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REFRAMING IMMIGRANT RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND PRACTICES

Abstract

This article will examine two accounts of transformation derived from major studies of immigrant religion in the United States: Warner’s de facto congregationalism thesis and Yang and Ebaugh’s returning to theological foundations thesis. Taken together, they highlight the reality of multicultural incorporation by pointing to the willingness of religiously active immigrants to adapt to the religious context of the receiving society while simultaneously maintaining connections to their past faith tradition which entails a process of not simply preserving, but seeking to get at the core of that tradition, free from certain cultural accretions. To the extent that empirical research supports these two theses, it serves indirectly as a challenge to those critics of multiculturalism who contend that such an approach to incorporation entails leading to parallel and separate lives, thus failing to forge a shared identity with the larger receiving society. The line of research discussed herein sees most religiously affiliated immigrants reflecting a desire to both maintain a religious identity and establish relationships with those outside the group—in short learning to live with diversity.

Keywords: de facto congregationalism, ethnicity, immigration, multiculturalism, religion, theological foundations

As immigrants settle into the receiving society and, in particular, after the second generation comes of age one can find a variety of responses to religious belief and practice. At the individual level this can mean one of three possibilities: (1) an effort expended at preserving homeland religion in as pristine a form as possible; (2) a revising of religious practice with the aim of assimilating into the religious landscape of the new homeland; or (3) an abandonment of religion (Mullins 1988). Those who seek to maintain a connection to religious organizational life in either the first or second of these options discover that a transformation in organizational structure is generally necessary and often beneficial (Breton 2012: 107–110).

This article will examine two accounts of transformation derived from major studies of immigrant religion in the United States: Warner’s de facto congregationalism thesis (1993, 1994, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) and Yang and Ebaugh’s (2001) returning to theological foundations thesis. Taken together, they highlight the reality of multicultural incorporation by pointing to the willingness of religiously active immigrants
to adapt to the religious context of the receiving society while simultaneously main-
taining connections to their past faith tradition which entails a process of not simply
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approach to incorporation entails leading parallel and separate lives, thus failing to
forge a shared identity with the larger receiving society. The line of research discussed
herein sees most religiously affiliated immigrants reflecting a desire to both maintain
a religious identity and establish relationships with those outside the group—in short
learning to live with diversity (Kivisto 2012; Heath and Demireva 2014).

Warner’s de facto congregationalism thesis

The most sustained attempts to analyze a general pattern of organizational adaptation
have focused explicitly on the United States, with a string of publications by R.
ism” constituting the touchstone for this work. The idea of de facto congregationalism
was first articulated in Warner’s (1993) seminal essay on a “new paradigm for the soci-
ological study of religion in the United States,” where it represents one of the elements
of the paradigm. The argument he advanced was that there was ample evidence of a
new way of viewing religion in the United States emerging in the sociological litera-
ture, and that it marked a distinct contrast to the older, heretofore dominant model that
had taken shape with (Western) European societies as the main referents (Berger 1969).
Underlying the contrast between Europe and the United States as conceptual referents
was the commonplace observation that whereas religious observance was on the
decline in Europe, it remains robust in the United States. Warner points to an explana-
tion of this difference in terms of the open religious market in the latter case versus the
state monopoly in the former.

In this view is reminiscent of the religious economy perspective advanced by
Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1992), though he stresses that, “The new paradigm is
not defined by economic imagery, […] but by the idea that disestablishment is the
norm” (Warner 1993: 1053). In a detailed schematic comparison of the two paradigms,
Warner offers the following contrast. The old paradigm presupposed a situation in
which a particular faith tradition possessed a monopoly on legitimate institutionalized
religion, and thus could readily make taken-for-granted claims to being a universal
church with ascription being the primary basis for religious identity. The new paradigm
is distinctive insofar as it envisions a competitive environment in which religious iden-
tities are contested and fluid, making way for entrepreneurial leaders—rather than
prebendary officials—who must actively recruit members. The hallmark of this reli-
gious field is, thus, one characterized by cultural pluralism (Warner 1993: 1052, 1058).
Primary attention throughout the article is directed to a reframing of the way in which
we look at religious change. Specifically, the paradigm casts into doubt the old para-
digm’s assumptions concerning the secularization of modern societies, an assumption
that was forced to treat the American case as an anomaly. In the old paradigm, the ques-
tions often posed tended to revolve around identifying what were presumed to be the 
sources of American exceptionalism. In the new paradigm, the unresolved questions 
concern European exceptionalism.

In subsequent publications, Warner outlined his understanding of the United States’ 
religious field. First, he contends that Americans are «elective parochials,» and reli-
gion in the nation is aptly characterized as being «profoundly associational and volun-
taristic» (Warner 1998b: 124–125). Furthermore, he concurs with Morris Janowitz’s 
(1967) contention that «American communities tend to be ‘communities of limited lia-
bility’» Finally, while noting that there is no monolithic religious culture shared by all 
Americans, but rather a number of cultures, he contends that «religion mediates differ-
ence.» It is, in his opinion, «the institutional area where US culture has best tolerated 

Our interest here is on one facet of the model, which concerns organizational struc-
ture. Drawing on H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic work, The Social Sources of Denomi-
nationalism (1929), Warner views the denomination in its American setting as a struc-
tural innovation made appropriate in a context characterized by disestablishment and 
its consequent facilitation of religious pluralism. This was true even during the earliest 
phase of the nation’s history, when it was an overwhelmingly Protestant country, but 
one in which Protestantism was divided into an array of discrete religious bodies whose 
boundaries were drawn based on such factors as theological differences, ethnicity, lan-
guage, and the national origin of members. Secondly, Warner (1993: 1065) contends, 
«Another pervasive American pattern is the congregational model of local church 
organization, whether or not sanctioned by the hierarchy.» Calling this pattern «de 
facto congregationalism,» he goes on to spell out what this means. The term serves to 
label:

…an institutionalized bias of American religious life toward affectively significant associations 
under local and lay control, beginning with observations of differences between congregations 
within the same denomination. …De facto congregationalism implies that the local religious 
community is in fact constituted by those who assemble together (which is the etymological root 
of «congregation») rather than by the geographic units into which higher church authorities 
divide their constituents, which is what «parishes» historically are (Warner 1993: 1066–1067).

There is little question but that congregationalism has been a hallmark of American 
Protestantism in a nation that at its founding rejected the idea of a state church in favor 
of creating a wall of separation between church and state. But is this organizational 
pattern relevant to other religions, as well? Warner thinks it is, and in considering 
earlier waves of migration points to Catholic church historian Jay Dolan’s (1985) 
assessment that whereas Vatican II pushed Catholic laity into a considerably more 
prominent role of leadership, evidence of their significance in establishing and devel-
oping churches should be dated to a far earlier time in the history of Catholic America. 
In the case of Judaism, Warner (1993: 1067) states that its «normative congregational-
ism …has long facilitated adaptability…»
He also contends that a similar tendency is at play among post-1965 immigrant religious groups. He cites as an example trends among Muslim immigrants in the United States. Whereas in the pre-migration setting the mosque was solely a place of prayer and the imam’s role that of prayer leader, in the American context the functions of the mosque have expanded to include education and socializing, while the imam is tasked to engage in such activities as counseling, visitations to the sick and homebound, conducting marriages and funerals, and serving as a representative of the mosque to the larger society. In short, Warner (1993: 1067, see also 1998a: 209) writes, the imam becomes a «religious professional» who models his role along the lines of «pastors, priests, and rabbis.» The findings of the New Ethnic and Immigrant Congregations Project (NEICP), which Warner directed with funding from the Lilly Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts, reinforced his conviction of de facto congregationalism. Admittedly, the project focused explicitly on congregations, and not on private religious practice nor on the operations of larger regional, national, or international religious bodies. Nevertheless, he saw similar patterns, be it among Rastafarians or various ethnic Christian churches in different cities across the country (Warner and Wittner 1998).

The second major research project on religion and the new immigrants, the Religion, Ethnicity, and New Immigrant Research (RENIR) project, was conducted in Houston under the leadership of Helen Rose Ebaugh and again funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The research team identified 793 immigrant congregations in the greater Houston metropolitan region. Many of these congregations had fleeting existences and the team determined that they would concentrate on the 413 congregations that appeared to have a more stable institutional presence. Data were collected on 60 percent of them, complemented by more intensive work with eight focus groups and in-depth field research at thirteen selected sites. The researchers’ findings, based on the ethnographic component of the study, supported Warner’s thesis: congregationalism constitutes one of the primary structural adaptations of immigrant religious institutions.

Although Warner subsumed the provision of various needed resources to its members under the congregational model, the researchers distinguished the congregational model from the community center model. Some congregations, particularly the smallest with the most limited resource bases (such as the Zoroastrian Center) did not fit the mold of the community center model, while most did to greater or lesser extent. In short, the RENIR researchers concluded that while de facto congregationalism is in fact the norm, it varies, not unexpectedly, in terms of how close particular congregations are to the ideal typical model (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000: 49–62).

Warner (2000: 277–278) summarized the «congregational form» as it applied to immigrant religious institutions, a summary account of which includes the following:

- a voluntary membership association defined by choice rather than proximity;
- lay leadership taking form as boards of directors, trustees, deacons, and so forth;
- incorporation for tax purposes as a not-for-profit organization;
- it may be truly independent or may be part of a larger denominational organization;
• clergy tend to be viewed as professionals hired by the lay leaders;
• an exclusivity of membership based on ethnicity or national origin;
• a multifunctional organization that besides its religious function serves one or more
  other functions, which he specifies as including «educational, cultural, political,
  and social service activities»;
• a tendency to conduct religious services and other activities on Sunday, paralleling
  Christian practices in America.

Fenggang Yang and Ebaugh (2001), making primary use of the RENIR findings, concur
with Warner’s de facto congregationalism in analyzing what they describe as the «trans-
formations in new immigrant religions,» though they do so with one significant revi-
sion. Actually, they depict three transformations. Besides adopting the congregational
form, they also discuss what they see as a return to theological foundations and a
reaching beyond traditional ethnic and religious boundaries to include other people. We
will address the second of these topics in the next section.

Their discussion echoes Warner when they point to the prevalence of the congre-
gational structure for Christian and non-Christian religions alike, for the centrality of the
voluntary character of membership, the salience of lay leadership, the expansion of
organizational functions—both religious and secular—and with this expansion, the
expanded role of an increasingly professionalized clergy (Yang and Ebaugh 2001:
273–276). Unlike Warner, they observe the emergence of larger organizational net-
works that tend to resemble Protestant denominations, and rather than seeing congre-
gations as being divided into the independent and those linked to larger institutions,
they see the latter as characteristic of a general—though not universal—trend. In dis-
cussing ritual practices, they concur with Warner’s claim about the shift to Sunday
worship.

They add that in other ways immigrant congregations come to resemble Protestant
churches. They note that whereas in traditional Buddhist temples the people sit on
cushions on the floor, at the His Nan Temple in Houston pews have been installed and
traditional chanting has been replaced by hymns, some which have borrowed melodies
from Protestant hymnals. Finally, they note that language is a fraught issue, particu-
larly insofar as it reflects generational differences in acculturation to American society.
Whereas the immigrant generation tends to want to maintain their homeland language,
a shift towards English usage is evident, with a bilingual phase often setting the stage
for a shift to English-only usage. In panethnic congregations, the move to English gen-
erally occurs more quickly because of the need to find a common language (Yang and

Studies that have made use of the de facto congregationalism model have tended to
take it as a given and apply it to the particular case study being explored, adapting or
adding features along the way. This is true of yet another major comparative project,
that conducted by Michael Foley and Dean Hoge (2007) entailing a study of 200 con-
gregations in the Washington, DC area, with in-depth analyses of 20 of them. They
found, for example that, «both lay men and women in immigrant worship communities
are more likely to enjoy leadership roles in the performance of worship than lay people
in the population as a whole» (Foley and Hoge 2007: 155). It is also characteristic of the multitude of studies examining a single or a few congregations. A representative example can be found in the work of Carl Bankston III and Min Zhou (2000, see also Bankston 1997 and Bankston and Zhou 1995). Their comparative research, which examined a Vietnamese Catholic congregation in New Orleans and a Laotian Buddhist temple in New Iberia, Louisiana, lends support to Warner’s thesis. At the same time, they note a certain irony in this organizational adaptation insofar as a major impetus for founding immigrant religious institutions is to insure the «perpetuation of cultural traditions» (Bankston and Zhou 2000: 455). What they concluded in both cases was that efforts expended at promoting cultural preservation had the unintended consequence of assisting members in their effort to gain a socioeconomic foothold and to fit into the receiving society’s public sphere.

Critique

Wendy Cage (2008) has provided the one instance of a sustained critical analysis of de facto congregationalism, calling for a revision of the original thesis. Her assessment builds on Manual Vásquez’s (2005) brief but direct attack on de facto congregationalism, which he locates as an aspect of his broader criticism of Warner’s new paradigm, which in turn is treated as an instance of an even more far-ranging challenge to Western intellectual elitism in the realm of religious studies, particularly as it gets refracted in modernization theory, dependency theory, American exceptionalism, and so forth. In his account, the new paradigm is described as «a cluster of «provincial’ theories» that reflects the American religious scene as it seeks to «universalize the U.S. model.» Meanwhile, lurking behind the de facto congregationalism model is a «crypto-normativism» (Vásquez 2005: 229–230). He raises the following specific problems: (1) the congregational thesis presumes that sending societies are homogeneous, thus denying that they are both institutionally differentiated and religiously pluralistic; (2) it is inattentive to the reality of transnationalism; (3) it ignores the dynamics of power within congregations; and (4) at the methodological level, a preoccupation with congregations blinds researchers to manifestations of religiosity in other facets of everyday life (Vásquez 2005: 231–233).

Vásquez suggests that some immigrants have been involved in congregational life in the pre-migration context—as with base communities shaped by Liberation Theology in Latin America. This is meant to dispute the idea that the congregational model is inherently rooted in the distinctive religious field of the United States. He also points to the case of undocumented agricultural workers in rural Florida who because of the insecurity of their lives and the lack of resources have failed to produce a «robust congregational life.» In this example, he raises a question about whether there is an urban bias in research on immigrant religion and goes on to write that «we cannot deny the impact of funding agencies like the Lilly Endowment and the Pew Charitable Trusts, which in generously supporting our research, have shaped our agendas (Vásquez 2005: 233–234). With this broadside against de facto congregationalism, one might assume
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that Vásquez is prepared to assign it to the scrapheap of failed conceptual models. He doesn’t. Instead, he suggests that,

If it is relativized and stripped of normative and teleological assumptions, as the secularization and the assimilation paradigms have been, the congregational approach will likely continue to yield valuable insights into the ways in which religious organizations mediate the formation of collective identities among immigrants (Vásquez 2005: 234).

It is here that Cadge picks up the critique. She begins her brief by contending that despite its apparent modesty, the hypothesis «touches on profound and central themes as regards the meaning of modernity and the changing nature of religious institutions in the modern world,» and she points in particular to José Casanova’s (1994) widely-cited book on the return of public religion as a touchstone for her position (Cadge 2008: 346). She points to his concept of «denominization» as reflecting the differentiation of modern societies into discrete spheres of influence—a theme, it should be noted, that was central to both Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, though they do not factor into the analysis. Differentiation assumes concrete form when religious disestablishment takes hold. Cadge does not distinguish differentiation from pluralism, but she has in mind contexts that are characterized by the interplay of the two—though she does not pose it as such. She proceeds to locate congregationalism as a more local manifestation of Casanova’s «more global vision» (Cadge 2008: 247).

She concurs with Vásquez that the de facto congregationalism thesis ignores transnationalism, treats the United States as a universal model, and contains both an unwarranted normative and teleological underpinning. Moreover, it fails to define, to use the language of Bourdieu, the proper organizational field and as such does not adequately account for variation in organizational forms or the precise social processes that account for the development of those forms. By treating congregationalism as a natural and desirable organizational form, the thesis fails to step back to determine when and in what circumstances the congregational model is most likely to emerge (Cadge 2008: 347).

The crux of her critique revolves around two charges. First, by failing to define the organizational field, Warner and those who embrace his thesis presume the existence of a unified field rather than considering the possibility of multiple and diverse religious fields. The second charge concerns the presumed failure to offer an adequate account of the processes by which one or another type of religious organization emerges. Here Cadge turn to the influential work of Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1991) on institutional isomorphism, which specifies three ideal types of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative. She contends that Warner and those who have followed his lead have assumed, without stating so explicitly, that congregationalism is to large extent the result of the interplay of coercive and mimetic isomorphism.

Identifying these presumed shortcomings of Warner’s thesis, Cadge offers a revised approach that hinges on the idea that it is necessary to speak about multiple organizational fields rather than a unitary organizational field. Her empirical case is Buddhist immigrants from Thailand. She argues that their temples across the United States
engage one another in a sustained way both at the informal level and through the work of two umbrella organizations, the Council of Thai Bhikkhus and the Dhammayut Order in the United States. As such, she contends that they constitute one particular organizational field in the much larger arena of multiple religious organizational fields in the nation.

With this framing, she divides Warner’s thesis into eight elements and offers her assessment of whether or not the Buddhist temples fit the model. She concludes that on four of the items they very clearly and uniformly do fit: (1) they are characterized by voluntary membership; (2) in which people identify with the temple based on a sense of connection to fellow members rather than predicated on territorial proximity; (3) members undertake systematic fund raising efforts to insure the economic viability of the organization; and (4) they gather together regularly for worship and fellowship on Sundays.

For three of the items she finds what she refers to as variations. First, in terms of clergy being hired as professional employees, she observes that precisely how monks are selected differs somewhat among temples, as do the specifics of the job requirements and the amount of power and autonomy they are granted. While monks are called to temples by lay members, they are not paid salaries the way professional clergy are in Warner’s model. The calling aspect clearly fits the model. Given that Cadge does not provide information about how monks are compensated, it is impossible to assess if their economic relationship to the temple departs significantly from the model. Furthermore, although the monks come from Thailand and are quite unfamiliar with American culture, the resultant intercultural strains and their implications for institutional functioning are not addressed. For an earlier analysis of the «organizational dilemmas» created by cultural tensions between homeland and receiving country, Mullins’ (1988) study of Japanese Buddhists in Canada is instructive, as is the more recent study also from outside of the United States of so-called «EasyJet priests,» Polish priests serving Catholic Poles living in Britain (Trzebiatowska 2010).

Second, in terms of multifunctionality, she notes variations in what temples actually do, but notes that the «vast majority of Thai temples in the United States are multifunctional, including at least one educational, cultural, political, or social service activity in addition to their religious activities» (Cadge 2008: 360). That most temples provide such services to members would appear to validate Warner’s position. The variations discussed by Cadge simply involve differences in the precise services performed and the extent to which they are. Larger temples with more extensive resource bases, not surprisingly, tend to offer a greater array of services. But in this regard, they do not differ from non-immigrant Protestant congregations, as Mark Chaves (2009, 2004) has shown in his research on American congregational life. He notes that, «The reality is that virtually all congregations do something that might be called social service, but much of this activity is very small-scale and informal and focused on short-term, emergency needs for food, clothing, and shelter» (Chaves 2009: 71).

Third, Cadge’s study found that only a minority of temples was ethnically exclusive. Although she does not provide details about the heterogeneity of temples, she does point to the widespread presence of Laotians in the Thai temples and in smaller numbers other Asian groups, including Cambodians, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Sri
Lankans. In addition, slightly more than one in three temples have some non-Asian members. One of the consequences of this tendency is that English frequently becomes the lingua franca (Cadge 2008: 358).

The one element in Warner’s model that Cadge did not test was the role of the laity in temple functions, both because of data limitations and some of the distinctive features of Thai Buddhist temples. However, what she has to say on the subject appears to lend credence to de facto congregationalism. Thus, she observes that «lay people have taken on more temple leadership roles through administrative work, the education of children, meditation teaching in some contexts, and other functions» (Cadge 2008: 355). Her article concludes by calling for a revised version of the de facto congregationalism thesis, one that is more attentive to heterogeneity and variability and which offers an account of process by utilizing the insights of the new institutionalism.

**Assessing the critiques**

How convincing are the critiques? I would contend not very. In the case of Vásquez, the striking thing about his challenge to the new paradigm and in particular to the de facto congregationalism thesis is how far removed from Warner’s account his discussion is. He treats Warner’s work as being tainted with ideological biases that make it suspect, but never actually grounds his analysis in the textual evidence itself. He imputes normative and teleological inflections without offering exegetical evidence to support this charge. When Cadge picks up the gauntlet, she, too, conceptually inflates what Warner actually had in mind when he introduced the idea of de facto congregationalism, tying it to broad notions of modernization writ large.

I would suggest that, contrary to Cadge, his thesis is and was intended to be a rather more modest proposition. It’s predicated on two main assumptions. First, the congregational model is an ideal type, and as such in the real world we can expect to find organizations that more or less resemble it on a scale—as well as finding some that don’t seem to bear a resemblance to the type. Second, when it comes to immigrant religious organizations, the claim is that there is a tendency to take on the congregational form. This suggests that not all such religious bodies will assume this form. Moreover, those that do will not necessarily do so in ways that make them identical to the traditional Protestant congregation. And as to why such a tendency exists, Warner does not rely on theoretical appeals to modernity or to Bourdieu-inspired ideas about religious fields, but rather offers a far more grounded analysis based on such things as the quest for tax-exempt status and the pragmatic considerations that go into deciding to use Sunday as the primary worship and social gathering day of the week.

Why spend so much time with these critiques of Warner’s position? I think better than offering a summary of those researchers who have taken the thesis at face value and applied it to particular cases, an examination of a sustained attempt to, if not deconstruct, revamp in significantly new ways the original thesis provides invaluable insights into the utility of the concept. As it turns out, I would argue that Cadge’s case study serves to illustrate, not the problems of the original thesis, but rather its robustness.
This being said, there are two issues that are not adequately addressed by Warner. The one is a consequence of his focus on the settlement nation and not on the sending country and the potential interplay between the two. Vásquez called for the need to employ a transnational optic, something that quite clearly Warner does not promote. On this score, I concur with Vásquez. The second issue is less a conceptual one and more a question of whether or not there is empirical support for one of Warner’s assumptions, namely that immigrant congregations will tend to be ethnically exclusive. Cadge’s Thai Buddhist temples are multi-ethnic and it is reasonable to wonder whether this might be the more typical pattern. This particular topic constitutes what Yang and Ebaugh (2001) consider to be the third major transformation in immigrant religions, one that will not be addressed in this article.

Returning to theological foundations

A growing body of research has taken up the topic of whether or not the immigrant experience at the individual level can be aptly characterized as what historian Timothy Smith (1978) referred to as a theologizing experience—by which he means not only an intensification of religious identification and involvement, but heightened reflectivity (most scholars have tended to uncritically accept the thesis; for a recent challenge to it, see Massey and Higgins 2011). Here we address a related topic at the organizational level, one that looks at what Yang and Ebaugh (2001) depict as a «returning to theological foundations.» This particular topic, of course, skirts the question of the level of religiosity among immigrants in general, being concerned with the nature of religious belief and practice for those who are institutionally affiliated.

Yang and Ebaugh (2001: 281) stress that a returning to theological foundations is not necessarily the same thing as a turn to fundamentalism, writing that whereas fundamentalists see «modern culture as a threat,» they found that sometimes for their subjects «reaching toward foundations among immigrant religions can generate liberal or liberating ideas and actions—liberating followers of a religion from stifling cultural traditions and sectarian limitations.» In their portrait, the tendency to return to theological foundations is driven in no small part by the need of religious minorities to transcend ethnic and national-origin boundaries in order to develop a critical mass sufficient for success in organizing a sustainable religious community.

Although they note that the return can be to either the actual origins or the imagined origins, it is my sense that the significance of the imagined or constructed nature of origins is understated in their formulation. That being said, what return entails is what Raymond Breton (2012: 113) calls a process of «pristinization,» which amounts to an attempt to separate religion from culture in a «search for the ‘universal’ since the theological foundations must be common to all members, whatever their national or ethnic backgrounds.»

Yang and Ebaugh (2001: 280) present a simple illustration of one of the less controversial ways this plays out. Noting that Pakistani Muslim immigrant men pray with caps, while Arab men do not, the former were forced to ponder whether there was a
scriptural basis for the practice of cap wearing or if it was simply an artifact of their particular ethnic culture. Yang and Ebaugh do not address in any detail the larger sectarian divide between Shi’ites and Sunnis that characterizes Islam globally, but observe that umbrella organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America make an effort to stress the commonalities shared by all Muslims while downplaying differences. Breton (2012) frames the issue as follows:

This may entail distinctions between what is fundamental and what is less so. In Islam, the fundamentals include the belief in one god, the existence of the prophet Mohammed, and salvation (for Shi’ites, there are five fundamentals). In addition, there are five pillars: the profession of faith, praying five times a day, almsgiving, annual fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca for all those able to make the journey. Muslims will still be considered Muslim if they do not practice the five pillars, but not if they disagree with any of the three basic principles (Breton 2012: 114).

Yang and Ebaugh report findings from the Houston study that indicate this tendency within Islam can also be seen in other non-Christian religions. Thus, Buddhists in the metropolitan area have sought to forge a consensus within the religion that overcomes traditional differences between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists. Similarly, efforts are underway, spearheaded by leaders of an organization known as the World Hindu Council (Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America), to identify those concepts and practices that are shared by all Hindus. The Eastern Orthodox community has likewise sought to transcend national differences in constructing a unified Orthodox Church in America (Yang and Ebaugh 2001: 279–280).

These examples are intended to reflect a general trend, as the adherents of immigrant religions create a space for themselves in a pluralistic religious landscape, adapting and adjusting their beliefs and practices in the process. This was aptly described as the result of an effort to separate religion from culture. Another way of putting it is to describe it as an effort to separate religion from ethnicity. Of course, not all groups attempt to make this separation, instead working hard to define religion and ethnicity in such a way that the two are mutually reinforcing. Min’s (2010) study of Indian Hindus and Korean Protestants in the New York City metropolitan area reveal two groups that make just such an effort. He is particularly concerned with exploring the ways in which religion is or is not utilized to preserve ethnic identity. He discovered that Koreans were less successful in maintaining the religion/ethnicity linkage, due to large extent to a generational shift in which the children of immigrants distanced themselves from their Korean background as they assertively defined themselves as Christian in a manner that distances themselves from the particularities of being a Korean Christian. In contrast, for Hindus, from both the first and second generations, religion was an important vehicle for maintaining a sense of being Indian.

Min explains the difference in terms of differing levels of «dogmatic authority» in each belief system. Among Korean adherents to evangelical Christianity was a firmly-rooted conviction that their religion was the one true religion, whereas among Indian Hindus, an embrace of religious pluralism and of mutual toleration of different religions leads to a lower level of dogmatic authority. The net result is that Korean Christians find that they do not need their ethnic background to reinforce their religious iden-
tity while Indian Hindus do. Prema Kurien’s (2007) research complicates this picture by suggesting that Hindu immigrants may have differing levels of dogmatic authority depending on whether the geographical referent is India or the United States: actively supporting the Hindutva ideology of the BJP in the former while arguing for multicultural respect in the latter.

There are two main points to be made about this line of research. First, all of the studies to date capture small case studies in various locales throughout the country. They constitute a snapshot at a particular point in time, which is a relatively early one, given that these groups have not been in the receiving nation for more than a few decades and the second generation has only recently come of age. If we look back to the last major migratory wave in the United States, we see that from the third generation and beyond, the tendency has been to sever the earlier linkages between religion and ethnicity. While minority religious communities—such as the Amish and Hasidic Jews—have managed to keep the linkage intact, they remain very much outside of the mainstream currents (Kivisto 2007).

The general trend has been for ethnic churches to merge into larger bodies and by so doing, relegating the ethnic character of the church to the realm of nostalgia. A major contributing factor for this shift was widespread intermarriage and with it religious switching. It is too early to determine if this general pattern will repeat itself. It is worth observing that past immigrants were overwhelmingly of European-origin, and whether they were white on arrival or became white over time (Guglielmo 2003; Rœdiger 2005), by the time that the third generation came of age, race did not constitute a factor shaping marital choices—provided, of course, that marriages occurred between fellow Europeans-Americans.

This leads to the second point. It is important to note that the vast majority of these past immigrants were Christian, whereas today’s immigrants find representation from all of the major world religions and from many minor ones. That being said, Christians still constitute a substantial majority of the new immigrants. At issue is whether the ways in which immigrants respond to their respective religious traditions differs depending on whether the religion in question is Christian or non-Christian. For the former, a place at the table has already been set. Indeed, given the varieties of Christian expression in the nation, a number of places at the table have been set and they are free to sit where they please. In contrast, non-Christians are confronted with the task of finding a place at that pluralist table (Kurien 2007).

Returning to Cadge’s idea of a religious field, I would take issue with her attempt to treat each religious tradition, in effect, as occupying its own field detached from other fields, including the dominant or majority field. Rather, I would contend that one should locate immigrant religions in terms of an overarching religious field that can be viewed as a dome covering all of the various manifestations of religious expression in a particular large-scale societal space such as a nation. To not do so makes it difficult to understand precisely what immigrant religions are responding to and how they are framing their presentation of collective self to the outside world and to members within the religious community. Immigrant Christians discover that Protestant Christianity in the United States is divided between two expressions that have lived in acrimonious relationship to
each other since the nineteenth century. David Hollinger (2013) has chosen to distinguish the two versions of Protestantism as «ecumenical» and «evangelical.» Synonyms for the former include liberal, mainline, and cosmopolitan, while for the latter they include conservative, fundamentalist, and parochial. He succinctly distinguishes the two by writing that, «While the ecumenists increasingly defined themselves through a sympathetic exploration of wider worlds, the evangelicals consolidated ‘home truths’ and sought to spread them throughout the globe» (Hollinger 2013: 21).

Since the 1960s, sociologists of religion have speculated about why ecumenical denominations have been losing numbers—or as the advocates of a rational choice perspective on religion would have it, market share—while evangelical churches (sometimes treated as «strict» churches in the literature) have witnessed dramatic growth until recently (Iannaccone 1994; Finke and Stark 1992). Given this reality, immigrants would appear to have a choice of opting for denominations in decline or denominations exhibiting vibrancy. And it is evident that many immigrants, particularly Asian immigrants but also Latinos attracted to Pentecostalism, have opted to affiliate with evangelical churches, whether they are part of larger denominational structures or among the substantial body of nondenominational churches.

But these institutional options are only part of the religious field, for immigrants also enter a landscape characterized by a set of cultural values that serve to frame how religion in general and particular religious expressions are to be recognized and what sorts of interreligious relations are to be encouraged and which discouraged. N.J. Demerath III (1995: 458) finds something paradoxical at play, for he argues that the decline of liberal Protestantism should be seen, not as having occurred because it watered down its doctrines as some have suggested, but as a consequence of its «cultural triumph on behalf of such values as individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry.» Hollinger cites this argument favorably, adding the caveat that liberal Protestantism was not alone in shaping this general cultural milieu, but was aided and abetted by other sectors of American society with similar inclinations, including liberal Catholics, cosmopolitan Jews, and secularists. The point for our purposes here is that when immigration scholars contrast the climate of opinion regarding newcomers in the past versus the present, there is a general consensus that today’s immigrants enter a more receptive society than did their earlier counterparts. And this is, ironically, due in no small part to the efforts of that sector of American Protestantism that is least likely to attract contemporary immigrants into their denominational life.

Conclusion

This article has been concerned with immigrant religious organizations, and as such has had a decidedly inward focus. The focus on the congregation—not simply a synonym for organization, but a distinct type of religious organization—has opened up certain vistas while remaining relatively inattentive to others. This is a reflection of the way a research agenda first developed in the early 1990s in the form of Warner’s
NEICP project and subsequently took off, the result being a robust body of research findings. Readers will note the obvious about this agenda: it has a decidedly American cast to it. Insofar as it was initially informed by the new paradigm, with its distinct American focus, this was inevitable.

It is not that research on congregations elsewhere has not occurred. It has, but not nearly to the same extent and not designed with the new paradigm in mind. This is particularly true of research conducted in Western Europe. These studies do not speak very directly to comparative questions that seek to determine the differences and similarities found in the United States and Western Europe. Given that Canada is often depicted as straddling in a middle ground between the two, Breton’s (2012) recent book is instructive. Although its focus is on Canada, much of the literature he cites derives from south of the 49th parallel. There is, however, a large enough body of research focusing specifically on Canada for him to pattern his analysis along the lines of American researchers. He concludes that trends in Canada to great extent parallel those of its much larger continental neighbor.

The general «take-away» from this large and growing body is that Foner and Alba (2008) are on to something when they contend that religion in America (and Canada) has proven to be a bridge to inclusion. The unanswered question is whether they are right in asserting that, in contrast, religion tends to be a barrier to inclusion in Europe. Scholarship on immigrant religion in Western Europe has been far more inclined to look at the context of reception rather than the ways in which immigrants adapt and adjust to new circumstances. In particular, it has focused on state actions and on the attitudes and actions of the public at large. Moreover, it has been keenly interested in one particular religion: Islam. When religion is articulated as a problem, it is almost inevitably concerned with Islam, which has had a greater impact demographically in Europe than in the United States. In terms of divergent research agendas, while in the latter religion tends to be viewed as a potential asset to incorporation, in the former it is seen as an impediment. Clearly, what is needed is a genuinely comparative research agenda.

This article has suggested but one aspect of that agenda: to determine if de facto congregationalism and returning to theological foundations are relevant in accounting for the immigrant religious experience in Western Europe, or whether they are limited to the American (or North American) context. One might expect to see the congregational model serving religious immigrants in Western Europe for similar pragmatic reasons as those found in North America. However, in those countries in which the state plays an active role in shaping church-state relations (e.g., France), one could also reasonably expect to see organizational models diverge from de facto congregationalism as the state attempts to impose its own top-down model. In terms of returning to theological foundations, one might reasonably contend that the migratory experience in any context is sufficiently disorienting to propel significant numbers of immigrants to an intensification of religious belief and practice. On the other hand one might counter that claim by arguing that context matters, and the higher level of religiosity in the United States will be reflected in a greater propensity for immigrant to return to theological foundations than is true of the more secular cultural landscape of Western
Europe. Future research attempting to test these competing hypotheses will contribute to determining whether or not the bridge/barrier distinction holds empirically.

References


Peter Kivisto: Reframing immigrant religious organizations and practices

