutional logics that are used in the public sphere and to what end, and how effectively they are deployed by the groups that use them.

Religious Diversity and the Prospects for Pluralism

There are volumes either in process or written recently about the increasing religious diversity of the United States, and I will not rehearse all of their insights here.⁵ The most important point may be the new shape and identity of post-1965 immigration. For the first time in national history, the largest numbers of immigrants in the current era are from Latin America and Asia, rather than Europe. And while the majority of immigrants continue to be Christian (the largest groups being Mexican Catholics and Korean Protestants), for the first time significant numbers are adherents to non-Western faiths, specifically Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

By this measure, “objective” religious diversity is higher than it has ever been. More people of more different faiths, and more variations among the various world religions, live in the United States than ever before. It is worth noting that the “subjective” social construction of religious diversity may not necessarily be any higher than it has been in American history. Religious diversity and heterodoxy, as it was then defined, caused Puritans to banish Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, among others. City fathers of Springfield, Massachusetts, objected to the siting of a federal national armory there on the grounds that it might attract employment-seeking Baptists.⁶ The debates about whether Roman Catholics could be “good Americans” accompanied the arrival of large numbers of Catholic immigrants, and similar doubts were cast at various times about Jews, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, to name a few. John Higham rightly asked whether the current cultural conflict over diversity is really anything new,⁷ and Jose Casanova made the evocative point that American Islam in the early twenty-first century is mirroring the development of American Catholicism in the nineteenth century.⁸

Nonetheless, that American society is diversifying rapidly is beyond dispute. And there are issues to take seriously, whether one celebrates or deplors the concomitant social and cultural changes. Robert Wuthnow has presented a persuasive case regarding the challenges religious diversity presents to American culture.⁹ Legal issues concerning the regulation and subsidy of religion by government are complicated by more variety in the religious sector, particularly when that variety assumes different organizational forms. Culturally, Wuthnow noted that the theological commitments that many Americans take very seriously may be challenged by living in close proximity to others of different faiths. Also, for those who associate religion generally with moral order, diversity in faith may produce a fragmented moral culture.¹⁰ And at the most severe is the chance that social conflict can follow from encounters among groups that have different absolute truths by which they orient their actions.

However, intersecting with these concerns about religious diversity is the strong cultural tradition of the United States as a country devoted to the recognition and even celebration of individual choice and its potentially attendant variation. “Freedom of religion” is constitutionally protected, however varying the interpretations of which freedoms, and whose religion, deserve the most protection. The lack of an established faith in legal terms, combined with the historical

experience of settling a frontier nation with successive waves of immigrants—many of them searching for a new world in which to practice their religion relatively unencumbered—has meant that a certain amount of religious diversity has been unavoidable. Whether it was Calvinists understanding Baptists as religious “others” in 1790s Massachusetts, or contemporary Christians regarding Muslims as “unassimilable,” religious difference has always been socially constructed—but somewhat ironically, also often a celebrated fact of American life.

Religious diversity is not just a matter of immigrants and their religions. Even established, historical forms of religion in the United States have diversified internally. Some of this is synergistic adaptation of elements from nontraditional religions (whether culturally foreign or not) into traditional forms (just as immigrant groups adapt or adopt new practices and understandings).¹¹ But this process has been amplified by changes within American culture and religion that have produced more internal variation within American Protestantism and Catholicism. Many of these changes have loosened religious authority from ecclesial hierarchies and religious organizations and placed more authority in the individual’s conscience and experiences. For many Americans, religious authority has been privatized and individualized.

[I]ntersecting with these concerns about religious diversity is the strong cultural tradition of the United States as a country devoted to the recognition and even celebration of individual choice and its potentially attendant variation. “Freedom of religion” is constitutionally protected, however varying the interpretations.

Many scholars posit the bases of these changes in what is generally known as the “sixties,” where the authority of many social institutions was challenged and individual expression was given the same primacy in the moral, cultural, and religious realms that it had in capitalist economic ideology and institutions. The post-war suburbanization of Americans who had been living in ethnically defined urban neighborhoods, the mainstreaming of American Catholics into the middle class, followed by the changes signaled by Vatican II, and the putative American

consensus around the tri-partite “Protestant-Catholic-Jew” formulation,¹² became the basis for an even greater splintering of religious, cultural, and institutional authority. Even many ascribed identities, such as those reflecting religion, class, and sexual orientation, have lost much of their cultural legitimacy. The primacy of individual choice and autonomy has become clear. While these changes were significant, they of course tapped into a deep theme of Arminianism in American religious culture.¹³

Another stream of scholarly work points to a polarization of the American religious landscape. Often termed the “culture wars” argument, the thrust is that American religion has been “restructured” so that denominational or faith tradition differences are less important now than they once were. Rather, differences based on denominational or affiliational identity have been replaced by a liberal-conservative or “progressive-orthodox” divide.¹⁴ Again, ascribed denominational identities have become less salient than consciously chosen ideological or theological ones. The extent to which this has happened is debated, as is its direct application to politics, but the key point is that any cultural religious consensus that might have existed in the United States has disappeared by the early twenty-first century. And whatever contribution religion made to cultural cohesion, political unity, and civic life has often been thought to have disappeared with that.

Civil Society in Theory and in Practice

The idea of civil society, as Adam Seligman demonstrated, is filled with ambiguity and potential contradictions, and its usages are as normative as they are analytic.¹⁵ The generic definition given to civil society, at least in most traditions of Western political and social thought, is that it is composed of those aspects of social existence beyond the realm of the state. This means institutions such as the family, religion, and even the economy (hence civil society’s conceptual development with free-market capitalist thinking) have been the elements of civil society and the core of western liberal democracies.

In its nonstate dimensions, civil society is often conceptualized as the realm of “private” life—or as made up of “private individuals.” Especially if we think of families, or religious congregations, these seem to be the quintessential realms of private activity and individual discretion in action. And yet these social institutions and sites of interactions are simultaneously part of the realm of what many writers think of as the “public sphere.”¹⁶ Civil society is apart from the state, but regulated by it; dependent on legally free individuals, but meant to be the *community* of free individuals.¹⁷ Civil society was originally conceptualized as a realm of social mutuality, of equality, and liberty, in that sense reconciling the philosophical tensions between communal obligation and individualism in Western societies. That some persons, or social groups, might be more equal or more free within civil society has been both a theoretical and practical issue for almost three hundred years.

In these ways, “civil society” was the product of a process of differentiating individual, legally autonomous persons—who were civic citizens—from collective identities and communal social organization.¹⁸ While this process was associated with the rise of bourgeois capitalism and liberal democratic political thinking, it was thus inextricably also entwined with the rise of the sectarian Protestantism that gave the individual person and soul a moral and theological value. The instantiation of these elements was expressed as a melding of reason and revelation in the Puritan communities of North America,¹⁹ a society where, at least in cultural principles, individual autonomy, equality, and communal cooperation among the like-minded could all coexist.

Hence the source of the great Tocquevillian insight about American society, religion, and politics. When de Tocqueville called the young nation’s churches its “first political institution,” there was more to the observation than just the idea that Americans discussed politics in religious groups or learned skills of self-government by running their free-standing congregations. Certainly, American congregations and other voluntary organizations supported the republican and democratic forms of government in the United States. But the insight also recognizes the extent to which the broader elements of American Protestant religious culture are thought to be necessary for societal success and stability beyond the directly political. By thinking of themselves as free and self-directed, Americans found a coherence between their religious and national identities.²⁰ Barry Alan Shain argued that much of this rested on the practices and assumptions of “localism,” which had and still has a heavily communalist dimension—rather than a “mythic individualism” that views individual persons as completely autonomous and isolated.²¹ Individuals choose to belong to particular voluntary associations, but then live lives enmeshed in webs of relationships that are anchored in such institutions. It is precisely the attempt at reconciling individual autonomy and communal obligation, private wants and public contributions, that the idea of civil society was designed to call to attention, and the practices of civil society were thought to accomplish, in American life.

Religious Contributions to Civil Society

In recent historical periods, the notion of civil society has been refined and restricted somewhat from its original definition as all social life outside the state. As capitalist economic systems came to dominate Western Europe, North America, and eventually spread worldwide, economic organizations began to become distinctively different forms of social organization from other sites in civil society and required different forms of social action and individual behavior. In part, taking economic organizations out of civil society recognizes a certain degree of compulsion in economic activity—one needs to work to survive, and the hierarchy of authority within economic firms is often rigid. Thus, recently, terms such as the “voluntary sector,” the “third sector,” “independent associations,” or the “nonprofit sector” began a focus on organizations and institutions in civil society that were thought to be “between states and markets.”²² The “voluntary

association” is the bedrock form of social organization in this more current conceptualization of civil society.

Clearly, then, religious organizations and institutions are a part of civil society in the United States, especially given the constitutionally mandated separation of religion from the arms of state power. In the United States, they are a particularly important part of civil society, given the number of religious organizations in the country, their diverse types, and the different populations that are served. It is well known that more Americans belong to religious organizations than to any other form of voluntary association in the society. As a result, scholars, social critics, politicians, and ordinary citizens all attribute important things to religion and religious organizations, beyond whatever truths are contained in theological doctrines or religious beliefs.

American localism and suspicions of government have made it a general cultural preference to leave religious regulation to civil society rather than the state. To the extent that the society runs smoothly and the government is legitimate, this arrangement garners widespread approval.

As mentioned above, since de Tocqueville social commentators have assumed that American religious organizations supported the country’s democratic form of government, at least in part through serving as a strong component of and foundation for civil society.²³ American localism and suspicions of government have made it a general cultural preference to leave religious regulation to civil society rather than the state. To the extent that the society runs smoothly and the government is legitimate, this arrangement garners widespread approval. Credited with many good things, religion and religious organizations are culturally legitimate in American society. Individuals who participate in religious organizations are thought to be good people. It is difficult to run for public office without being a religious participant, and religious participation makes people—at least by some Americans’ criteria—better family members; more successful participants in education and economic institutions; less likely to commit crime or other “sins of the flesh”; and more willing to help others, often through volunteering their time and donating their money.

At the organizational level, religious institutions are understood as contributing positively to many elements of social life. They are thought to make people better citizens, in part by providing people the opportunity to develop skills at self-governing, as well as skills of negotiation, getting along with neighbors, and fostering altruism. The organizations themselves mobilize volunteer and charitable efforts and help provide for the less fortunate in society. The physical plants of religious congregations are often *de facto* community centers, providing the settings for all sorts of social gatherings, many of which are not explicitly religious.

Thus, when Robert Putnam and others lament the decline in the belonging to religiously based organizations, they are concerned because they believe that decline has deleterious effects on social life and culture beyond the religious institutions themselves.²⁴ This is the religious dimension of the recent “social capital” debate. Putnam and others believe that society works better when the populace holds higher stocks of social capital. Social capital is the networks and connections between people within a society that allows them to accomplish things that need cooperation to be accomplished. Social capital acts as a resource for social groups, tying people to each other, giving them others to rely on and work with, and making society a viable collective effort. One key product of social capital—the connections between citizens and their experiences working together—is social trust. Such trust produces a more satisfying social life, less need for the coercive power of the state, and more coherence within society. Religion and religious organizations are then, not at all surprisingly, argued to be the main contributors to American social capital and hence civil society.²⁵

It is important here to note a significant “revisionist history” to the tale of voluntary associations and American civic life. Jason Kaufman has amassed a persuasive array of historical evidence and a sound argument to argue that the “golden age of fraternity” in the late nineteenth century was a fragmenting of the common good, not the creation of a public good.²⁶ Voluntary organizations, Kaufman argued, became major vehicles of self-segregation among Americans—using the freedom of civil society to associate only with the like-minded—and not coincidentally, those of similar race, gender, and religion. As he noted,

The huge wave of organization building between the Civil War and World War I was motivated by the desire for exclusive social outlets that would allow individuals of different genders, races, ethnicities, and birthplaces to socialize in private, self-segregated groups.²⁷

Kaufman believed that two factors influenced the rapid spread of voluntary organizations for this purpose—one the “external” societal condition of large numbers of immigrants of various national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds; and one an “internal” organizational mechanism of “competitive voluntarism” in which groups began to compete with each other for members by providing more services, higher status, and the like. In addition, the voluntary nature of membership meant that dissatisfied or marginal members could leave easily, and the low regulation by the state (“low barriers to entry” in economic terms) meant that alternative organizations were easy to find.²⁸ Thus, far from a golden age that produced widespread social

trust and an inclusive public good, voluntary associations in this period fragmented the public and abetted social and political segregation.

Two things are important about Kaufman's argument here. First is the important role played by the increasing social diversity arising from immigration, obviously relevant to the argument in this article and the contemporary implications of which are explored further below. Second is the affinity and parallel between the organizational form of American's historically dominant religion—a nonliturgical Protestantism made up of congregations of like-minded individuals—and the organizational form that is the backbone of American civil society and thought to be the main generator of social capital, the voluntary association. Thus, it is not just American political democracy that has been supported by American religious congregations and those who participate in them, there is also a coherence of organizational form, such that cultural notions of “the way we do things” take a very similar organizational form, whether those things are religious or secular.

Religious institutions can and do organize themselves in a variety of different ways, in terms of hierarchy, authority, membership demands, or bureaucracy.

This tendency for organizations to look alike or, as sociologists might call it, this “institutional isomorphism”²⁹ is not too surprising in this case, as it was largely the same people establishing both religious congregations and secular voluntary associations—Anglo-Saxon, nonliturgical Protestants.³⁰ They used the organizing principles that existed in their cultural repertoires. But it is significant to note that the shape of civil society organizations is by no means predetermined or necessary. Religious institutions can and do organize themselves in a variety of different ways, in terms of hierarchy, authority, membership demands, or bureaucracy. For example, some place religious authority in a trained, hierarchically arrayed episcopacy, while other groups emphasize relative egalitarian relationships among believers and give little special status to clergy. Even more interesting sociologically, some religious groups make distinctions between “religious authority” as that which pertains to doctrine and theology and “agency authority” that runs the organization's mundane and secular affairs in the world.³¹ The forms that organizations take have notable consequences on how those organizations run and shape social life, which in this case shapes the impact that civil society organizations have on the public sphere.

For example, Steve Warner has noted a distinction between two basic forms of local religious organization in the United States.³² One is the “parish”—a geographically based unit that may or may not encompass people who share more than their faith. The other is the “congregation,” a gathering of people drawn together because they share faith and value commitments, and may or may not live in physical proximity. The two methods and forms of organizing religious gatherings, Warner noted, lead to different types of religious conflict. The former leads to “turf wars” as people defend neighborhoods and parish boundaries from religious (and often ethno-racial) others. Congregations lead to “moral crusades” where groups of people clash over commitments to different theologies, social values, or symbolic identities.

That the congregation is the dominant form of American religious life is thus significant for American civil society. When involvement in groups is voluntary, and there is little regulation of that form of voluntary association, people come and go relatively easily. What sociologists call the principle of “homophily” produces groups that are increasingly made up of people who are increasingly similar. Social networks are the main ways in which new members become attracted to the group—and networks are generally made up of people who are similar to each other, particularly if, as is the case with religious congregations, the membership is family-based. Even if different types of people join the same organization, those who are more different often become more marginal within the group and then are more likely to leave and form their own association. The resulting organization is thus increasingly made up of people more similar to each other, as those who are more different are more likely to leave. Thus, differences *within* any given group tend to decrease while differences *between* groups tend to increase.³³

An important test of the congregational form of American religious and secular organization arrived in the form of the millions of Roman Catholic immigrants to the United States from the 1840s to the 1920s. Roman Catholicism is marked by a parish structure for local congregations and by an ideology of the “church universal” that is meant to encompass all humans and societies within one ecclesiastical structure. Notably, the arrival of significant numbers of non-Protestants played a role in native-born Protestants beginning to organize voluntary associations within civil society for secular as well as religious purposes. Also significant is that the Catholic parish structure remained strongest when Roman Catholicism was still largely an “immigrant church” in the United States. It is possible to argue that residential segregation reinforced ethnic and religious boundaries, and thus, even geographically based parishes tended to be filled with socially similar groups of church members.³⁴ And the American Catholic church also allowed the establishment of national parishes, meaning that Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics often did not actually mingle on Sunday mornings.³⁵

Nonetheless, the parish form of Catholic organization has retreated in more recent decades. As American Catholics became more “mainstream” after World War II—meaning that as more went to college, moved into the middle class, and moved out of ethnic urban neighborhoods into the expanding suburbs—the parish

nature of Catholicism became more “congregational” in its orientation. Laity in parishes began to press to have greater control over their choice of clergy and the management of their churches and programs. Catholics also began “shopping” more for churches that suited them and commuting farther to go to churches that had programs they desired. This has led to organizational dynamics that began to seem more like Protestant churches and their “congregationally” oriented principles.

So, a major question to ask of contemporary American religious diversity is whether congregational forms of religion will develop within those traditions not having “congregations” per se, and whether other forms of religious organization can support civil society—whatever form it takes—within the nation. Evidence shows that the state regulation of religion—in particular the tax laws that govern nonprofit status and thus make financial contributions to the organization deductible—has produced dramatic uniformity in the legal forms that American religious institutions take, as well as constrained some of their activities (especially explicit partisan electoral campaigning).³⁶ For religious organizations to be considered a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization, the law mandates certain organizational practices, such as boards of directors and financial and accounting practices. By and large, religious groups in the United States have adopted those forms—institutional isomorphism has resulted from these state mandates. Steve Warner argued that a cultural dynamic also reinforces the legal isomorphic pressures and has the effect of increasing the similarity of local religious organizations across religious traditions, what he called a “de facto” congregationalism that has become normative due to the voluntary associative nature of religion in the United States.³⁷

Thus, groups of religious minorities do not enter a “level playing field” in terms of the discourse they use or the forms and institutional logics their religious organizations have to take once they become established here. Both legal structures and cultural models of how one organizes voluntary associations were built with Protestant congregations in mind, and those representing the new religious diversity are forced to deal with that. The process of migration, by definition, requires some adaptation and negotiation of new surroundings. But more than just that, newcomers to any society face inequalities. Many will become naturalized citizens, but that only gives them the opportunity to be involved in the most formal, and most individualized, of our political behaviors—voting. Other types of social influence, and minorities’ treatment at the hands of government officials and their fellow citizens, are often quite distinct from their citizenship status itself.

Given that religious diversity is increasing the number of particular languages and organizational forms that relate religious commitment to the larger public sphere, which ones should participate in public discourse, and what arguments should be privileged? If the institutional logic of the religious institution shapes not just how cobelievers relate to each other, but the resources and orientations they have for being connected to the larger society, religious pluralism will affect civil society and the way we, as a society, can think and talk about ourselves.

Languages of the Public Sphere

A common argument among scholars of American politics is that its main language is that of liberalism, in a basic Lockean form.³⁸ Others have extended that argument to the primacy of liberalism in American cultural contexts, as a motivation and justification for action.³⁹ The language of liberalism is based on the notion of a “social contract”—an essentially voluntary arrangement, as a deal struck between equals, in which all parties have their interests protected and get something equivalent for whatever they give. Liberalism is a language of rights, of autonomy, and of a clear distinction between what is privately owned and publicly owed.⁴⁰

It is important to note that there is a distinct “universalism” in the language and logic of liberalism. Individuals are at the center of the liberal worldview. Individuals are to be treated equally, but are thought to be largely the same except for differences of personal preferences. And individuals are to be largely autonomous of ascribed social groups and identities as well as the state. This language is clearly compatible with the organization of civil society into voluntary associations, in which people are free to join and leave groups as it suits their needs. Similarly, an overall institutional logic treats the civil society at large as an entity composed of autonomous individual units—in this case voluntary organizations. That is, the form of the society—an aggregate of autonomous organizations—is a macro reflection of the form of the voluntary organization—an aggregate of autonomous individuals.

But how can American society accommodate religious faiths that do not accept these liberal premises, that do not begin with the assumption of autonomous individuals as the social building block of society? If religion is relegated to the private sphere alone, basic principles of religious liberty might well keep that from being a public issue. Religious groups may organize themselves however they choose in private life, but they must enter public society accepting liberal principles. But if the forms of religious organizing affect how civil society functions, then its organizing assumption has public implications. What if families, genders, or religious groups—and not autonomous individuals—are considered the basic social formation?

While Christian cultural assumptions, and the institutions and justifying ideology of liberal capitalism, are clearly the dominant forms in the United States, it is not the case that this hegemony is so complete or universal as to make any alternatives impossible. In other contexts, I have argued, as have other scholars of American culture, that the language of liberalism in American political culture is not the only discourse available, even if these alternatives are not as culturally dominant and recognized. Furthermore, I contend that these alternative forms have roots in religious worldviews, not all of them Protestant or even Christian—but the fact of their religious pedigree and articulation has aided their acceptance into and legitimacy within American political culture.⁴¹ Clearly, some non-Protestant groups have been absorbed into American culture and society. Roman Catholics, and *shtetle* Jews from Eastern Europe, brought much more communalist approaches to religious and public life with them than Protestants had previously

accommodated. True, this brought nativist charges of “clannishness” and suspicions as to whether they could manage the democratic traditions of American life. And Jews and Catholics became more “protestantized” in their organizations and ethos (for example, accommodating “de facto congregationalism”). But American culture and politics also changed, with more communal and social justice themes becoming important threads in the American tapestry.

But how this happens, and why it is so for some groups rather than others, is both an empirical question for social science and a normative question for the body politic and civil society. Paul Lichterman examined the efforts of several religiously based community service groups that were self-consciously trying to bridge social divisions by reaching out. He found the groups he studied encountered obstacles to what he called “spiraling outward” and taking their internally generated social capital into the public sphere. Whatever their good intentions and formal beliefs or ideologies, the process was not automatic or easy. Lichterman concluded,

First, civic groups maintain distinctly different customs . . . and these give groups different styles of reaching out. The customs exist apart from the beliefs or ideologies that groups hold. Second, those customs influence the kinds of conversations a group can have; they can welcome or discourage social reflexivity. Third, social reflexivity enhances a group’s ability to create or strengthen enduring, civic bridges across a variety of social differences. . . . Finally, . . . groups can bring religion into civic life . . . by using religious meanings to understand their civic role in the wider world. . . . Apart from influencing a group’s stated *goals*, religious meanings influence customs; they provide some of the building blocks for a group identity in the wider civic arena.⁴²

Thus, internal group customs and orientations to the wider society can encourage a reflexivity that facilitates participation and reaching out, or hinder it.⁴³ Lichterman found this, even while studying Midwestern Christian groups. What happens when those trying to engage civic life do not come from religio-culture groups that share the assumptions about religion, or pluralism, or civil society, that exist in the United States as a result of its historically Protestant domination?

While there is not space for an extensive analysis, I review here some particular challenges that Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu immigrants may face when organizing themselves in the United States, and some of the themes in American civil society and culture that may be affected by their incorporation to this society. This is meant to be suggestive rather than systematic or exhaustive, but it points out a direction, I believe, for understanding religious pluralism and the future of civil society.

Neither of the classic “Eastern” world religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—have historically been organized into free-standing local religious organizations; they do not have a congregational tradition, as such. Much of traditional Hindu religious practice happens in the home, with trips to the temple only for particular types of ceremonies and rituals. Religious education is the province of direct relationships with gurus, often very localized and nonstandardized, and depending upon the authority of the guru. It is possible to think of Hinduism as organized into “denominations” if those are thought of as shared beliefs, ritual practices,

and devotions to a particular deity. But unlike most American Christian denominations, these are not national organizations that bind local groups together, issue policy directives, or exercise agency authority. It is true that Hinduism has in recent times become more formally organized, with some push toward certain types of standardization. It may be that this trend is abetted by encounters between Hindus and other religions and cultures in a globalizing world—at least some of which may reflect the influence of Indians who have migrated to the United States and are adapting to organized forms of religious life they have found here. Nonetheless, while instantiating Hinduism into the types of formal organizations historically populating American civil society might be difficult, Hinduism's traditions of tolerance, flexibility, and ideological inclusion give it many relevant cultural tools for such adaptation.

Neither of the classic “Eastern” world religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—have historically been organized into free-standing local religious organizations; they do not have a congregational tradition, as such.

Buddhist temples have historically been the sites for the devotions of monks, not for gatherings of collectivities of believers. The *sangha* is a concept of a Buddhist community, but often the assembly of ordained monks and nuns or “noble ones” rather than a gathering of the faithful who are the “laity” most engaged in civic life. While individual Buddhists have important religious responsibilities, they have often been supporting casts to the religious virtuosi. There is a very loose organization of collective religious life.

Like Hindus, some of that is changing for Buddhists in the United States, and temples are becoming community centers and places for cultural transmission.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Buddhism has two qualities that make it appealing and relatively understandable to American Christians: first, it has a “universalist” quality in that its religious truths and practices are potentially available to all persons, whatever their culture or ethnicity; and second, it is often very individualist in its practices, with considerable room for personal interpretation. These factors often foster an adaptability that should help the acceptance of Buddhism—and there is evidence of considerable interest, some conversion, and a fair amount of partial adaptation of Buddhist ideas or practices, at least among the American white middle class.⁴⁵

Similar to Hinduism, in Buddhism there is not a clear sense of popular ownership of the religious organization and no real sense of the organized denominational religious landscape. Also, much of Hinduism's and Buddhism's social outreach is focused on confronting the "wheel of *samsara*," which recycles individuals through life via the laws of karma, rather than attempts at building righteous institutions.

As an Abrahamic faith, Islam shares a number of characteristics with Christianity and Judaism, not the least of which is more clearly defined organizational manifestation of the religious institution. Mosques or *masjids* are used regularly by "lay" Muslims and organize a local religious life on a consistent and routinized basis. Theologically educated *imams* run religious life, but the *masjid*'s organization—in the United States often including an Islamic school—is controlled, supported, and administered by pious laypersons. Islam has a tradition of outreach into society through collective, organized effort, not just as gestures of individual piety and alms-giving. Furthermore, Muslim thought has traditionally considered religious and secular society to largely be coterminous, and held in a type of "covenant" with God. That is, there is a clear conception of being God's chosen and that the social order should reflect that. As a result, the religious institution has responsibility for working to remedy the failings of other social institutions (a notion clearly found in varieties of American Christian thought, including in the founding Reformed tradition⁴⁶).

Islam also has a distinct universalism, in which religious truth is potentially available to all, with an accompanying religious mandate to spread the faith among nonbelievers. Like Christianity and Buddhism, Islam has been a missionary religion. Taking this universalism another step further is the concept of the *ummah*, the one Islamic community, in which Muslims from all over the world stand in solidaristic relationships with each other.

Islam also has a distinct universalism, in which religious truth is potentially available to all, with an accompanying religious mandate to spread the faith among nonbelievers.

There are ways in which the *ummah*, and the idea of a covenanted relationship with God as a chosen people, can present challenges to Muslims participating fully in a religiously pluralistic society. This is particularly so in societies with an institutional separation of religious institutions from the state—the *ummah*

was originally a religious and a political community simultaneously.⁴⁷ For many Muslims, Islamic law, *Shari'a*, should be the basis for civil law, and religious elites should have some formal political authority. But elements of these ideas can also be found among some Christian groups as well. And the historical fact is that for many Muslim communities throughout history, the reality has been a practical separation of religious and political authority, the development of a distinct structure of civil law, and a need to accommodate non-Muslim fellow citizens. Certainly in many places in the United States, Muslim American organizations are beginning to participate in interfaith forums for community engagement and religious understanding.

In sum, many dimensions of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism make the voluntary civic association a less than natural organizational manifestation of their religious culture. Who forms the relevant community and how inclusive that can be; who can claim and mobilize “members” and their energies; and whether religious, ethnic, and national identities can be reinforcing are some key questions that religious pluralism poses for American civil society—but the challenge may involve change rather than decline, as new forms of organizing emerge.

Conclusion

Many of the concerns with decline in civic association and civil society make one of two assumptions. First is the argument that many commonly acknowledged social problems in American society are at least partly caused by the loosening of social connections, trust, and networks that are thought to be generated and maintained by civic associations. Thus, a healthy civil society is an important part of solving these problems. The second assumption is that the important social capital and attendant trust that comes from civil society are generated primarily by one specific organizational form that used to predominate in the United States—the voluntary association. I see no need to accept either of those claims without empirical and theoretical inquiry.

Robert Wuthnow, for one, has investigated empirically the so-called demise of American civic associations.⁴⁸ He found, along with scholars such as Robert Putnam, that the nationally organized voluntary associations that once formed the scaffolding of American civil society have in fact declined in prevalence, scope, and influence. Wuthnow did not conclude, however, that civil society is in demise. Rather, he found many different forms of association now existing in many different types of communities. The formal voluntary association was an institutional form for an age of more settled populations, with people more bounded by institutions, social networks, and ascribed identities. Contemporary society is characterized by, in Wuthnow's terms, “porous” institutions—any given ones of which encompass less of an individual's life and they are entered and exited more easily. This fluid style of life has given rise to more fluid types of associations; they are formed more quickly but more partially, often have more limited goals,

and do not last as long. The concept of “member” is less established and less formal, with fewer rules, policies, or directives from bureaucratic national offices.

This may not be the ideal mode of association for supporting civil society in our complex society. But then again, it may be an institutional logic that will allow non-Christian communities to participate more fully in civil life. Other realms of social activity also note the extent to which formal, bureaucratic, often professionally staffed organizations may be yielding to more fluid forms of organizing and acting.⁴⁹ That Hindus, Buddhists, and even Muslims are less likely to think of themselves as members of discreet congregations—who are in a de facto competition for their membership energies and commitment—may give them more experience with managing the multiple identities that are involved when one associates with several different groups. That members of these newer immigrant faiths are still juggling ethnic and national identities as they adapt to a new cultural setting may give them the personal resources to avail themselves of several different groups at once.

In sum, there has been a historic parallel and coherence in the institutional logics of American religion and American organized civil society. These logics have been expressed in sets of behavioral practices and in discourses of justifying and legitimating languages. What constitutes a good society, who counts as an American, and how religion should be regarded in public are intertwined concerns, often connected by these institutional logics.

There is no doubt that the shape of American civil society is changing, somewhat in tandem with the changing landscape of the American religious map. This presents challenges. But it is too early to declare this either the demise of American civic life or yet another realm in which an Anglo-Protestant culture grinds up and assimilates religious differences. The newer immigrant faith communities have resources that should permit them to prosper in civic life as so many have in economic life. And the religious groups of native-born Americans may also find themselves revitalized by this diversity—perhaps partly out of a sense of competition or (more troubling) a sense of threat—but also perhaps out of a sense that they may have something to learn about navigating the twenty-first century in our rapidly changing society.

Notes

1. For but a small slice of the variety of scholarship available on these topics, see N.J. Demerath III, *Crossing the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Christian Smith, ed., *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Power, and Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central American Solidarity Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

2. See Rhys H. Williams, “Religion as a Cultural System: Theoretical and Empirical Developments since Geertz,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, ed. M. Jacobs and N. Hanrahan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 97-113.

3. Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

4. Rhys H. Williams, "Public Religion and Hegemony: Contesting the Language of the Common Good," in *The Power of Religious Publics: Staking Claims in American Society*, ed. W. H. Swatos Jr. and J. K. Wellman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 169-86.

5. For some touchstone volumes, see R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, eds., *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2000); and Karen I. Leonard, Alex Stepick, Manuel A. Vasquez, and Jennifer Holdaway, eds., *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2005).

6. See N. J. Demerath III and Rhys H. Williams, *A Bridging of Faiths: Religion and Politics in a New England City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

7. John Higham, "Cultural Responses to Immigration," in *Diversity and Its Discontents: Cultural Conflict and Common Ground in Contemporary American Society*, ed. N. Smelser and J. Alexander (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39-61.

8. Jose Casanova, "Civil Society and Religion: Retrospective Reflections on Catholicism and Prospective Reflections on Islam," *Social Research* 68, no. 4 (2001): 1041-80.

9. Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

10. Samuel P. Huntington's *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) is perhaps the most well-known alarmist book about diversity from a well-respected academic social scientist. Huntington believes that American national identity is threatened by the social diversity represented in recent immigration because he believes that the core values in what he identifies as the "American creed" come out of "Anglo-Protestant" culture and that social/cultural/moral coherence is necessary for national unity.

11. The chapters in Warner and Wittner, *Gatherings in Diaspora*, provide many examples of such adaptation and syncretism.

12. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1955).

13. "Arminianism generally holds that man is not totally depraved, that God chooses men to salvation on the basis of some foreseen faith or goodness in them, that Christ died in order to save every man, that God's grace and will can be resisted, and that Christians can forfeit their salvation" (<http://www.reformationonline.com/glossary.htm>). See, for example, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinley, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); and Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993). For historical arguments regarding the American religious traditions emphasizing individualism and religious experience, see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

14. See, for example, Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); and Rhys H. Williams, ed., *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997).

15. Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

16. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); see also David Harrington Watt, "United States: Cultural Challenges to the Voluntary Sector," in *Between States and Markets: The Voluntary Sector in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Robert Wuthnow (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 243-87.

17. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, 3.

18. Or, as David Hollinger has put it with a slightly different emphasis, the distinction and tension is between "national culture and communities of descent." David A. Hollinger, "National Culture and Communities of Descent," Smelser and Alexander, *Diversity and Its Discontents*, 247-62.

19. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, 6, 71-78.

20. Paul Lichterman, in *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), called this the "social spiral." By participating in civic

groups, people's horizons expand, so they spiral outward to concern with the wider community, not just the people in their own group.

21. Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

22. See Wuthnow, *Between States and Markets*; Franklin I. Gamwell, *Beyond Preference: Liberal Theories of Independent Associations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Walter W. Powell, ed., *The Non-profit Sector: A Research Handbook* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

23. For example, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Scholzman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

24. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

25. See Corwin Smidt, ed., *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003).

26. Jason Kaufman, *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

27. *Ibid.*, 8.

28. Note the general affinity of some of these organizational mechanisms with Finke and Stark's explanation for the proliferation of religious groups in the United States. See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in America's Religious Economy, 1776-1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

29. See Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

30. For a number of essays on the origins of nonprofit organizations, dimensions of civil society, and useful bibliographies, see Peter Dobkin Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism and Nonprofit Organizations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

31. See Mark Chaves, "Denominations as Dual Structures: An Organizational Analysis," in *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations*, ed. N. J. Demerath III, P. D. Hall, T. Schmitt, and R. H. Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

32. R. Stephen Warner, "Epilogue: Building Religious Communities at the Turn of the Century," in *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City*, ed. Lowell W. Livezey (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 295-307.

33. See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), for this logic applied to the issue of multiracial religious congregations.

34. See John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

35. Demerath and Williams, *A Bridging of Faiths*.

36. Rhys H. Williams and John P. N. Massad, "Religious Diversity, Civil Law, Institutional Isomorphism," in *Religious Organizations in the United States: A Study of Identity, Liberty, and the Law*, ed. J. A. Serritella, T. C. Berg, W. C. Durham Jr., E. M. Gaffney Jr., and C. B. Mousin (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2006), 111-28.

37. R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. J. P. Wind and J. W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 54-99.

38. See, for example, Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1955); Ted Jelen, "On the Hegemony of Liberal Individualism: A Reply to Williams," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 1 (1999): 35-40; and H. Mark Roelofs, *The Poverty of American Politics: A Theoretical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

39. The best known of these is Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

40. Rhys H. Williams, "Constructing the Public Good: Cultural Resources and Social Movements," *Social Problems* 42, no. 1 (1995): 124-44. See also Rhys H. Williams, "Liberalism, Religion, and the

Dilemma of 'Immigrant Rights' in American Political Culture," in *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants*, ed. P. Hondagneu-Sotelo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 16-32.

41. Rhys H. Williams, "Visions of the Good Society and the Religious Roots of American Political Culture," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 1 (1999): 1-34.

42. Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness*, 16-17.

43. See other considerations of how religion can open or close space for democratic politics in Rhys H. Williams, "The Language of God in the City of Man: Religious Discourse and Public Politics in America," in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, ed. C. Smidt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 171-89; and Rhys H. Williams, "From the 'Beloved Community' to 'Family Values': Religious Language, Symbolic Repertoires, and Democratic Culture," in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, ed. D. S. Meyer, N. Whittier, and B. Robnett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 247-65.

44. See Paul D. Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

45. See Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

46. See Rhys H. Williams, "Constructing the Public Good" and "Visions of the Good Society and the Religious Roots of American Political Culture."

47. See, for examples of recent scholarship, Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Bassam Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991).

48. Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

49. For an analysis in developments in the study of "social movement" organizations, see Kelly Moore and Michael P. Young, "Organizing and Organizations in Social Movement Research" (manuscript, Department of Sociology, University of Cincinnati, OH).