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Religion and Ethnicity in the United States

MARK GRANQUIST

The relationship between religion and ethnicity in the United States is as important as it is complex. In the contemporary American world, the understanding of one's ethnic identity (or lack thereof) is a matter of a number of different voluntary and involuntary factors, of which one's religion is often one central component. For many Americans, their religious identity is formed by the ethnic heritage that they have or claim, although as with many other aspects of American religion, it is not always a simple matter. Among some groups of Americans, there is a high degree of correlation between their ethnic and religious identities, high enough to be generally predictable. Among others, however, the correlation between these factors is much lower or even nonexistent, and in truth, some Americans would suggest that they do not even have any particular ethnic identity at all. To complicate the situation further, the entire idea of ethnicity itself is a moving target, as the place of this concept has shifted in the United States over time, and may well be shifting again. To understand the relationship between religion and ethnicity, we must first look at the evolving place of ethnicity in American society, and then examine the ways in which religious identity interacts with it.

THE CONCEPT OF ETHNICITY

The concept of "ethnicity" is simple; it is those sets of qualities that define

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and delineate a group of people as ethnic. The definition of “ethnic” is, however, much more difficult to determine. Generally, “ethnic” refers to common characteristics that mark a particular set of people as an identifiable group, things such as race, national origins, language, culture, religion, and other social factors. However, some groups may be defined by one of these factors (say, national origin) and divided by another (language or religion). Starting with the rise of European nationalisms in the nineteenth century, ethnicity often became defined in racial and even biological terms, but the traumas of the twentieth century have shown the folly of such definitions. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the relation between ethnicity and race, though it should be noted here that no matter how many people popularly do mix the two together, these are separate and distinct entities. Current definitions of ethnicity tend to steer clear of racial categories, and instead revolve around those complex interactions of multiple cultural factors that, when combined, create in any particular group of people a common identity. Modern theories of ethnic formation suggest that this process of development is, in part, intentionally constructed, and changes over time. As well, the borders of ethnicity can be more or less porous, allowing for individuals to move in or out of different groups, or even to claim multiple identities.

The understandings of what it means to be ethnic have shifted over time. The roots of the word “ethnic” come out of the Greek, where *ethnos* means a nation or a race, along with its own national or racial characteristics. The Romans generally used the word to mean those groupings of peoples outside of the Roman Empire; thus “ethnic” came to have the same connotations as “barbarians,” or those uncultured people outside of Greco-Roman society. This same understanding came into English, and the use of the word “ethnic” took on an additional religious overtone, coming to denote those people who were heathens or pagans, outside the realm of Christendom. Since the composition of the American colonies in the eighteenth century was primarily that of Protestant immigrants from Great Britain, this same understanding of “ethnic” was translated into American culture. As it evolved, this sense of a core American identity came to redefine the term “ethnic” to mean those other immigrants coming to America who were not English-speaking white Protestants. Those “core” Americans believed that their traits came to define what it meant to be an American, and that it was the job of the “ethnic” immigrants to adapt and assimilate (as much as possible) to this core culture; hence, the idea of a “melting pot” in which the various ethnicities would be turned into “real” Americans.

In the twentieth century, American understandings of ethnicity took a more positive direction. The millions of immigrants to the United States, as well as their descendants, did learn English and became American citizens, but also decided that the maintenance of their distinct traditions and ethnic characteristics were positive elements that they could continue alongside of their American-ness. Thus, the status of being a “hyphenated American” was no longer just a step in the pro-

cess toward becoming fully American, but rather a permanent status that one could celebrate and enjoy. American ethnic pluralism, once viewed as a potentially dangerous negative, became seen as a source of strength and pride; ethnicity became “cool,” and many of those who had self-consciously determined earlier to lose their ethnic identities in an attempt to become American, now sought to reclaim their ethnic identities with pride. If they did not, then their children and grandchildren often did (much to the amusement of their elders).

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

The role of religion in all this was a key, yet it was very complex. The British colonists in eighteenth-century North America came with a definite common culture, but it was not one defined in any part by a common religious culture beyond that of English-speaking Protestantism. British colonists were anything but dutiful members of the Church of England; they were predominantly English dissenters from that church, a mixture of Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists who had left the established Anglican Church. Thus, as a common American identity was being formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this identity was defined on one level by a vague sense of English-speaking Protestantism, but expressed by an increasing diversity of denominational expressions within it. Tied to this were the pragmatic and theoretical bases of American religious pluralism, which led to the idea that no one specific religious identity was required to be a core member of the American culture. To be sure, to be a member of this core one needed to be some form of Protestant, but this could be expressed in many different forms, even in the theistic Deism of the Unitarians and Universalists. To be a good American, then, one really should be religious, but no one particular form of Protestantism was required. But there were definitely religious affiliations that would define persons as “ethnics” and outsiders, the most important the practice of non-Protestant forms of religion, and the religious use of languages other than English.

With the massive numbers of immigrants that came to the United States during the great migration of the nineteenth century (approximately 35 million people, 1820–1920), concepts of religion and ethnic identity underwent a transformation. Many of the earlier immigrants were still European Protestants who, it was hoped, could be readily assimilated into the core American culture. The immigration of large numbers of Irish Roman Catholics and smaller numbers of German Jews complicated this scenario, and led to social tensions. But the later nineteenth-century immigration, dominated by Catholics and Jews from southern and Eastern Europe (and on the West coast, Chinese and Japanese), pushed these tensions to the breaking point, and caused major reevaluations of both the core American identity and the relation of religion to it.

Ethnicity formed the bonds that held many of these immigrant communities together, and the largest and most visible element of this ethnicity was a common

religious heritage. Religion was the primary venue for expressing and maintaining the ethnic heritage among many of these groups, which is why the transition from the religious use of the immigrant languages was so delayed in coming, and why the eventual transition to English was so wrenching when it finally came. As these immigrant groups slowly moved into the American mainstream, they continued to celebrate a modified form of their ethnic heritage by becoming “hyphenated” Americans, able to celebrate both identities, and to switch on a usable “ethnic” identity when they so desired.

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In the twentieth century, a second surge of new immigrants after World War II (and especially after the immigration reforms of 1965) meant an even more complicated ethnic and religious mixture, as most of these new immigrants were not Europeans, and a distinct minority of them were not even Christians. During the turmoil of the 1960s, African American and Hispanic groups (among others) began to see the positive value of ethnic heritage, and pride in being ethnic came into vogue, even among those Americans who were considered already assimilated. Indeed, the very notion that there actually was a common or core ethnic identity for Americans came itself into question. Assimilation, which assumed the attempted conformity to a dominant national identity, was rejected by many, while still others questioned the entire idea or validity of a single national identity that could encompass all Americans. The idea of America as a “melting pot” that assimilated the new immigrants was replaced by the metaphor of America as “salad bowl,” in which the different ethnicities maintained their separate identities, contributing their own particular “flavors” to the national mixture. This ethnic pluralism paralleled the ever-increasing religious pluralism and diversity of American culture.

RELIGION AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN RELATIONSHIP

Having seen the change and development of ethnicity as an operative category in American public life, we now need to examine the intersections between religious and ethnic identities. This is not a simple task, as the permutations and changes between the two concepts have resulted in a number of different scenarios for this relationship. One of the important things to understand is how ethnicity and the development of modern nation-states have developed over the last two hundred years or so. While the nation-states of western and northern Europe have remained relatively stable during this time, this has not been the case for much of

the rest of the world. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Africa and Asia, might well have come from areas where the political boundaries and allegiances have shifted over time, blurred by war and colonialism and the like. The descendants of an immigrant from the former Yugoslavia, for example, might well be confused about which of the secession of countries in that area actually constitutes their true ethnicity or national identity. Immigrants from African countries might find it an even more daunting enterprise; immigrants who legally might come from the country of Ethiopia, for example, actually come from a bewildering number of different tribal and linguistic backgrounds, and could be Orthodox or Protestant Christians or Muslims. Even in the case of western and northern Europe, these ethnic identities may shift over time. A Swedish-speaking immigrant from western Finland, for example, might claim either Swedish or Finnish ethnicities, as they choose (they have done both). Restive ethnic minorities, once seen as members of a larger nation-state, might come to claim a more specific ethnic heritage, such as the case of Spanish who now claim Basque or Catalan identities, or British who now identify as Welsh or Scottish. Some groups without a firm tie to any particular nation-state (such as Jews, Kurds, and Zoroastrians, for example) might find their ethnicity solely linked to their religious or cultural identity, without reference to the countries in which they might historically be found.

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There are different levels of correlation between religion and ethnicity among populations found in the United States; one might consider them high, medium, or low correlations. Those groups with a high correlation between religious and ethnic identity might include those countries where there is a tight, almost exclusive relation between the two. Immigrants from Saudi Arabia, Poland, Mexico, and the Philippines, for example, would come from a country where one religious identity is so monolithic as to be virtually exclusive; to be a Saudi is to be a Sunni Muslim, to be a Pole is to be Roman Catholic, and so on. This high degree of correlation might also be found among those who are relatively stateless in their background, such as groups previously mentioned; Jews, Sikhs, Jains, and Kurds. The medium level of correlation between religious and ethnic identities might be seen especially from larger countries where there is a dominant religious identity, but with enough religious pluralism or freedom of dissent to allow for other recognized religious groups. This might include immigrants from most western European countries with state-supported religious entities, and larger, multiethnic and religious populations, such as China, India, Indonesia, and South Africa. Thus someone claiming a German-American identity might be Lutheran or Reformed

Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Jewish, not to mention smaller forms of Protestantism. Chinese-Americans could be Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or atheist. The lower level of correlation between religion and ethnicity would be seen in immigrants from countries where no one form of religion predominates, among the growing number of Americans with a mixed or multiethnic heritage, and among old-stock Americans whose roots go back to the colonial period. Certain newer religious groups, especially those developed in the United States, would hold no particular ethnic identity at all; examples might include the newer Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations (although if they have a division along racial lines, this might complicate the situation). While it is clear overall that religion and ethnicity are often closely related to each other, it is also clear that there are forms of religion in America that cannot be said to have clear ethnic ties whatsoever. One could further investigate, however, the ways in which old-stock white Protestant Americans might actually constitute their own "ethnic" tribe or tribes, depending on region and other cultural factors.

There are some forms of religion in America that have, especially in the popular imagination, specific and definite forms of ethnicity attached to them (whether true or not). It would be generally assumed that a Norwegian-American would be a Lutheran, a Greek-American would be Orthodox Christian, a Sri Lankan-American would be a Buddhist, and so on. In some cases, such as with American Jews, ethnicity and religion are so intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable, leading to the question of whether Judaism is actually a religion or an ethnicity. This is complicated by significant numbers of American Jews who maintain Jewish identity while practicing another form of religion (Christianity or Buddhism), or, in the case of atheists, no religion whatsoever. Among American Protestants, many groups exhibit a relatively low correlation between religion and ethnicity (most mainline Protestants), or in the case of the descendants of nineteenth-century continental Protestants (such as Lutherans and Reformed) maintain a medium correlation. Thus many (not all) Lutheran congregations over seventy-five years old can trace their origins to some particular ethnic Lutheran denomination, usually German or Scandinavian. But in many of these congregations the ethnic base is declining in power, or maintained in a vague cultural sense, with specific ethnic traditions and foods rolled out on special occasions and festivals.

ROLE OF ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS

Having seen the complications and interconnections of ethnicity and religion in America, both historically and in the present, it is time for some considerations that might touch on their roles in contemporary American Christian congregations and their ministries. Even if ethnicity as a social category were relatively unimportant in a particular congregation, for example, forms of ethnicity might well still be very important to the larger context of its ministry in an increasingly

multiethnic America. This essay will explore six potential findings from ethnicity and religion in America that might have a bearing on congregational life.

First is the realization that ethnicity is an important concept in American public life, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Whether in the assimilationist paradigm of the nineteenth century, or in the integrationist paradigm of the twentieth, the idea that America can or should move beyond ethnic particularities has not come to any sort of realization; quite the opposite. Ethnicity as an important form of individual and group identity is likely to grow stronger in America in the twenty-first century, especially as the current diversity of peoples in this country continues to expand. Some would see this as a negative, and if this increasing emphasis leads to greater forms of internal tribalism and strife with the nation, it certainly would be so. But ethnicity has proven over time in America to be an elastic and often expansive category, in which people can celebrate ethnic particularity without denigrating others, and without shutting out elements of a common heritage in which all Americans (of whatever ethnicity) can share. Many longer-term Americans have actually come to a renewed appreciation for their own long-suppressed ethnic heritages.

Second is the importance of understanding the ways in which religion and ethnicity are interconnected, and how they tend to support each other. For many immigrant groups, organized religion continues to be an important carrier of ethnic heritage and memory—perhaps even their most important element. Religion and the home are the two places where the ethnic language, customs, and traditions are maintained far longer than in any other area of a group's life. But this can be an uneasy relationship as well, for ethnicity has divided, and still continues to divide people who share the same religious heritage. Lutherans in America, for example, continued to maintain many separate, ethnically distinct Lutheran denominations well into the twentieth century, long after the time that they ceased using the immigrant languages. In Islam, for another example, all Muslims are considered to be “brothers,” but this has not, however, meant that Muslim immigrants to America have often established multiethnic mosques. To the contrary, where it is practical, orthodox Muslim-Americans have often established ethnically specific mosques, where different nationalities can maintain their own ethnic identities. Muslims from Sierra Leone and Morocco and Egypt and Iraq and Pakistan and Indonesia come with enough cultural and linguistic differentiations to make the establishment of separate religious organizations preferable. When it comes to religion, ethnicity is often a strong bond that brings people together, but can also divide those who otherwise would share a common faith.

Third, the strong ties that bind religion and ethnicity together might suggest the general futility of trying to divide the two. In order to correct what are obvious and unsupportable abuses of religious hospitality and fellowship in the name of ethnic specificity, some have counseled an alternative vision, one that emphasizes religion “purified” of ethnic specificities. In this vision, believers are united only by

the central tenets of their mutual faiths, and any element of ethnic identity should be “checked at the door.” Ethnic specificity, it has been claimed, divides one believer from another, and thus must be eliminated in the house of God. Congregations, especially of European-Americans, have been berated and belittled as being elitist and exclusionary for holding onto their ethnically specific identities within a multiethnic America. While almost any congregation can be challenged to be more welcoming of others, pushing the destruction of a legitimate ethnic identity within a congregation is as destructive as it is futile. Efforts to push congregations to shed important ethnic identities are fraught with peril and rarely get anywhere. A renewed appreciation for both the ethnic identity of a religious congregation, and a simultaneous appreciation for the ethnic identities of others, might seem to be a better course of action.

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Related to this, a fourth understanding is that while there are occasionally genuinely multiethnic congregations within the American religious scene, these are relatively rare, and often difficult to maintain. There are a few congregations that are genuinely multiethnic, but these tend to represent exceptions to the general rule. Some of these truly multiethnic congregations are found, interestingly enough, in Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God, which stress common worship and a singular identity in God. Sometimes large urban Roman Catholic parishes feature many different groups of ethnic worshippers, but most of these parishes feature separate worship and social experiences for each distinct ethnicity, and can hardly be said to be truly multiethnic. Given the difficulties of forming and maintaining true multiethnic congregations, it is a real question whether this type of religious community is truly a viable model for the future of American religion at all. This question may seem shocking, given the prevailing social and religious conventions of the American pluralistic “orthodoxy,” but to continue to suggest this path seems to fly in the face of the fact that ethnic particularity continues to be strong, and its impact on worship patterns decisive.

This, then fifthly, suggests that a commonly voiced strategy, especially among mainline Protestants, is wrong. That strategy revolves around the realization that old-stock European-Americans are less and less likely to be actively practicing members of mainline Protestant congregations. Thus one strategy for revitalization and growth is to increase numbers within these congregations through ethnic diversification of their membership, by bringing into them numbers of these new “ethnic” Americans. While ethnic diversity is a laudable goal, this is a strategy that

has been attempted for over 150 years without much success. In the mid-nineteenth century, old-stock mainline Protestant denominations often attempted to bolster their sagging numbers by conceiving outreach to the new ethnic immigrants of the day. It did not work then, and if the current data are to be believed, this same strategy is not working now, not at least in the foreseeable future.

If these points have merit, then, one might ask how American congregations can avoid the polarization of ethnic tribalism, something that is important. A sixth and final point is that new strategies must be developed to bridge the gaps between religious groups that naturally occur on the basis of ethnicity. It is hard to see much evidence that multiethnic congregations and the assimilation of new ethnic believers into mainline Protestant congregations show much evidence of success. But this is also not to counsel the ready acceptance of the current status quo, and to leave American Christianity “Balkanized” into little ethnic silos. New strategies might include alternate methods of connecting Christians from different congregations and ethnic backgrounds through creative interactions and mutual support. Larger and more well-established congregations might take the lead in reaching out to ethnic congregations and groups, and assist them in establishing themselves in the new and often bewildering religious culture. New ethnic congregations can, in return, communicate to these older congregations not only their own ethnic and religious traditions, but also demonstrate their passionate commitment to the transforming power of the Christian gospel that has so often faded among the older congregations. There is much that can be shared and learned through mutual interactions.

Religion and ethnicity are deeply intertwined in American life. It would be foolish to deny this and useless to fight against this very strong tide. But this does not mean that Christians cannot be one in the gospel, just that we need new models and new ideas of how to express this unity with one another that take into account the ethnic diversity of twenty-first-century America. ⊕

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