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

Raymond Brady Williams

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Recent immigrant Christians from India are changing the face of American Christianity. They introduce ancient Catholic Oriental rites, St. Thomas orthodoxy, the fruits of modern Protestant missions, and the outpouring of Pentecostal revivals. This book is the first comprehensive study of these Christians, their churches, and their adaptation.

Professor Williams describes migration patterns since 1965 and the growth of Indian Christian churches in the United States. The role of Christian nurses in creating immigration opportunities for their families affects gender relations, transition of generations, interpretations of migration, Indian Christian family values, and types of leadership.

Contemporary mobility and rapid communication create new transnational religious groups. Williams reveals some of the reverse effects on churches and institutions in India. He notes some successes and failures of mediating institutions in the United States – seminaries, denominational judicatories, ecumenical agencies, and interfaith organizations – in responding to new forms of Christianity brought by immigrants.

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[More information](#)

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Contents

<i>List of maps</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction	I
1 Road to America	10
2 Christian stories about India	47
3 Becoming what you are: St. Thomas Christians from Kerala	92
4 Becoming what you are: Catholics and Protestants from India	143
5 Wilderness, exile or promised land: experience and interpretations of migration	181
6 Going home: bridges to India	227
7 Adding rooms to the house	250
Conclusion: immigration and the many faces of Christ	273
<i>Notes</i>	285
<i>Bibliography</i>	291
<i>Index</i>	299

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978-0-521-08804-6 - Christian Pluralism in the United States: The Indian Immigrant Experience
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Maps

1 India	<i>page</i> 37
2 Syrian Christian centers	40

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

America is the land of immigrants. The point is often made by new immigrants, and any college group of a dozen students can create from their family stories most of the history of immigration to America. My family once claimed Welsh ancestry, Williams being a good Welsh name, only to learn a few years ago that a German ancestor changed his name from Wilhelm. That discovery changed our whole personality, we say in jest. Our experience illustrates a contemporary interest in family histories, and the humor shows that we do not understand very clearly how we have been affected by our pasts. That we as individuals and as a nation have been greatly affected in ways of which we are not conscious is difficult to deny. Perhaps the renewed interest in genealogy and ethnicity arises in part from a renewing of the immigration stories of new immigrants. The stories look back, but they are also attempts to reveal who we are, how we situate ourselves, and what we shall become.

Stories of Christian immigrants from India arriving in the United States since 1965 are the focus of this book. They are often overlooked among adherents of several Indian religions both because they are fewer in number and because they appear less exotic than Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or Jains. They also take their place beside other new immigrant Christians – Korean Presbyterians, Vietnamese Catholics, Aladura Independent African Christians, and those from other churches and nations – in the work of reshaping American Christianity. Here the attempt is made to preserve the early history of the arrival and adaptation of Asian-Indian Christianity and to encourage reflection on their experience and the role of religion in migration.

Earlier research in India with Swaminarayan Hindus introduced me for the first time to Gujarati immigrants in the United States (Williams, 1984:193–200). “Do you know my cousin in Chicago,” they would ask. The cousin brothers in the United States in turn directed my attention to other Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Sikh, and eventually to Christian, immi-

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

grants from India (Williams, 1988). Contacts with Christian immigrants established during that research led to participation in seven annual family conferences of Asian-Indian churches held in the United States during 1993–94. These conferences ranged in size from the few hundred Malankara Orthodox Christians gathering in Los Angeles in 1993 to the several thousand Malayalee Pentecostal Christians meeting in Chicago over the Fourth of July weekend in 1994. These annual conferences provided opportunities for conducting hundreds of interviews, eliciting 678 detailed questionnaire responses from participants, and observing both religious rituals and social interactions of thousands of participants. With the exception of one group, leaders cooperated, and the lay people were unfailingly gracious in offering assistance. They welcomed me to hundreds of homes, scores of congregations, worship services, and social gatherings across the country, and provided written materials and personal observations that provide the foundation of this work. A research trip to India in February–March 1994 afforded the opportunity to interview Christian bishops, pastors, and people, and to observe the work of churches, seminaries, and institutions, primarily in south India and Gujarat. Surveys of American seminaries and Bible colleges and questionnaires received from those students with family backgrounds in India provided additional information about people preparing for leadership in both India and the United States.

During previous research on Indian religious groups, I engaged in a modified participant–observer approach, observing ceremonies in temples, mosques, and homes and talking with leaders, participants, and families about their experiences, all the while preserving that sympathetic distance from ritual participation and affirmation that I thought appropriate to an academic researcher. I did not, for example, join in chants or songs, prostrate before gurus or priests, nor wave the arti lamp before images of deities. Undertaking this research on Christians, I thought it would be the same, but found out differently in Atlanta the first time a congregation asked me to offer the closing prayer. As an ordained member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I could not refuse and subsequently found myself participating in the Eucharist and occasionally delivering sermons in a variety of other congregations. I developed what anthropologists call an “observing participant” relationship with the Asian-Indian Christians. That stance affects my research in many ways, some of which I am unaware of, both in the access to people and materials and in subsequent observations. Three ways are obvious to me: (1) I am more critical at times in dealing with the

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

XI

Christians than I would feel comfortable being as an outsider dealing with other religions; (2) I am more prescriptive than I normally would be bold enough to be, using at times the words “should” and “ought,” especially in chapter 7; and (3) I include more explicit theological language from their comments and in analyses. Perhaps other evidences of observing participation will be more obvious to the reader than to the author.

A research leave in 1993–94 and support provided from Wabash College by its then-dean, Paul McKinney, and from the Louisville Institute for the Study of Protestantism and American Culture by its director, James W. Lewis, provided freedom from teaching and administrative duties for research and writing. Most of what I have learned comes from contacts with Asian-Indian Christians and their bishops, priests, and leaders, so profound gratitude goes to them for their assistance and Christian hospitality: *sine qua non*. That debt is to so many people that it is impossible to name them, but they will recognize their insights and comments in the text; I hope they will judge the results to be worth their efforts. The St. Ephram Ecumenical Research Institute in Kottayam, Kerala, was home during research in Kerala, and its director, the Revd. Dr. Jacob Thekeparambil, furnished important contacts and provided valuable information from his remarkable knowledge of Indian Christianity. Ms. Debbie Polly on the staff of Lilly Library at Wabash College expanded the library to research size and enhanced the research by her pleasant manner and efficient work in scouring many sources for reference materials. Mr. Christopher Runge was the student research assistant for this project and was especially helpful in recording field notes and results of surveys. Professor Charles Blaich assisted with analyses of the survey results.

My colleague, Professor William C. Placher, read early drafts of a few chapters. Mr. John John, a perceptive son of immigrants from India, and the Revd. Dr. Geevarghese Panicker, a leading figure among Keralite Christians, also read and commented on portions of this work. Mr. Christopher Coble, who was my research assistant during research on an earlier book on immigrants (1988), offered, from his now enlarged perspective as a student of American religious history, comments and questions that were enormously helpful. I am deeply grateful to them because their corrections saved me from errors of detail and interpretation, their comments provided additional insights, and their friendship enriches both research and life.

My first book published by Cambridge University Press is dedicated

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

to my family, the second to colleagues in the religion department of Wabash College. It seems appropriate to dedicate this book to the church, specifically the First Christian Church of Crawfordsville, Indiana, which ministers to descendants of earlier immigrants from many lands and whose message of the essential unity of all Christians, forged from experience on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century, may serve us all well as we move toward new experiences and challenges as American Christians or Christian Americans.