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Immigrant Religion

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People have left their homes for new places for millennia. But the current globalizing society has made it faster, easier, and more complex than ever. Many migrants, and the immigrant communities they create, turn to religion to ease their transitions into their new society, especially if the move was forced by turmoil in their native country. In building new lives, religion can provide cultural comfort, offer practical benefits, and ease immigrants’ acceptance into their new society.

Ethno-religious communities are a source of cultural comfort and continuity in a new country with unfamiliar languages and norms. These congregations often practice customs that are foreign to the new country, but traditional to that ethnic group. Similarly, the religious building itself and the happenings inside preserve and reproduce architectural traditions, art, and music native to the group. They offer refuge from social alienation.

Religious communities also provide social networks and leadership opportunities for immigrants, which can help build skills for success in the economy or counteract nativist hostility. Congregations can foster community in the face of prejudice, while religious hierarchies and status can allow otherwise marginalized congregants with chances to lead. Discrimination in society may make social opportunities difficult; religion can be a safe space that immigrants themselves control. In less hostile atmospheres, religious communities emphasize civic engagement in the wider society. A community that worships together can breed political organizing, as seen in multiethnic Islamic coalitions in the U.S. Likewise, immigrants who found their own places of worship interact with municipal authorities while building their own spaces and can “increase” their status within local society. Religious spaces can also provide networks and resources for members. From sharing housing and employment opportunities to offering language classes, the friendships cultivated can address the economic and cultural strains immigrants experience.

However, a major factor in whether immigrant communities incorporate and flourish in new countries is the quality and degree of acceptance they receive from the host country’s citizens and governmental agencies. Some nations have a long history of immigration and develop both policies and a cultural identity that welcome and encourage newcomers. They seek to develop a societal “pluralism” that values diversity. Other countries have less experience with immigration, and either resist immigrants or do little to make incorporation easier. Finally, some countries fall between these poles, welcoming some immigrants over others, or establishing policies and expectations that accept newcomers but pressure them to assimilate into the dominant culture. Other factors connected to reception are economic conditions within the society, or clear ethno-racial inequalities.

Few countries in the contemporary world lack immigration; thus, most nations have developed responses. These responses can vary widely and often depend upon the socio-cultural characteristics of
different immigrant groups as well as conditions in the receiving society. Religion can be key in this reception; for example, in the 19th century large numbers of Catholic immigrants came to the United States, the nation’s first substantial non-Protestant population. Anti-immigrant nativism in the 1850s, and again from 1890-1920, was consistently anti-Catholic (and often anti-Semitic). In the early 21st century, with new communities of South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants, Islamophobia has often been connected to anti-immigrant sentiment. This hostility has sometimes spilled over into expressions of prejudice and discrimination against other South Asian religious groups, such as Sikhs. The more salient religion is in a nation, the more suspicion there is that different religious groups may not have the capacity to fully incorporate into society.

When immigrant communities are religious minorities in a new country – or when they move from religiously homogeneous societies to religiously diverse countries – they must adapt religiously to their new location. Members encounter those from different ethno-religious communities at work, at school, and in their neighborhoods. Different religions treat their geographical location differently – for example, Hinduism is deeply associated with the land and place of India, whereas Buddhism is often a highly individualized religious practice that can treat adherents’ residential location as irrelevant. Immigrant groups have shown three basic religious responses to immigration. First is developing a “hybridity” in their religio-cultural system; over time they slowly adapt, and modify, practices or beliefs drawn from other groups into their own religion (for example, American Muslims are beginning to treat mosques more like religious congregations and social service centers, rather than just places to pray). In contrast, other groups develop a religious separatism, involving withdrawal from other groups and maintaining strict social and cultural boundaries between them. A third response is to re-emphasize the “theological foundations” of the religion, to unify the community but allow cultural practices deemed not central to adapt to new circumstances. Some communities may experience all three religious responses, changing over time.

It can be misleading to think that immigration leads to a complete break with migrants’ former countries. “Transnationalism” is a process through which immigrants remain connected to their homeland as they settle into a receiving country. This affects personal and group identities, as well as practical, economic decisions. The preservation of national identities is often informed by religious commitments and influences immigrants’ acculturation into the host society. On one hand, immigrants who remain deeply connected to their homelands may challenge the norms of the host society. For example, a pan-ethnic identity of resistance has been observed among Mexican Catholic immigrants, compared to a more assimilative approach taken by their Protestant counterparts. However, even when remaining connected to their native country, immigrants must adjust to life in a new society. In turn, transnationalist communities must assess and possibly shift their priorities in a new land: will extra household funds be a remittance back home, or is money spent to soften life in the new country? Many immigrant communities remain involved in the political life of their home countries. But for immigrants who spend more time in the receiving country than their homeland, political issues affecting the new country can ultimately take precedence.
Suggested readings:

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