More Than One Path—Asian Religious Immigrant Responses to 
Life in America

Rachel McCausland
The United States of America is an undoubtedly diverse nation, and that diversity began with religion. According to Martin E. Marty, religious diversity existed from the earliest days of colonization in the plethora of Native American religions and various denominations of Christian and Jewish settlers.\(^1\) This has inevitably shaped the nation, leading to the creation of religious freedom laws and separation of church and state. Theoretically, the stage should be set for anyone of any religion to come to America and feel like a valid part of the American religious atmosphere. The Asian immigrant populations I have studied, who identify as either Buddhist or Hindu, and who originate from Japan, China, India, Korea and other places such as Cambodia, are new to the American religious landscape; thus they may face greater challenges than those of European descent or religious affiliation. Among these Asian immigrant groups, any response to the move to America depends on the previous values or needs of the immigrant population, and will manifest not just as continued practice versus loss of religion, but rather can fall under the umbrellas of: 1) conversion, 2) adaptation, or; 3) interaction. The lines between these categories are difficult to draw, and often overlap, but each result in surprising twists, such as temporary conversion; increases in religiosity caused by a need for community and a redefinition of identity in contrast to non-Asian Americans; multi-religious membership; renaming of some religious practices as “cultural” or “ethnic”; and a greater emphasis on certain religious values in order to claim a contribution or conformation to desirable American values.

The population of Hindu and Buddhist immigrants has increased in recent years. Some say that this supposed explosion in numbers has caused a fundamental change in American society. Tom W. Smith conducted a study in 2002 which compared various estimates of Buddhist and Hindu populations; he refers to relevant websites and scholarly articles on trends of

growth in American Hindu and Buddhist populations, as well as statistics from the General Social Surveys and the American Religious Identity Survey. From his findings, he asserts that many current estimates are blown far out of proportion, and that there is actually no consensus about the Buddhist population in America. By taking an average, it seems that there may be around 1.5 million Buddhists in the United States, or less than one percent. Hinduism has a much smaller margin of speculation, with 74% of estimates “in the 1-1.5 million range.” This means that even though these groups are growing relatively quickly—“about 3-4 fold” since the 1970s—they remain small in numbers. However, Smith theorizes that the impact on the public consciousness is greater than might be expected because adherents stand out through the erection of building; visits from foreign leaders such as the Dalai Lama; and the fact that many non-Asian Americans are infatuated by ritual aspects of these religions—such as yoga or certain forms of meditation—without actually converting. In this sense, religious shopping in America may be expanding Asian religious influence, but does not necessarily support the endeavors of individual sects of Buddhism and Hinduism, much less the individual members of those sects.²

In order to explore how American values, including pluralism, might affect Asian religious immigrants, one needs a basic understanding of what pluralism means in the American context, and especially what it means for non-Judeo-Christian, non-European groups. Marty argues that pluralism is different from diversity, because while diversity merely means there are diverse groups of people in a given area, pluralism brings one “to a terrain in which people have thought about what to do about diversity”. This need to do something about diversity is not in the sense of seeing diversity as an evil, but rather as something which can and should shape the society as a whole; pluralism is constructive, an active rather than passive response to diversity.

In America, there are laws which allow for diversity of religion as well as other aspects of life. However, laws which invite diversity do not necessarily mean a nation will display equality among religions as far as numbers of adherents, accommodation, and time in the limelight go. At one point, Catholics and Jews were not considered American, while both have now made their way into the religious mainstream. Historically and presently there are certain bodies of people who may still feel excluded, either explicitly by other people or else by the sense that their values and practices do not seem to have a place in American life. The exclusion of Jews and Catholics in the past led to the conceptualization of America as a country of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it is also seen as a secular nation due to not having an official state religion. Now that America has regrouped under the banner of this tradition, one might assume that non-Judeo-Christian immigrants might be forced to compromise their religious identities in order to succeed in America, economically and socially. However, the evidence seems to say that such immigrants are not merely victims of America, and to see them as such is not very pluralist. In this sense pluralism becomes more than diversity, manifesting itself through adaptation and interaction between the immigrants and the rest of America.³

³ Marty, “Pluralisms.” 16.
“conversion” or change from one religious identity to another. While over half of the respondents to the original interview indicate religion as highly important, slightly less than half report that they have “changed their religious beliefs or practices” or “are more religious” since becoming a refugee. Sixty percent reported becoming Christian. Sense of victimization correlated with a high rate of conversion, while those with good jobs were less likely to change religion. Also, the percentage of those who had changed religious beliefs since coming to America rose in correlation with time spent here. However, a comparison between results of the first and second interviews reveals that Buddhist identification rose from 35% to 42%, with Catholics remaining at 13%, and Protestants down from 43% to 38%. Those who reported religion as being “at least ‘somewhat important’” rose by over 10%. This seems to indicate that refugees may see America as a religious nation and, at first, think conversion to Christianity is a necessary part of adjustment to American life. After spending more time in America, their approach to religion may shift. This would explain why 7% reverted to Buddhism six months after the initial interview, perhaps now perceiving that conversion to Christianity is not entirely necessary for integration into society, either economically or socially.4

As indicated by the correlation between low rates of conversion and good jobs, economic need does seem to be tied to rates of conversion or abandonment in some cases. Beginning in the 1980s, Cambodian refugees poured into the U.S. by the hundreds of thousands due to the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and the invasion of the Vietnamese. Thomas J. Douglas conducted a study of Cambodian-Americans in Long Beach and Seattle. On their way out of the country, though the majority of Cambodians are Buddhist, many were converted to Christianity in refugee camps, and accused of being “rice-bowl Christians”, meaning that they only converted

in order to get “greater access to the social services and immigration assistance offered by Christian aid organizations. Yet many of these converts continue to engage in Christian practices today,” therefore one may assume the conversion was sincere or became sincere later.\textsuperscript{5} Sharon A. Suh asserts through her study on Korean American Christian and Buddhist populations that membership in a Christian church is more economically appealing for Korean immigrants; it offers more support programs and opportunities to network in order to find jobs and other economic opportunities.\textsuperscript{6}

As for Hindus, the influence of economic status is flipped. According to M. Gail Hickey—who compiled 90 oral histories of Indian immigrants to Indiana—since immigration was opened to them again in 1965, most Indian immigrants were allowed in because they had skills the workforce needed. Because of their higher economic status, they do not tend to live in ethnic enclaves as much as some other Asian groups, and are more spread out, though they will often network with concentrated neighborhoods of Indians. As of the year 2000, “sixty percent of employed U.S. Asian Indians hold managerial or professorial positions; 30 percent work in technical, sales, or administrative support positions,” and these positions are likely to draw them to many places in the country. This can result in cultural isolation which may influence the rate of conversion or abandonment of religion among immigrants. In Indiana, there are no concentrated Indian communities. Hindus make up 83 percent of the Indian population, and before the 1970s and ‘80s, it was very difficult to find quality vegetarian food. This led some to


abandon, partially or wholly, their commitment to vegetarianism, and this may have led to the sentiment of being cultural and not religious Hindus, as several interviewees expressed.\footnote{M. Gail Hickey, “Asian Indians in Indiana,” \textit{Indiana Magazine of History} 102 (June 2006): 122-128.}

Cultural forces play another part in conversion. For example, the popularity of meat foods in American culture contributed to the absence of vegetarian foods which Hindu immigrants could eat. Cultural ideas of gender equality and Americanization can also exert influence on likelihood of conversion. Douglas asserts that many of the Cambodian immigrants he interviewed “invoked key words associated with Western subjectivity: \textit{choice, freedom, self-identity, and personal responsibility}.” (125). This seems to apply regardless of religious leanings, but Douglas later states that children are often encouraged to participate in Christian congregations and youth groups by “parents eager to help their children become American” (136). Unfortunately, this often turned against them when their children developed a critical attitude toward their parents’ religious practices, defying the family values and open-mindedness their parents thought such participation would reinforce.

In what may be seen as a further defiance of family structures, some Cambodian women report feeling greater freedom to participate in Christian churches than in Buddhist wats. In Cambodian Christian churches, women generally outnumber men, are allowed to give “bible instruction” during services, lead music, and participate in other meaningful ways not always open to them in Buddhist meetings (135). These numbers are somewhat self-explanatory and self-reinforcing. If women are allowed more freedom in Christian churches, more women will be attracted to such churches, and this higher number of women may encourage even more women to participate.
Conversion is also influenced through peer pressure, concepts of independence and freedom, and ethnic identity. In most places in America, Korean Buddhists are in a minority compared to Korean Christians. For example, in Los Angeles, the 1999 Korean Directory reported “348 Korean-language churches”, while “the Buddhist temples equaled a mere 19”. Thus, many Korean Buddhists “complain that they are often urged to convert to Christianity while they shop at the Korean markets, do business with fellow Koreans, and meet with friends”, and that is not counting the influence exerted on their children through school groups, peers, and Christian relatives. Thus pressure comes mainly from fellow Korean-Americans rather than non-Asian Americans. Some that do not convert claim that, since Buddhism values free choice so highly, they pride themselves in not pushing their children to go to Buddhist services. They also say that they would prefer their children socialize with “fellow Koreans who share similar values outside of religion” instead of “spending time with non-Koreans.”

This complements the results of a study on maintenance of ethnicity by Pong Gyap Min, in which she found that, comparing Korean Christians and Indian Hindus in America, Korean Christians were more dependent on frequent church attendance because they came from a more homogenous society and needed more frequent interaction with same-ethnicity congregations, whereas Hindus’ religious and ethnic practices were tied together in home practices and community festivals. Hindus, mostly from India, may also be less susceptible to conversion due to coming from an already culturally and religiously diverse country. Buddhism, being individualistic and based in personal enlightenment through self-awareness, is less socially intertwined than Christianity, and so Christianity (typically perceived as a Western religion)

---

ironically becomes a more effective tool at reinforcing Korean ethnicity and social bonds.⁹ For example, many Korean churches also have Korean schools which pass on the “language, etiquette, history, and music for kindergarten through college students”. In religious classes for children, “teachers emphasize ‘filial piety’ as a central element of Korean etiquette,” and Pastors emphasize obedience to parents through gospel analogy: “just as Jesus Christ obeyed God, children should obey their parents.”⁹

However, this does not mean that Buddhist temples are never social or ethnic resources for Asian-Americans. Wat Buddharatanaram, a Thai Buddhist temple in Texas, seems to be very successful in creating an active environment in which to pass down both religious and ethnic values from immigrants to their children. Founded in 1999, it provides a place for Buddhist teaching, festivals (both ethnic Thai and Buddhist), training for future monks, and classes on Thai language, traditional handicrafts, and dances. Temples like this are committed to building a connection to the immigrants’ culture of origin, through instruction for both children and adults. Some even provide a means to vote in Thailand.¹¹ The success of this temple demonstrates that religious membership is directly linked to ethnic preservation in America, which may indicate that those who convert are pressured to Americanize and do not receive enough support from non-Christian religious organizations, especially the youth.

The question of family is of definite importance when it comes to religious activity among Asian immigrants. In the case of Hindus, Hickey speaks of second-generation immigrants

---


in Indiana who, though only grudgingly partaking in cultural and religious activities as children, "developed a closer appreciation for Asian Indian ethnic traditions as adults." Since such ethnic traditions are often interwoven with religious traditions among Indians, it is likely that this desire to pass on aspects of one’s identity to one’s children would be present in Hindus specifically as well. However, a commitment to family and a commitment to religion can also conflict and require the immigrant parent to change their approach to conserving their identity. Shanthi Rao, a first-generation Hindu immigrant, speaks of how at first she and her husband were greatly involved in establishing a local Hindu temple and participating in religious activities there, but as their children grew, “they became involved with a range of activities… leaving even less free time… I felt they weren’t getting as much out of the temple as we [the parents] did”. Rao was able to find a solution by shifting the focus of religious activity from the temple to the home. Because of this, though her now-grown children “do not go to temples…they reflect on the puja days” with their own personal deities which they took with them. This adaptation might have been more difficult in another religion which is more bound to place and figures of authority. Though conversion does happen with more frequency in some ethnic groups than others, total abandonment of all previous religious practices or beliefs seems to be less common across the board than some form of adaptation.

It may be tempting to think of adaptation as a synonym for submission to the dominant culture, and sometimes adaptation is made in order to acquiesce to certain cultural constraints. G. Victor Sogen Hori, who has studied the adaptations of Japanese Zen Buddhism in America,

---


claims: “Any set of practices that has originated in one culture takes on a different significance when transplanted to another.” To borrow his own example: Valentine’s Day in Japan is focused on women giving chocolate to men out of “intertwined feelings of gratitude and obligation” rooted in Japanese concepts of relationships. A complimentary “White Day”, where men give white chocolate to women, reflects a sort of yin-yang balance typical of Asian cultures. The holiday came to reflect the values of the culture where it was transplanted.14

This transformation can happen with religion as well. One example of this is in the separation of time in American Zen centers. In a traditional Japanese monastery, there is no division between time for ritual observance of zazen (roughly meaning a meditative mindset of emptiness) and everyday work or play. In American Zen centers, on the other hand, the lighting and extinguishing of a candle indicates an idea that “zazen is an activity with a beginning and an end”. The candle is a popular religious symbol in America, well-suited for adaptation to religious practice. In America, there is a time for worship and a time for everyday things, versus the Japanese Zen approach of making everything “religious time”. In American centers there is also a separation of ritual spaces from living quarters, and while in the Japanese tradition everyone sleeps, eats, and meditates together in the same space, American centers differentiate between private and public, holy and mundane. This may be partly because the members are not all Japanese-Americans, but also non-Asian Americans who have converted to Buddhism after its arrival. These members bring their own sets of values to the experience, but the centers are also under American time constraints as well. Thus, the religion adapts to the members’ needs.

For example, the strict teaching methods and vertical hierarchy of monastic life seem undemocratic to the typical American participant—thus the western division of teacher versus student body. Monastic leaders may depend on the patronage of non-Asians, making it inevitable that such influence will occur. Hori does not dwell on how these changes affect Japanese-American Buddhists. This is probably because Japanese-Americans practice differently than non-Asian Americans. But sometimes simply being in America affects the structure of monastic life, dictating how long it is acceptable to take time off from work or family during a retreat. This is illustrated by how Cambodian Buddhist’s Prachum Ben festival for honoring the dead, which normally lasts two weeks, is usually “compressed into a two-day weekend” in America.

Adaptation rests on fitting the needs of a diverse religious body, because in the case of Asian religions, experiences can differ widely due to how the religion reached America. Jan Nattier provides a handy model for differentiating Buddhism in America according to three types. “Import Buddhism” is when Americans become interested in Buddhism and seek it out, through visits to Asia, the importing of religious books, or attendance at events with Buddhist speakers. “Export Buddhism” is the product of missionary efforts from Asian countries, and “Baggage Buddhism” is the religious experience which immigrants bring with them. Sometimes, the divisions between these groups can be sharp and seemingly impassable. The experience of a white middle-class American Buddhist may be unrecognizable to a first generation Chinese-American Buddhist, and they will inevitably expect different things from their religious experience. In trying to accommodate the wide range between these two poles, Buddhist leaders in America adapt in various ways. Import Buddhism focuses more on individualism, meditation

---

and (sometimes expensive) monastic retreats, while Export and Baggage Buddhism is often more locally or ethnically based and sensitive to the social and economic needs of its members. Thus, the adaptations of (for example) monastic Zen Buddhism varies greatly from the adaptation of greater focus on ethnic community in urban Thai Buddhist temples. This is a product of diversity between sects, as well as the demographics of membership.

The line between adaptation and interaction is not so much a line as a gradient. Adaptation comes from interaction, though the extent of exchange can vary enormously. The common theme is redefinition of identity due to new circumstances. Cambodian-American Buddhists, like many other Asian-American Buddhist organizations, import their leaders from their home countries. This somewhat alters the relationship between laity and authority. Since the laity must be the ones to raise money to bring a monk over, and then must support him by their membership, the monk-laity relationship becomes somewhat of a client-patron relationship, with the laity as patrons. This is not due to cultural pressures but simple geography and economy.

On the other hand, if a group has not yet been able to bring a monk over from Cambodia, they are restricted in the type of practices they can “recreate easily” which may leave them open to the option of incorporating other religious traditions as well, or altering their own. For example, one Prachum Ben celebration held in a Christian building included Cambodian Muslim traditional dances as a way to reinforce Cambodian ethnic identity to the non-Buddhists who were in attendance. This is a clear example of immigrants actively defining their identity in order to be understood a certain way by others. They begin to interact with their environment in influential ways. Some Cambodian Buddhists are involved in both their local wat and their local Christian church, and claim to believe in both traditions equally. Some wear cross necklaces along with Buddhist religious symbols. With Christianity and Buddhism in complex interaction,
these immigrants actively participate in the shaping of their own religious identities, rather than being victims of change forced on them by removal to America. More research should be done on the effect multi-religions membership may be having on Christian churches.¹⁸

One indication of how American religious pluralism may be affected is seen in an article on how to bring Christianity to Hindu immigrants by Christian evangelist Timothy Paul. Though maintaining the truth of Christianity and the duty to evangelize to Hindus, Paul emphasizes the need to take a more Hindu approach to evangelism. He acknowledges that the typical American model of conversion does not work with Hindus, and that in order to impact Hindus, one must create a deep and authentic relationship with the Hindu in question, learning to sincerely appreciate his or her customs, foods, languages, and viewpoints. Finally, Paul asserts that, once converted, Hindus must be allowed to be a Christian in a Hindu way, even allowed simultaneous worship of Hindu deities in trust that the converted Hindu will eventually feel a need for no deity but Christ. In this sense, Paul demonstrates that he has been influenced by the presence of Hindus in America and the Hindu mindset, toward a more pluralistic view of religious journeying in general. He is not only aware of the diversity of America’s immigrant population, but is engaged in constructive interaction with it.¹⁹ Prema Kurien claims that America is a multicultural society in which people must organize according to recognizable ethnic or national identifiers, and that Hindus in America have actively branded themselves as ideal Americans. Because Hinduism is so diverse in practice, tradition, and place of origin, American Hindus rally around the central pillar of claiming a multifaceted and tolerant religion and homeland. They choose pluralism and tolerance as the axis of their collective identity, emphasizing beliefs and

texts which support their image as an enlightened religious people in matters such as gender equality or science.\textsuperscript{20} By situating themselves there, American Hindus project their own image of America back at the non-Hindu public, and this is bound to have an influence.

Surprisingly, Hinduism may have a direct influence on American politics and religious allegiances. Kurien distinguishes between “official Hinduism”, or Hinduism as it is represented by public religious leaders in America, and “popular Hinduism”, or Hinduism as it is practiced and believed personally by individual immigrants. Kurien claims that on the fringe of official Hinduism, leaders “use the discourse of multiculturalism to promote a militant Hindutva [Hinduness] movement” and overseas Indian nationalism, “in some cases going so far as to call for the total expulsion of Muslims and Christians from India”. For example, Kurien asserts that some Hindus, probably due to historic Muslim-Hindu conflicts and the sense of being marginalized or invisible in America, “wrote letters to politicians and the media, called radio and television talk shows, and spoke up at town meetings to make strongly anti-Islamic and anti-Pakistani statements” after September 11\textsuperscript{th} 2001. The tolerance of the Hindu was used as contrast against the intolerant fanaticism of the terrorists. It follows then, that these American Hindus may have exerted some influence over other American views of Pakistan and Islam. This is one unique example of interaction, in which some Hindu immigrants weave American identity into themselves, while weaving themselves into America.\textsuperscript{21}

In some cases, Asian religion interacts with non-Asian America through perceiving the needs of its host country as a whole, rather than changing only in response to the needs or


circumstances of its pre-existing adherents. Pravrajika Vrajaprana, an American Hindu nun and author, explains that the Ramakrishna Order of Hinduism, which was the “first Indian monastic organization to undertake social service”, has a much different role in the United States. In India, most of their work tends to the physical needs of people, but in America, Vrajaprana answers questions of the order’s purpose by saying: “Our work in America is mainly pastoral, since the poverty we experience here is, for the most part, spiritual.” Therefore, the Ramakrishna Order underwent a change in America, not through the necessity of its immigrant members, but through a perception of how it might contribute to America’s spiritual deficit. It does not seem to be an evangelical organization, as in, it does not seem to be bent on creating new Hindus. In fact, Vivekenanda, a student of Ramakrishna (the order’s namesake), actively embraced God’s manifestations in the Muslim and Christian faiths as well as Hindu, seeing all as manifestations of one divinity. The order thus seeks to create spiritual wholeness in all those it serves.22

There are, however, as mentioned earlier, occurrences of non-Asian Americans converting to traditionally Asian religions. The direction of influence thus becomes completely reversed from the assumption that immigrant religion is always influenced by the host culture and never the other way around. In the case of Buddhism, it has already been mentioned that “export Buddhism” or what one might call evangelical Buddhism does exist in America. Nattier focuses specifically on Soka Gakkai International, a sect which believes in chanting a set mantra in order to obtain Buddhahood, and improve one’s “material circumstances as well”. She claims that it is mainly popular among the middle to lower economic classes and among racial and ethnic minorities, including Latin@ and African Americans.23 At the same time, a study by


23 Jan Nattier, “Buddhism Comes to Main Street,” 76-77.
Buster G. Smith on expansion patterns of Buddhism in America shows evidence that Buddhism is most likely to succeed among Asian immigrants “as well as in areas where there is not already a strong religious presence. In addition, education, especially at the college level, seems to be higher in areas where Buddhist organizations exist….“ Though only a correlation, and thus not the proven cause, this trend suggests that in places—besides the obvious Asian-American communities—where there is a lack of religious identification, either because of secularization or because the existing Judeo-Christian religions may not fit the population’s needs, Buddhism succeeds. It may be that, as in the case of the Ramakrishna Order, Buddhism has something to offer which fills a hole in the American religious landscape, either by providing economic hope, in the case of Soka Gakkai, or by counteracting disillusionment. Either way, Asian immigrant religion is steadily becoming influential over more of the American public.

In conclusion, this sample of the various ways in which Asian-American immigrant religions influence and are influenced by life in America has shown that there is no reason to assume that influence on religious practice and affiliation only flows in one direction, from host country to immigrant population. However, while America is pluralistic in the sense of allowing multiple identities and differences, it still has certain values which it holds essential to successful integration and which can have a great effect on immigrants, namely: capitalism, democracy, and strict removal of religion to a private sphere of life. Despite these essential American values, changes in immigrant religions should not be seen as a complete submission but rather the result of an active interaction between many religious, ethnic, and social/national backgrounds—interactions which also directly affect the realities of non-Asian Americans. In this way, Asian-American religious immigrants are as great and perhaps greater players in the shaping of American pluralism and the American religious landscape than are non-Asian Americans.
Annotated Bibliography


This source discusses mainly Indochinese refugees who are either Buddhist, Protestant, or Catholic, and discusses if, when, and how their religious identification changed, as well as cases of reverting back to Buddhism after being in America for a longer period of time. This may indicate that the refugees’ picture of American religious pluralism changed enough for them to feel comfortable practicing their original religion.


These authors discuss how temples are cultural resources for immigrants who are learning about their own culture and adjusting to America. Temples also want to engage non-Asians. Most Thai don’t live in enclaves and they speak English well. Temples and religious groups were established even without official leadership because Thai want a community space to have traditional ceremonies and festivals and to learn about Buddhism. There is a difference of ethnic Thai and Buddhist festivals and focuses for the temple activities, and temples will even provide a link to voting in Thailand. These temples are aimed mainly toward first generation immigrants, and may not be able to retain membership among the second generation.

This chapter discusses how Cambodian immigrants approached conversion to Christianity as refugees, conversion of their children to Christianity, and also their own melding of Christian and Buddhist practices, and how these approaches relate to a sense of being good Americans and religious people. It shows how these immigrants actively participate in the shaping of their own religious identities, rather than being victims of change forced on them by removal to America, with Christianity and Buddhism in complex interaction. It talks about the lack of infrastructure which initially led to activity in Christian institutions and the changes which occurred after that infrastructure was made. Also, other things like time constraints had an effect on ritual practices, and the conversion of children often has a weakening effect on family structures. Some respondents connected Christianity to American capitalist success. Interestingly, in order to create a more solid ethnic identity, some Cambodian Buddhists also embraced certain Cambodian Muslim traditional dress and dances as culturally Cambodian.


This article talks about immigration and demographics in Indiana, and how hard it was for early Hindu immigrants to find good vegetarian food in America. Some people “adapt” to
start eating beef and other meat, and real Indian food is so time-consuming which is hard in American fast-paced culture. Some families eat Indian/vegetarian food at home but eat more American when they’re out. There are cultural Hindus, meaning they don’t do a lot of the ritual/practice but hold the values/ideas. Also, Hindus worship at home, so there are few temples. When parents have children, religiosity increases so they can pass on culture.


This article is based on the argument that any religious or cultural practice, transplanted into another country or culture, will undergo a transformation in response to the values and mindset of the new culture. Specifically, it analyzes changes which occurred in the practices of Zen Buddhism after it reached America in response to American ideas of health and hygiene, private and personal space, distaste toward explicit hierarchy, and so on, as well as cultural misconceptions American Buddhists might have about the “old ways”.


This article brings up various theories about possible causes for the tendency of immigrant Americans to use multiculturalism as a basis for non-American nationalism, as in the
case of Hindus attached to India, and argues that religion is one very significant factor in this process. The author distinguishes between “official Hinduism”, a pan-Hindu identity presented by non-sectarian leaders, and “popular Hinduism”, or the Hinduism which is actually lived out and passed down day-to-day by American Hindus. The article draws information from an eight-year study of various American Hindu organizations, as well as studies in India and research and involvement in Hindu newspapers and online groups, forums and websites. It discusses the need for a public ethnic identity in America rather than simply a private one, and how the construction of such an identity can influences the political views of such populations. It also explores ways in which the face Hinduism presents to the American public has been constructed in response to the multicultural and secular/scientific mood of America. It discusses how current American attitudes toward certain religious or ethnic groups (such as Muslims) might influence the formation of American Hindu religious identity, and is valuable in showing how differently “American” identity can be interpreted.


This article gives a clear and concise overview of the meaning of cultural and religious pluralism in America, and how it has developed over history and been interpreted different ways. It also makes an argument about the origins of pluralism as well as its necessity in modern life.

This article talks about how Korean Christians see America as a Christian country, which helps in their adjustment. It discusses the very thorough support mechanism of Korean churches in America, which provides a vast array of cultural, social, and economic services. It also discusses how coming from a homogenous vs. heterogeneous society (Korea vs. India) greatly influences how much such support services are needed, the adaptation of religious and cultural practices, and so forth. Hindus have a harder time establishing large communities like Koreans in America due to their own diversity of language and belief, but they also have less need for such a community because many of their religious and cultural rituals are based around every day life at home.


Another approach to the same subject by the same author, but including specific quotations from respondents.

This article discusses the differences between export Buddhism (Buddhism brought purposely from Asia as a missionary effort), import Buddhism (Buddhism which non-Asian people, usually upper-class, seek out and bring from Asia for their own use), and baggage Buddhism (religion brought with immigrants who immigrated for non-religious purposes). It also describes the rifts between these three communities and somewhat how they view and affect each other.


This article is from a Christian missionary perspective, as in telling how best to go about bringing Christ into the lives of immigrant Hindus. It is useful because it shows how America has begun to move toward a much more religiously pluralistic view, even so much that Christian missionaries realize that they cannot reach those belonging to other cultures or religions unless they first immerse themselves in and wholly accept that person’s culture and create a genuine friendship of mutual respect for one another’s culture. They must work within the Hindu worldview.

This is a primary source document describing how one Hindu American approached the process of adapting to American life while still retaining one’s own identity, and how their background in a multi-racial multi-religious society prepared them for and influenced their transition into American life.


This article discusses the evidence supporting the claim that Buddhism is likely to flourish most in places where there is a high Asian population, a low instance of religious identification, and a higher amount of university-educated people.


This article discusses how the estimates of how many converts to eastern religions there are in America are vastly overblown, mainly because of how visible the members and leaders of such movements are, as well as the fact that many people are attracted to certain ideas or practices without actually identifying as Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu (ex: Yoga, Meditation).

discusses how the few Korean Buddhists in America are pressured by their Korean friends and family to convert to Christianity. Also how Korean Buddhists see themselves as more successful and independent than their Christian counterparts who rely on a large support group via the church, but have greater difficulty in passing their religion on to their children because of the hands-off nature of Buddhism.


This article is useful as a report by someone who’s been a Hindu nun since 1977, talking about how though the Vedanta society in India was focused mostly on physical poverty, here in America they are mostly pastoral since they see America’s poverty as mostly spiritual. Also talks about how Hinduism, especially Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, have influenced the reality of cultural/religious pluralism in America. Where before would have been driven out, was able to speak about all religions being essentially true to crowd’s approval. Apparently this group finds its niche in America not by being similar but by seeing where a void it can fill is, that of refuge and peace and meditation and a listening ear and a slower life pace.