

**Supplementary Material Accompanying the Paper**

**“Ethnic Identity in American History and America’s Exceptional Religiosity:  
Theory and Some Evidence”**

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## **A Focused Review of the Salience of Ethnicity in American Religiosity**

I briefly review here how ethnicity and religion have played an important role in the adaptation of immigrants to America historically and also in the recent past. This review has to be necessarily very terse to keep the length manageable.

### *The Puritans*

Ethnicity has been present at the core of religion in America since the inception of European immigration. The Puritans, who were Anglicans dissatisfied with the reforms of their church in purging the influence of Catholicism, came to New England in the 1620s and 1630s to escape the intolerance of Charles I in England. Their attitude is reflected in what Breen (1975) has called “persistent localism”. Fiercely independent, and wanting to protect their way of living and worshipping even in England, they were very insular—they brooked no interference from anyone even outside their own town. The settlers in New England came from diverse agricultural communities that were isolated by transportation costs and so developed an attitude of inwardness. Every town in New England was different from every other, each wanting to preserve its autonomy. This was reflected in the fact that the various congregations in New England were distinct and independent.

The Puritans’ goal in the colony was to protect their ways from outsiders and they showed no interest in spreading Christianity to others such as the Native Americans [Stout (1975)]. In fact, they actively persecuted other Christian denominations like the Quakers and the Baptists. The Christianity of the Puritans was strictly ethnic because its goal was to preserve their group. It was only after the Glorious Revolution in 1688, when England got into wars with Catholic enemies on the European continent such as France, that the Puritans shed their autonomy somewhat and united with the Protestant interest to defeat Catholicism [Kidd (2005)]. The definition of “ethnic” became broader, but it was still ethnic. The influence of the Puritans lasted in America for at least a century.

### *The German Americans*

Roughly 49% of Americans today trace their ancestry at least partially to German descent. German immigrants came to America starting in the seventeenth century and subsequently arrived in several waves, climaxing in the decade of 1890. Many Germans who were living in Russia also immigrated to America. The German immigrants comprised Protestants, Catholics, and Jews; some of the immigrants who came after the failed revolution of 1848 were secular.

The pattern of German migration to rural America is well illustrated by Kamphoefner (1987). He studies emigrants from the Westfalia province of Northwest Germany to rural Missouri. They were motivated largely by the prospect of owning cheap land. Immigration was not to random areas but was path-dependent: there was a great deal of chain migration, that is, migration based on information from social contacts with earlier immigrants, usually from the same village or nearby areas in Germany. As a result, villages in Missouri were often virtually transplanted from Westfalia. This led to many ethnic German enclaves in rural America, where the immigrants largely interacted with other Germans from the same region. Kamphoefner argues that this pattern of chain migration also largely characterized migrations from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Holland. Highly individualistic people who immigrate without contacts in America were relatively few but were also more prosperous than the majority who engaged in chain migration. The latter sought security in exchange for prosperity.

Kamphoefner also shows that the immigrants from Westfalia tended to keep to themselves, marry amongst their own kind, and worship amongst themselves as Protestants. Furthermore, he notes that the immigrant enclaves which had a German church tended to be more stable; those without one tended to disappear over time, while those with one tended to expand (p. 189). Needless to say, chain migration of this nature was conducive to the perpetuation of ethnic identity amongst German (and other) immigrants, but it is not essential to the story of enduring ethnicity. Conzen (1990) finds that German ethnicity persisted in Sauk valley, Minnesota, despite the fact that the peasants came from all regions of Germany. The glue in this case was Catholicism, which was common to the immigrants to this and other parts of America. German ethnicity that was cemented by Protestantism and by Catholicism illustrates the complementarity between religion and ethnicity.

German culture in urban areas dominated cities like Philadelphia and many of the big Midwestern cities. Most cities had a 'German Town' where German was the spoken language

and German contributions to literature, music, philosophy, science were proudly disseminated. The German language was taught in public schools. Despite the high profile German immigrants had towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the immigrants themselves were not unified [Kazal (2004)]. As a country, Germany formed only in 1871 when Bismarck united what are now its various provinces. German immigrants to the United States still retained ethnic affinity to the region from which they hailed and so their allegiance, despite a common language, was ethnically fragmented.

The German presence in urban America is barely seen today. The reason was the American backlash against the Germans after America entered World War I; Germans in America were seen as the enemy, and any overt pride they may have exhibited in their German ethnicity would have worsened matters. This backlash was compounded by the Second World War and by the Holocaust. As a result, German ethnicity in urban areas is almost invisible today. But, as Kazal (2004) argues, it only seems that way. What occurred, at least in cities like Philadelphia, is that the older German immigrants identified themselves as “white” and as the “Old Germans”, to separate themselves with the newer immigrants from eastern and southern Europeans. The working class ethnic Germans, who were Catholic and fraternized more with the Irish Catholics, identified themselves as “white” Catholics. So the German ethnicity morphed into a “white” ethnic identity and a Catholic one. This, somewhat special, German experience is in accord with Will Herberg’s (1955) thesis that narrow ethnic identities lost themselves in a religious one—Protestant, Catholic, and Jew being the mainstream religions deemed acceptable.

### *The Irish Americans*

The Irish were early immigrants to America. There is evidence that they immigrated even before the American Revolution, and they continued well into the twentieth century. In the eighteenth century, Irish immigrants were mostly Protestants (known as Scotch-Irish) who came from the English-dominated province of Ulster in Ireland; in the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants were mostly Catholics who came from the predominantly Catholic parts of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> In the hundred years after 1820, around 5 million Irish people immigrated to the United States [Kenny

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<sup>1</sup> A good general reference on Irish immigration is Kenny (2000).

(2000)]. Today, roughly 10% of Americans identify themselves as having descended from Irish ancestry.

There was a torrent of Irish immigration into America during and after the Great Famine of the 1840s which killed over a million Irish people. Most of the people who subsequently emigrated from Ireland were Catholics, as mentioned. A series of blights afflicting the potato (the main staple of the Irish) turned into a famine due to injudicious and callous policies by the English, who controlled Ireland [Kinealy (1997)]. The motivation was partly driven by the vested interests of absentee English landlords in Ireland. The long-drawn attempts by (Protestant) England to control (the mostly-Catholic) Ireland had already hardened Irish-Protestant and Irish-Catholic identities before the Famine. It is obvious that English policies that exacerbated the effects of the potato blights with such tragic consequences would have made the cleavage between these identities more trenchant. The Irish Catholics brought their staunchly Catholic identity to America (which at the time was essentially a Protestant country) when they emigrated post-famine out of desperation.

The post-famine Irish immigrants to America were mostly unskilled and they faced considerable challenges adapting to their new home. They encountered extreme hostility and discrimination at the hands of the Americans, and were second only to the African Americans in the treatment they received. They were stereotyped as uneducated, promiscuous, and uncouth drunkards, very different from the treatment that met the Germans and the Scandinavians who preceded them (who were also mostly Protestants). Unlike their predecessors, the Irish settled mostly in urban areas, where they had to encounter many other ethnic groups—making it imperative for them to define themselves as Irish Catholic.

As with other immigrant ethnic groups who seek religion during their adaptation to a new country, the Irish identified strongly with Catholicism and started building Catholic churches. In course of time, the Irish dominated what came to be the American Catholic Church. The Church provided employment opportunities to the immigrants through its parochial schools, healthcare, and welfare systems [Lee (2000)]. This not only helped counter the hostility towards them as Catholics in a Protestant country by providing material and spiritual support, but also educated Irish children so that they became upwardly mobile.

The Irish immigrated not only to America but also to Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Kenny (2003) points out that the identity they assumed depended on which country they went to. In particular, in Britain or Australia their ethnicity did not acquire much importance, whereas in America they were “Irish Americans”. I submit that the reason for this is the greater “societal competition’ with other ethnic groups in America. The greater the ethnic competition a group encounters, the greater is the need to differentiate itself. Ethnicity becomes more salient to an immigrant group when thrown into a society with many ethnicities. An immigrant needs, as Herberg (1995) put it, to answer the question, “Who am I?” This applied to all the immigrant groups in America, and hardly any other country has had such a wide spectrum of immigrant ethnicities. In the case of Irish Americans, the link between their identity and the religion is particularly transparent.

### *The Italian Americans*

Among Europeans, Italians were late immigrants to America. There was a mass arrival of immigrants from Italy between 1890 and 1914, although there were some immigrants from that country since the 1820s. The mass immigration was set in motion after 1861, partly in response to the uncertainty surrounding the unification of Italy. Most immigrants at the time were unskilled peasants and either opted for farming or labored in public works in America. They took up these low-skilled jobs that the Irish immigrants had done in previous decades but who since had moved on to better jobs. In their new country, the Italian Americans faced a considerable amount of hostility and discrimination. Many had immigrated to America with the intention of making enough money to return to Italy, and a large proportion of them actually did return.

In terms of religion, most Italian immigrants were nominally Catholic. Back in Italy, they were deeply religious but they adhered to local customs, holy people, spirits, and the like [Vecoli (1969)]. This adherence to Christianity was at the family and village levels, and so there was not much in common even across villages. In other words, Italian ethnicity was very fragmented and it retained this feature even after emigration to America. Catholicism did not bind the Italians together the way it did the Irish [Abramson (1971)], and so the immigrants could not coordinate collective activities as Italians. Italian churches were built only after a long lag post arrival and even after they were built, there was difficulty in decided which patron saints they should be named after. Adding to the difficulties was the fact that Italians did not believe that they should

be contributing money for the erection and maintenance of churches because in Italy these were financed by the Vatican. It was not until the 1920s that some semblance of a collective national pride brought them together somewhat when Mussolini rose to power back in Italy [Luconi (2003)].

During the nineteenth century, Italians bore a great deal of hostility towards the Catholic Church. They viewed the papacy as being aligned with the state in oppressing the poor. So religion did not serve as a refuge from poverty and oppression the way it often does. Thus their fragmented, village-level ethnicity did not meld into a broader ethnicity as 'Italian Catholic' under Catholicism. When they arrived in the United States, the American Catholic Church was dominated by the Irish, who disdained the Italians.<sup>2</sup> The Italian immigrants had continued difficulty assimilating as Catholics until the Vatican took active measures to send Italian priests to serve them. Various Protestant denominations sought to entice the Italians to convert, with inducements like jobs, food, and the like. The Catholic Church thwarted these attempts with similar inducements. In order to retain the children of Italian immigrants, Catholic schools were also opened to counter the influence of Protestantism that was taught in public schools.

In Vecoli's (1969) view, neither Protestantism nor Catholicism managed to seriously engage the Italian immigrants; they remained nominal Catholics. Mostly, they remained loyal to their local ethnicities, along with their beliefs in local practices and patron saints. We can infer that, while their religious beliefs may have been strong, they were ethnically very fragmented in nature even within the ethnic group 'Italian Catholic'. Nevertheless, the ethnic Church did the Italian immigrants the service of enabling their integration into American society [Tomasi (1970)]. By the third generation, Italian-Americans largely converged to the ways of American (Irish) Catholics [Russo (1969)]. Nevertheless, Vecoli (1977, p. 38-39) contends that many still resisted this assimilation while not rejecting Catholicism.

### *The African Americans*

Even though they were not voluntary immigrants to the United States, it is very important to briefly consider Blacks. Their religion is very much based on ethnicity (with the ethnicity largely

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<sup>2</sup> The reason for this is that the Irish Catholics hated the King of Italy, who in their view was appropriating the temporal authority of the Pope by usurping the Papal States during the unification of the country that the Italian patriots desired [Vecoli (1969)].

defined by race). Most Blacks are Protestants, with many in mainline Protestant denominations (like Baptists and Methodists), and a significant proportion belonging to evangelical Protestant denominations. In terms of religiosity, at the present time Blacks in aggregate are among the most religious in the country, especially evangelicals.<sup>3</sup>

During the early decades of their slavery, they were not introduced to Christianity for various reasons, mostly racist. It was the Quakers and the Methodists who first brought Christianity to them. But it is only with the Great Awakening—the revival of (Protestant) religion after the European Enlightenment movement—of the 1730s and 1740s that Blacks were seriously involved in Christianity [Lincoln (1973)]. The first churches were built by the few free men during the eighteenth century. Baptists and Methodists accepted Blacks into their fold. Since then, the number of Black churches increased substantially, many resulting from fissions from other Protestant denominations. Catholicism has played a relatively minor role in Black Christianity.

The Christianity of the Blacks is strongly influenced by the Old Testament narrative of the Jews, who were captives in Egypt, then escaping and making their way to the Promised Land. The Blacks saw their slavery in the United States in the same fashion. The Black Church has played, and still plays, a very important role in the lives of Blacks. It provided them with spiritual solace and refuge from the treatment at the hands of whites. Also, as Putnam and Campbell (2010, Ch. 9) point out, the Black Church combines an emphasis on personal piety with an emphasis on the communal provision of social services.

In contrast to the organizations in many other religions, the Black church has been politically active and has helped articulate, coordinate, and fight for Black rights. The Civil Rights movement, which led to the landmark legislation in 1964, would have been impossible without the help of the Black Church [Putnam and Campbell (2010, Ch. 9)]. In the light of the slavery prior to the Civil War and persistent discrimination since then, it is not surprising that the Black Church has been very active politically because extreme discrimination contradicts the Christian tenet of the equality of all when is interpreted without racial bias. Given the extent to which this

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<sup>3</sup> See Putnam and Campbell (2010), especially Chapter 9.



church is involved in the wellbeing of Blacks, it is not surprising that there is a strong link between ethnicity and religion, with the causality likely going in both directions.

### *The Jewish Americans*

The Jews in America have always constituted a very small proportion of the population, but their influence on American life and the economy has been disproportionately high. The Jews came to America in several waves.<sup>4</sup> Initially, a small contingency of Sephardic Jews arrived in New York in 1654 in order to escape Portuguese persecution in Brazil. This was followed in the same and the next century by the immigration of German Jews, who were mostly merchants or tradesmen. After the 1890s, there was a massive inflow of Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe. With a brief hiatus during World War I, immigration resumed again because of the sharp rise in persecution in the Nazi regime.

Today the Jews in America essentially belong to three denominations: Orthodox (10%), Reform (35%), and Conservative (18%); in addition, 6% belong to other denominations and 30% belong to no denomination according to a Pew study.<sup>5</sup> According to the same study, around 22% of American Jews described themselves as having no religion. The American Jews are less religious than the rest of the American population.

The Jews are a unique ethnic group: most believe that being a Jew is a matter of ancestry, but some think that being a Jew is a matter of religion. So, in contrast to other ethnic groups like Germans, Italians, etc. who may or may not be Christians, the term “Jew” applies equally to the ethnic group and also to the religion. Judaism stemmed from, and is still wedded to, a particular people, a nation. It is not easy to separate the Jewish nation or ethnicity from the Jewish religion.<sup>6</sup>

This peculiarity of the Jews may explain the fact that a significant proportion of them in America says that being Jewish is very important to them but yet do not practice Judaism. We may understand this by referring to Glazer (1957, Chapter 1). He points out that the Jewish religion, as documented in the Old Testament, is essentially a history of Jewish lives and Jewish practices

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<sup>4</sup> Glazer (1957) offers a concise account of Jewish history in America.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center (2013), *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, [www.pewresearch.org/religion](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion)

<sup>6</sup> As Glazer (1957, p.7) puts it, “In a world in which religion tends to be increasingly divorced from nationality, Judaism maintains the connection in so profound and organic a form that it makes the idea of a divorce incredible.”

in the past. So, we may surmise that if some Jews no longer find those practices as being relevant to their present reality, they may well not continue with them, that is, choose not to practice their religion. And yet, being Jewish may be very important to them because their identification with the ethnic group is strong. There are many ways in which ethnic identity may be preserved—language, literature, history, and religion. Since Judaism is essentially Jewish history (if we accept Glazer’s interpretation), we see how an emphasis on the common descent and shared historical experiences may preserve ethnicity without the aid of religiosity. Furthermore, persistent discrimination for centuries and events like the Holocaust can contribute to greater ethnic awareness. The Jews, then, are a unique exception to the general rule that ethnicity and religiosity are causally linked; Jewish ethnicity and Jewish religion may be almost identical by definition but the practice of Judaism does not causally follow from ethnicity.

The sampling of groups briefly summarized above give us an idea of the role of ethnicity in the religiosity of the American immigrants of the past. The following three cases show that ethnicity also matters to recent immigrants.

### *The Latino Americans*

The term ‘Latino’ has come to be used synonymously with the term ‘Hispanic’ in America, and refers to people from several countries: Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Colombia, among others—immigrants from Central and Latin America. The languages in their home countries are largely Spanish and Portuguese. Two centuries ago the Latinos in the country were mostly Mexicans, who owned many areas that they ceded to the United States in 1848. Today, Latinos form a very large minority—the largest outside non-Hispanic whites—and much of this immigration came after the 1965 Immigration Act that ceased giving preference to European whites. The Latino population in the U.S. was close to 60 million in 2019, and this constituted about 18% of the population.<sup>7</sup> Since Latino birth rates are higher than those of the rest of the country, the proportion of Latinos in the U.S. population will increase in the coming decades.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI725218#RHI725218>

Traditionally, the Latinos in the United States were predominantly Catholic. A decade ago, in 2010, about two-thirds of the Latinos were Catholic. But this is changing; the proportion of Protestants and unaffiliated or no-religion Latinos (“Nones”) are increasing at Catholicism’s expense.<sup>8</sup> By 2013, the proportion of Catholic Latinos declined to 55% and that of Protestants stood at 22%; the unaffiliated Latinos accounted for 18% of their population.<sup>9</sup> This is partly because Protestantism is becoming more popular in Central and Latin American countries (from where Latino immigrants are still arriving) and also because, for various reasons, second and third generation Latino immigrants are switching to Protestantism. Most of the Latino Protestants in the United States belong to the Evangelical church and the rest to mainline Protestant churches [Putnam and Campbell (2010, Ch. 9)].

The religious contribution to ethnic entrenchment of Latinos in America comes more from Catholicism than from Protestantism. All churches catering largely to immigrant Latino populations directly or indirectly promote the bolstering of ethnicity to some extent by facilitating social interactions among ethnic groups and providing access to support groups. The orientation of the churches, however, can vary and each type is more successful at attracting some immigrants but not others. Palmer-Boyes (2010) argues that the Latino Catholic parish is essentially a specialist organization that caters to the ethnic immigrant interpretation of Catholicism. In this regard, Latino Catholic parishes differ considerably from Anglo Catholic ones. For example, Latino Catholic parishes have a higher proportion of charismatic Catholics who practice more expressive devotion, in common with Evangelical churches.

Calvillo and Bailey (2015) examined differences in relevance of ethnicity amongst Catholic and Protestant immigrants in the United States. They used the fact of whether the language the family speaks at home is Spanish as opposed to English as an indicator of adherence to ethnicity. They found that Catholic Latinos are more inclined to speak Spanish at home than Protestant Latinos. Menjivar (2003) studied the role played by Catholic and Evangelical churches in catering to the needs of immigrants from El Salvador in three American cities. She found that both helped the immigrants to adapt to their new country. However, the Catholic Church did this by cultivating a

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<sup>8</sup> I draw here from the 2014 Pew study *The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States*, available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/>

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the share of Catholics in the American religious landscape is more or less constant at about a quarter, and this is because of Latino immigrants who shore up the Catholic share [Putnam and Campbell (2010, Ch. 9)].

pan-ethnic identity (which covered many Latino ethnic groups) whereas the Evangelical church did so by cultivating an identity through an emphasis on their common Christian religion.

There are reasons why Protestant denominations tend to cement ethnicity to a smaller extent than does the Catholic Church. For the moment, however, I emphasize that the Catholic Church facilitates the perpetuation of ethnicity in Latino immigrants in the United States. Although it is losing adherents to Protestantism and to the Nones, as noted, it is still the largest religious denomination in the country, and Latinos constitute 25% of the Catholics. And given that the Latino population is increasing in size faster than the rest of the country (partly due to immigration), the importance of Latino ethnicity is likely to remain or perhaps even to increase in the foreseeable future.

### *The Korean Americans*

Korean immigration into the United States began in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when some Koreans went to Hawaii as workers in the plantations and, later, many moved to the mainland. In Hawaii, they were exposed to Protestantism and so they arrived in the mainland with some Christian background. After World War II and, especially during and after the Korean War, many more Koreans came to the United States as brides and children of Americans. After the immigration ban imposed on Asian immigrants in 1924 was repealed in 1965, more Koreans came to America.

There is a far higher proportion (71%) of practicing Korean Christians in America than in the Korea (21%) [Hurh and Kim (1990)]. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, is that there was self-selection of Christians among the immigrants. But there are other, more important, reasons that are relevant here. The Korean case shows in stark manner that even in contemporary America the church plays an important role in bolstering ethnicity. One of the peculiarities of the Korean case is that even the second generation immigrants are very actively engaged in the ethnic Korean church. Traditionally, it has been noted in the United States that, while the first generation strongly holds on to its ethnic roots, the second generation seeks to distance itself from it but the third generation returns to its roots.<sup>10</sup> This does not seem to hold for Korean immigrants.

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<sup>10</sup> In an essay written in 1938, the sociologist Marcus Hansen observed, “What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember.” [Quoted in Herberg (1955)]

The reasons for this are very pertinent to us. Chong's (1998) investigation of two ethnic Korean (Protestant) churches in Chicago reveals some interesting facts. The second generation immigrants, finding it difficult to assimilate because of their race, seek the company of fellow ethnics in the church. But the church is really a site where Korean culture is reproduced and perpetuated. Under the influence of the first generation Korean Americans, the Korean Protestant church adopts conservative values that ensure the second generation does not adopt the ways of the Americans at large. The Christian Bible is selectively interpreted so that the message is that being a good Korean is to be a good Christian. In other words, religion here is harnessed to perpetuate Korean ethnicity and its values such as respect for elders, filial piety, etc.

There are other reasons why second generation Koreans frequent their churches. The Korean church offers help with language problems, makes job referrals, offers advice in legal difficulties, etc. [Min (1992)]. Another important reason for church attendance is that, given that it is expected that immigrants should shed their ethnicities in America, one of the few avenues open to Koreans to sidestep this is to go to an ethnic church [Hurh and Kim (1990)]. There is no bar against this because the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

### *The Hindu Americans*

Although there was only a small number of Hindus in America prior to 1965 (most of whom came from Canada), it is only after that year that the number of American Hindus became substantial. The initial wave of post-1965 Hindu immigrants from India comprised highly skilled, trained professionals who subsequently were very successful in America as a group. Subsequent Hindu immigration has largely been driven by the family reunification provision of immigration laws and this latter group is relatively less skilled and has not done as well professionally.

Hindus have adapted to America in many ways and one is that American Hinduism is more ecumenical.<sup>11</sup> Hinduism has myriad aspects to it—it has different theologies, experiences, sects, etc.—and as practiced in India it may seem very fragmented, with the worship of different gods, using different rituals, conducted in different languages in different regions, etc. Since there are not enough Hindus in America from each region, American Hinduism has tended to emphasize

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<sup>11</sup> Williams (1998) offers an excellent treatment of this topic.

the unitive aspects of Hinduism, using only English in the services with the exception that the chants are allowed to remain in Sanskrit. In this way, the many subcultural Hindu identities of India are subsumed in a more homogeneous Hindu identity in America.

At more local levels, Hindu immigrants in America have come up with innovations that somewhat resemble Protestant congregations and Sunday schools. Kurien (1998) undertook an ethnographic study examining two such local groups of religious Hindus in and around Los Angeles (but there are similar organizations all over the country). One of these groups was directed mostly at adults in Hindu families but also accommodated children; the other was explicitly devoted to accustoming the children of Hindus to Hindu culture, values, epics, and stories. These sessions were followed by a study of the Bhagavad Gita, somewhat analogous to Bible classes for Christians. Such groups are not an essential aspect of Hindu culture in India.

According to Kurien (1998), by providing children with a firm sense of their ethnic identity, these groups in Los Angeles greatly helped Hindu immigrants to adapt to their American environment where they did not fit in because of their brown color. And this showed up in the subsequent success in the academic work of children and in their adaptation as American Hindus. In other words—and this was Kurien’s point—they became American by first becoming Hindu. This might seem like a contradiction in terms, but it is not. In fact, given the pattern that we have seen in so many other immigrant groups, it is one of the main ways in which immigrants adapt to America: by first establishing their ethnic identity.

All the ethnic groups I have discussed reveal that ethnic identity is an essential aspect of immigrant adaptation to America. The sense of ethnicity, far from being erased, in fact becomes stronger and better defined upon immigration. And religion seems to play a cardinal role in the cementing of this identity. As Putnam and Campbell (2010, Ch. 9, p.260) put it, “[E]thnicity and religion are often mutually reinforcing.” The group, comprising members in a similar predicament, collectively keeps alive their interpretation of their religion by engaging in weekly meetings, celebrating their religious festivals, having family gatherings, holding classes for teaching children the practices and beliefs of the ethnic group. In this manner, the practice of religion solidifies immigrants’ commitments to their ethnic groups and promotes cultural transmission.

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