

Introduction

I want you to meet my neighbor, Mary Thomas. She is head nurse in the emergency room of our city hospital. She came to the United States in 1972 when the hospital was desperate to hire trained nurses, and then she went back to India four years later to marry her husband and brought him to join her in the United States. He now teaches computer science in the city junior college. They attend the St. Thomas Syrian Orthodox Church that meets in St. John's church hall. His brother, Father Matthew, recently came from Kerala to be priest for St. Thomas parish. Mary's children attend St. Xavier High School with my boys.

The composite introduction raises more questions than it answers because the presence of Christian immigrants from India confronts those living in the United States with new neighbors and new types of Christianity not previously a part of American Christianity or experience. Their presence exposes the ignorance most have of Indian history, and thus it requires some effort to make their acquaintance. Are many Christians in India? What is the Syrian Orthodox Church? How did it happen that Indian Christian churches are now established in the United States? Why don't they just join "our" churches; we are losing members and would welcome their participation? Do they know Arvin Patel, who runs the motel on Main Street? Are all the Christian women nurses? What's going to happen to their children; will they become Roman Catholics? Pentecostals?

Introductions are significant because they help lay groundwork for pleasant, effective, and harmonious relationships. They can also create false impressions, especially when they multiply into stereotypes. Not all Kanti Patels own motels; not all Gundar Singhs run taxi companies; not every Mary Thomas is a nurse; one is unlikely ever to meet a Muslim terrorist. Only careful, more complete introductions reveal the fuller complexity of groups of new neighbors. Even the individual neighbor

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

discovers a clear identity in the context of associations with groups that develop in widening circles from the family to co-workers, religious group, acquaintances, and various kinds of social associations. Hence, any individual has to be situated in a nuanced set of associations before a neighbor can become acquainted; indeed, before the individual knows who he or she is. The set of associations is dynamic for new immigrants because migration initiates the formation and preservation of personal and group identities in new contexts.

It is no accident that in America becoming acquainted with new neighbors involves introduction to their religious affiliation, even though official government records are prohibited by law from including such information. Because most immigrant groups previously arriving in America have shaped their identities in their new homes by confessing a faith, by creating new religious groups, preserving boundaries based on religious affiliation, and negotiating both cultural and religious matters from relatively strong religious foundations, it follows that religious identity is an acceptable social marker in American society. Religious identification puts people in the correct pew, so to speak. "I am Catholic; she is Baptist; he is Jewish; I think they are Hindu." These are meaningful statements in the American context of freedom of religion and of voluntary association.

Mary Thomas is a St. Thomas Syrian Orthodox Christian from India, and, like everyone, is the product of social movements and forces that no individual controls. She and other Asian-Indian Christians in the United States are part of a massive movement from many countries made possible by dramatic changes in the United States Immigration Act of 1965. In the three decades from 1961 to 1991, some 17 million legal immigrants entered the United States – almost half a million coming directly from India – and the numbers exhibit a steady upward climb to almost 2 million immigrants in 1991 alone (INS, *Statistical Yearbook*, 1991: 27, 28, Tables 1 & 2). Even though Christians are a small minority both in India and among Indian immigrants, they are part of one of the significant migrations in modern times from east to west, from developing countries to the United States. Asian-Indian Christians are relatively anonymous among the representatives of the world's religions who are currently finding new homes in the United States. Spires and crosses on Asian-Indian Christian churches appear very much like those adorning other churches – unless one looks closely at the intricate decoration – but much different from the domes of mosques and temple towers that adorn the religious buildings of other recent immigrants from India. At

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

the same time that these Christians are adjusting to American society, they are also forming new associations and engaging in negotiations with new immigrants of many faiths, some from Muslim mosques and Hindu temples down the street from where they grew up in India.

St. Thomas Christians from India join Christians arriving from many parts of the world with forms of Christianity burnished and winnowed by long residence in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean. These immigrants precipitate changes in American Christianity as they develop transnational churches with manifestations in several countries where members and their families maintain associations at the same time as they negotiate new relationships with their American brothers and sisters in Christ. The new immigrants both reflect and create new dynamics in American Christianity and society that call into question dominant models of analysis. The two models of assimilation and pluralism seem inadequate to deal with the greater complexity of the new immigration. Analyses of the meaning of citizenship and ethnicity have not taken account of the transnational character of families and religious organizations. Denominationalism seems to be weakening in America at the same time as new immigrants are arriving who did not view themselves as members of denominations in the places of their birth. Hence, new immigration involves revision of the modes of analysis of American society and religion at the same time as it brings acquaintance with new faces and religious groups.

It is a startling realization that one could well teach about most of the living religions of the world by focusing on the religious institutions in any major American city. Students in Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, or other major cities could easily visit many types of religious institutions and talk with representatives of virtually all the world's religious communities. A walk through their hometowns would become a walk through the world's religions. That would not have been possible before 1965. Do you want to know about Nizari Ismaili Muslims, Swaminarayan Hindus, Punjabi Sikhs, Thai or Cambodian Buddhists, Caribbean Santaria, African Ogun devotees, Chinese Taoists, Iranian Zoroastrians or Indian Parsis? Become acquainted with your neighbors, observe the vitality of their home rituals and public celebrations, and explore the religious history they contribute to the American story. The same could be said about Vietnamese Catholics, Russian Orthodox Church members, Korean Presbyterians, African Aladura Praying Church members, Asian-Indian Baptists, and St. Thomas Christians. American society presents a moving kaleidoscope of living religions through which one

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

can observe both the evolving shapes of American religion and the religious histories that all immigrants are contributing to the American story.

The goals of this study include providing a more complete introduction for Mary Thomas and other Christian immigrants from India by presenting clear and accurate information about the growth and development of the Asian-Indian Christian immigrant community and their religious institutions. These new neighbors provide a case study of contemporary experience of immigration with which one can compare and contrast earlier immigrants' experiences and those of contemporary immigrants carrying with them different religious traditions and commitments. Study of issues these Christians face in adjusting to American culture, the resources that sustain them in their adaptation, and the ways they respond to the issues reverberating in American religion can sharpen our perceptions of contemporary religious dynamics. Current changes in the transnational world in which immigrants move and in American society where they come to reside make it necessary to look at the effects the new immigrants are having on both American Christianity and Christianity in India.

Chapter 1 places the arrival of Christian immigrants from India in the context of the immigration history of the United States. The two mirror-image immigration initiatives of this century – that producing a lull in immigration starting in 1925 and that opening the doors in 1965 to those from previously excluded countries – together shape the major contours of twentieth-century religion in America. The Christians are situated in the larger migration from India to the United States, especially those from Kerala, who make up the majority of Asian-Indian Christians. The chapter attempts to answer the questions raised by the too-brief introduction of Mary Thomas. Who are they? When did they come? Where are they from? How did they get here? Why did they come? How are they doing now that they are in America? A statistical profile of the Asian-Indian Christians derived from questionnaires from 678 people attending annual Christian family conferences provides a profile against which one can compare the composite of Mary Thomas.

Asian-Indian Christians tell stories about the history of Christianity in India, to explain to their new neighbors, and to themselves, who they are. Chapter 2 provides an overview of these stories and relates them to the fuller narrative of that history prepared by historians. An array of collective memories, even though fragmentary, preserves in the United States a narrative of the long tenure and diversity of Christianity in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

India. These stories are powerful agents in the formation and preservation of individual and group identities for immigrants. Three trajectories are traced through the main elements of the Christian story in India: (1) St. Thomas Syrian Christians: the first centuries; (2) the impact of Roman Catholic Christianity: sixteenth century to the present; and (3) the impact of Protestant missions: eighteenth century to the present. These constitute an adequate survey essential to understanding the Christian affiliations of immigrants from India. Analyses of linguistic, regional, and caste stratification supply material necessary to understanding the development and effects of early Protestant missions, evangelical churches, Pentecostal movements, and the ecumenical movement. The relation of the memory to the past is not so significant as the function it has in creating the present reality of immigrants as they sort themselves out and shape their relations to the larger society.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the adaptive strategies of Asian-Indian Christians and on the churches and institutions they are establishing in the United States. Transmission of religious tradition is always both a celebration and a quest because Christian immigrants from India constitute new communities in the United States, not identical to any found in India. Six trajectories or models of potential adaptive strategies are evident in both secular and religious organizations: individual, national, ecumenical, hierarchical, ethnic, and denominational. Variables in the process developing strategies of adaptation are: length of residence, population density, transition of generations, and majority/minority status. A survey of the development and current status of St. Thomas Christian groups – (1) the Syrian Orthodox Church, (2) the Knanaya Orthodox Diocese, (3) the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and (4) the Mar Thoma Church – locates these Christians in their new contexts in America. Catholics from India are establishing themselves under three rites in the United States: Latin, Syro-Malabar, and Syro-Malankara. Each rite has priests assigned under American bishops through bilateral agreements with bishops in India; moreover, some Indian priests are permanent immigrants and serve as diocesan priests. Indian Catholic immigrants provide one perspective on dynamic changes in the American Catholic Church due both to modern migrations and to initiatives of Vatican II. An examination of the experience of Christians from several Protestant groups and their current status and programs illustrates the diversity of strategies of adaptation; these include: the Church of South India, Church of North India, Methodists, Brethren Assemblies (Plymouth Brethren), Pentecostals,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Church of the Brethren, Baptists, and language-based independent congregations. Chapters 3 and 4 provide information about all the types of Asian-Indian churches in the United States. Together they provide a road map for locating all these churches socially and religiously.

Chapter 5 presents three models or interpretive structures providing compelling symbols and images for relating to a present condition based on experiences of a past and the perceived potential of the future, compelling because Christian immigrants search for religious interpretations to help them to understand their experience. Movement of these immigrants is primarily social rather than geographical, so major issues involved in the formation and preservation of personal and group identity through the transmission of tradition are central to understanding their experience.

Major issues discussed in this chapter are:

(1) Transmission of tradition through rituals or words. Some trust that Christian traditions from India are best transmitted through participation in complex rituals and they try to instruct young people in the language, gestures, and meaning of rituals and to inspire them with their beauty and mystery. Others encourage study of texts and doctrines. The process of indigenization has an added dimension in America: what does it mean for Christianity to become more Indian in India and more American in the United States, especially for people caught in the middle? Styles of music in the churches are indicators of the strata of influences that shape the transmission of tradition.

(2) Gender differentiation. Christians form the only Asian-Indian community that comes to America on the shoulders of the women, which creates significant tensions in families and churches. Women have different economic and social status in America than they occupied in India. Each immigrant church is dealing with the issue of the role of women in the church. The reversal of gender roles in the immigration process may explain in part the tensions and politics in the congregations because the church is one of the few institutions in which males among recent immigrants are free, and have appropriate skills, to contest for leadership.

(3) Transition of generations and family. Virtually all Indian immigrants say the major contribution they can make in America is to demonstrate strong family ties and family values, yet it is precisely those that are most under attack by American culture. A result is strong tension between the two generations now making it in America. Immigrants fear they have made a Faustian bargain in which they gain the whole world

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

and lose their children. The major issues of debate and argument are: demands for traditional symbols of respect for parents; agony of children striving to live up to expectations of two cultures; desire of children to relate freely with their peers, even to dating; professional goals for the children; and different expectations regarding marriage arrangements and levels of endogamy. Part of the problem is that the parents are unaware of changes that have taken place in India over the past twenty-five years, so they carry a vision of the way the church and society was in India and try to replicate that situation in America, thereby being doubly removed from reality. A number of the resulting conflicts involve misunderstandings regarding friendship and family. Most of the first generation have primary social relations with family, so the role of the family is unrivaled. Because most social contacts are with members of the extended family, very few are with members of the majority society. Hence, much of what members of the first generation know about American families and lifestyles comes from distorted images presented in the public media. Their children grow up in a society that values friendship highly and they interact with friends in a way unfamiliar to the adults and have different insights into American families and lifestyles. Churches are loci of socialization for immigrants and their children and hence provide the forum for debate, conflict, compromise, and resolution of these issues.

(4) Leadership. Religious specialists are “intimate strangers” because they are separated to various degrees by dress, lifestyle, ethos, and ordination. Yet they are involved with the most intimate affairs of their people. Hence, they are able to be mediators between individuals, between the generations, between America and India, between the past and the future, even between earth and heaven. That mediation requires special skills and preparation, and bishops, pastors, and priests often feel they are ambushed in the middle inadequately prepared. Asian-Indian Christian churches struggle with different types of leadership and with diverse proposals about how to raise up new generations of leaders who will be effective in the United States.

Chapter 6 reflects on the differences between the experiences of recent immigrants and those of earlier generations and on the new transnational context in which migration occurs. Travel for European immigrants at the turn of the century was long and hard, so they rarely returned to their native land for visits. Communication was very slow and expensive, so a distinct separation occurred. One result is that subsequent studies focused attention on the immigrants and their effects on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

America, with little attention paid to reverse effects immigrants had on Christianity and Judaism in Europe. Now travel and communication take only a few hours or just an instant, so bridges are maintained between the old country and the new, and studies of the reverse impact of immigrants on their native places are essential. The long-term impact of the brain-drain on parts of India and on its churches is yet to be noted. Much is made of the economic impact of hard currency, and, indeed, many areas of India now experience a building boom and some economic development from money transfers by non-resident Indians (NRIs). Beyond the secular economic impact, religious groups of all types are affecting religious developments in India. It creates an entirely different dynamic than the old foreign missionary model of effects of the West on Indian Christianity. It is part of the new globalization of religions that shapes the relations of expatriate Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others with religion in India. A study of the relationships established between Indian Christians in America and their “mother churches” and institutions in India provides a case study of the reverse impact immigrants are having on financing religious institutions, in developing transnational families, on leadership transfer, in revising theology and practice, and on strategies of modernization.

The final chapter notes changes that mediating institutions in America are making or need to make to facilitate the entry of new Christian immigrants. American society is in the process of multiplying the social categories used to analyze, describe, and understand itself, analogous to adding new rooms onto a house. New ethnic groups, new religions, new nationalities, new forms of Christianity – all are building and thereby creating new networks (doorways) and boundaries (walls). Several groups are interacting with Asian-Indian Christians in creating rooms. Seminaries and theological schools have long welcomed and supported students from India, and many leading bishops and professors in India were students in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s. Seminaries provided homes for pastors coming to serve the new Asian-Indian churches and training for some of the immigrants who entered the ministry after immigration in the 1970s and 1980s. A survey of all the seminaries and Bible colleges in the United States taken as part of this research reveals a current Asian-Indian student population of over 195 persons related to various Indian churches. Other ethnic groups, especially other Asian-American Christian groups, are positioning themselves beside the Asian Indians. Protestant denominations are just beginning to recognize new neighbors and to develop working

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

relations with them. Ecumenical agencies and interfaith agencies have been heretofore more interested in dialogue with new immigrants from other religious traditions – Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist – but increasingly will have to take account of Christian immigrants from India who have experience living as minorities among Muslims and Hindus.

The conclusion traces elements of continuity and discontinuity with the experience of immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The story of Asian-Indian Christian immigrants is an old tale with new twists. They adopt many of the same strategies of adaptation, assimilate easily in some areas but are blocked from full participation in others, experience disappointment when life in America does not meet high expectations, deal with tensions regarding how Americanized to become, agonize over the future of their children, and engage in conflicts regarding the authority of their clergy. Elements of a familiar story. However, a number of new twists are evident. As part of the brain-drain from developing countries to the United States, they constitute a different educational and professional population. They bring new strands of Christianity along with other Christians among the new ethnics resulting from changes in the 1965 immigration law. They bring many different faces of Christ to the United States to occupy spaces beside Sallman's *Head of Christ* on sanctuary walls.

The wish of the author is that those who read this book will be able to recognize the real Mary Thomas and other Asian-Indian Christians when they meet them and will quickly understand their backgrounds and experiences of immigration, thereby contributing to an ecumenical understanding of the church and to intercultural harmony.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience

Raymond Brady Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Road to America

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to
the land I will show you.

Genesis 12:1

A pious mother kneels each morning during mass at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Bangalore to pray for her children scattered around the world: a daughter working as an environmental scientist in Indianapolis, an engineer son in California, a son in an accountancy program in London, a physician son in Dublin, a daughter who is a computer specialist in Toronto, a son seeking admission to a graduate program at Notre Dame in Indiana, and a daughter preparing for school examinations that will determine her admission to an American university. The mother and many of her friends in Bangalore are part of transnational families created by rapid emigration of highly skilled professionals from India to developed countries since the 1960s, a phenomenon that Elinor Kelly refers to as "transcontinental families" (Kelly, 1990). Each of her children struggles to make a place and a future – economic, social, and religious – in the adopted country. As matriarch she binds the family together by her prayers and through regular telephone conversations and visits. She plans to organize the family estates and resources in India and move to North America to live with her children; by then it is likely that no member of the family will still live in India. Migration to America by this family and others like them was made possible by a dramatic change in immigration law, which reshaped this woman's family and is changing the shape of American Christianity.

Although its significance is only now becoming evident, the United States Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 is the most important law enacted by Congress in the last half of the twentieth century, precipitating fundamental cultural and religious changes in the United States. New immigration creates patterns of pluralism different from