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THE ROLE OF RELIGION: INTER-TEMPORAL ETHNIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

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Sociological inquiry of immigrants and religious institutions in the West has developed over the course of several decades, primarily because of the influx of massive migration of Catholics, Jews, and Lutherans. Although many studies analyze the role of religion in first generation immigrants, also of importance are issues of inter-temporal ethnic identity formation. Arising when we look at the role of religion for second generation immigrants, are issues regarding the role religion plays in identity formation, the role of the Church, and the preservation of culture via religion as an institution. This paper explores the changing religious values among first and second generation immigrants, and the role Religion and the Catholic Church play in ethnic identity formation. With a predominant focus on Korean American immigrants, the questions explored in this paper include, ‘In what ways do religious values among first and second generation immigrants shift, and what are the implications of such change on ethnic and cultural identity formation?’

Absence of conclusive external and objective boundaries has led some researchers to conclude that membership of an ethnic group is determined by beliefs and ideologies held both by ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of the group (Chai, 1998; Haddard and Lummis, 1987; Cohen, 2004). As a result of migration and integration, many people now have multiple affiliations that lead to more complex ethnic identities. Diaspora may be defined as an “experience of being scattered across the globe while attempting to maintain a connection with other members of an ethnic group and with the country of origin” (Cohen, 2004: pp. 88). Connections would include a certain social structure, a type of consciousness and a mode of cultural production. The formalization of an ethnic identity parallels the process described for personal and social identities; an individual with a diffused self-image moves through periods of foreclosure, crisis, and questioning before reaching an achieved identity (Cohen, 2004). Ethnic identity of immigrant groups are influenced by the host society, and over the course of generations, an identity that is an interaction of the traditional culture and the dominant-host society emerges (Cohen, 2004; Abouguendia and Noels, 2001).

The assimilationist paradigm, based primarily on the experiences of the turn of the century European immigrant groups, tended to hypothesize a second generation rejection of religion and ethnicity. This may be true in certain cases where maintaining ones traditional religious following is more of a challenge, as it is not compatible or encouraged by those in a new surrounding environment. A comparative study of Islamic values in the US demonstrated how the social and religions values of Muslims in North America fail to be maintained, primarily because of the essentially, non-Islamic environment. Authors Haddad and Lummis (1987), upon studying the controversial term ‘American Islam’, found that two
dynamic scenarios existed. On one hand, they found that Muslims who had been in the
country for awhile, many whom are first and second generation immigrants who
have been more or less assimilated into American society, try and maintain a low
profile of Islamicity by down playing characteristics that would make them appear
distinctly Muslim. This group perceives Islam as comparable with basic tenets of
American civil religion. On the other hand, newly arrived immigrants who have
been regenerated by the insurgence of world wide Islamic movements, come to the
US and are shocked by some of the Muslim practices. This abandonment of
traditional religion does not tend to occur in cases where the host-society has already
embraced the religion.

Researchers have found that the ethnic church represents a historically
integral part of American life for Korean immigrant groups (Chai, 1998; Chong, 1998;
Abouguendia and Noels, 2001). Beginning with the very first Korean plantation
workers who arrived in Hawaii in 1903, the church has been a focal point in the
Korean immigrant community (Chai, 1998). The Korean immigrant church, from the
beginning was a convenient vehicle for preserving ethnic culture and identity with
support of most Americans. However, the alienation of second generation youth
from immigrant churches by the first generation became what changed the second
generation’s religious commitments. It is argued (Chai, 1998; Chong, 1998) that most
“grown up” second generation Korean Americans do not attend their parent’s
church, even if they reside in the same city. The term ‘silent exodus’ describes the
pattern of second generation children leaving the church, and speaks to the lack of
effect it has on the Church community as a whole. Part of the reason second
generation immigrant groups choose to leave their parent’s church is because they
desire ethnic fellowship and a service that is designed to help them overcome
challenges and conflicts that are unique to their experience. The goal, therefore,
becomes a service that is individualistic.

How do priorities and beliefs of second generation Korean Americans differ
from those of first generation? Generally, first generation immigrants tends to see
Christianity as an ascribed characteristic that comes with family church membership;
there are strict observations of tradition and rituals that preserve hierarchy and
Confucian elements of duty, and respect and protection are emphasized. The second
generation is less concerned with the formal structures and process. They are more
individualistic and view Christianity as an achieved characteristic that comes
through “accepting Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior” (Chai, 1998: pp. 309). For
the second generation, there is a notion of being born again. Where for the first
generation, particularism is prominent, for the second generation, congregation is the
basis of identity, not Korean culture and language. The social implications that
should be recognized however, is that even though preservation of culture may not
be the primary goal of the second generation Korean American church, preservation
of identity as a second generation immigrant is key. Second generation immigrants in
this case have created a third space, which consequentially lead to new programs
that bring together like-minded members that foster intra-group marriages.
Resultantly, intra-group marriages contribute to the persistence of the Christian
legacy among Korean Americans as well as to the persistence of Korean American
ethnic and racial identity formations.

Chong (1998) argues that the ethnic Church is dominant in a groups search
for identity and sense of belonging, demonstrating how the evangelical Protestant
Church plays a role in the construction and sustainability of Second Generation Korean ethnic identity. Chong argues that the Church is the primary site of cultural reproduction of Second Generation immigrants, and that the Church supports development of cohesive group defensiveness and exclusivity in two major ways. First, the Church provides general institutional transmission of Korean culture, and secondly, core traditional Korean values are legitimized and sacralized through identifying with conservative Christian morality and worldviews. What is of interest is how ethnic religion can remain highly prominent for Second Generation immigrants under certain situational contexts, especially for the Korean American community, who have become distinguished by “vitality of ethnic religious life” (Chong, 1998: pp. 262).

Chong argues that ethnicity is driven by status and position in a society, and that social organization and adaption to external forces plays a role in the development of ethnic identity. Wanting to understand how ethnicity is constructed, the integrative approach is utilized to understand how cultural attributes of Korean ethnic groups are being appropriated by church members in the process of ethnic boundary construction and group self definition. The second generation’s ethnic understanding stems from cultural attributes of the first generation, but in a way that is more ‘abstract’ or ‘symbolic’. According to Chong, religion relates to ethnic identity in two ways. It is either identical to, or precedent of ethnic identity, or it is subsidiary to ethnic identity. Chong’s findings suggest that for Korean American second generation immigrants, Christian identity often coincide with the emergence of a more solidified ethnic identity. How religion supports and reinforces ethnicity relates to concepts of sacralization and legitimation. Weber, for instance studied the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior in relation to religion to show how religion and class are often contingent upon one another (Weber, 1993; 1958). Weber understood religion as a driving force that emphasized and legitimized the function of ethnic behavior. Worthy of note is how the participants in Chong’s study were highly educated, upwardly mobile Korean Americans, for whom social and cultural interests played a part their decision to attend church. The implications of this finding mean, that for some of the Churchgoers, a motivation to attend stemmed from their ability to maintain social networks and keep up with the Korean culture. This demonstrates how social class and the desire for upward mobility factor in to Church attendance (Chong, 1998).

In the interviews Chong conducted, participants revealed that they felt racist perceptions from the general public. The nature of symbolic boundaries is defined by an ability of a group to distinguish themselves from the ‘outside world’. Issues of racism, prejudice and discrimination may motivate second generation immigrants to become involved with the ethnic Church in an effort to recoil from the general public (in this study, close to 75-80% of the Korean American second generation community proclaimed themselves as being affiliated with the Protestant Church) (Chong, 2010). Also, the ethnic Church provides a space where discourse around basic value orientation can take place. For instance, Korean Confucian values are historically values that celebrate filial piety, respect for parents, family-centeredness and work ethic. The Church members interviewed reported having a high degree of attachment to Korean values, and even more strict traditional values when it came to issue of sexual morality, gender relations, displaying criticism towards the American culture that values individualism and liberal sexual morality.
The primary significance of the Korean ethnic church is its capacity to strengthen and reinforce ethnic identity by supporting their culture and enforcing value orientations. The Christian ethic is intertwined with the values of Korean ethics and values, and as a result, there is a powerful sense of group consciousness that develops. Discourse about religious faith and identity strongly relate to the discourse that shapes Korean identity. One female participant in Chong’s (1998) study is reported saying, “It’s very important for me to cherish my Korean culture. I think Koreans in general have a better value system than Americans, like having respect for parents…To tell you the truth, I think Americans are lazy in general. They just do what needs to be done, and no more... Their sexual morality is going down the drain. I don't believe in pre-marital sex. We have more respect for elders. We are more conservative, believe in rules” (pp. 270).

Further cultural transmission at the level of the Church begins with structural organization that is governed by two major principles: gender and age based hierarchy. Here it can be observed that Korean cultural values are transmitted and reinforced among second generation immigrants by social interaction that enforce unwritten rules, norms and order of conduct. Such values are reflected in the organization of the Church, and is demonstrated through spatially segregated Bible classes, selective readings of the Bible that reiterate the unity between Korean and Christian values, and hierarchical gender roles that permit only men (while excluding women) from taking more authoritative roles in the Church (Chong, 1998).

The normalized socialization of second generation immigrants and their children relate to how ethnic and religious aspects of the Church are interrelated in supporting ethnic identity and consciousness. Religious language provides an interpretation of reality as the Church is used as “instrumental in consolidating group unity and powerfully catalyzing a sense of exclusive group identity and consciousness in its members by helping to create strict boundaries against the outside world” (Chong, 1998; pp. 278). For second generation immigrants the Church has provided a place of resistance and defense against the majority of the general public. This portrayal of second generation Korean immigrants casts this group in a light that is more ‘ideal’ in the eyes of God, which is consistent with Christian values that would promote rhetoric around the issue of Christians having a ‘duty’ or a ‘calling’ to improve American society. As one youth pastor states, “I think Korean Americans are called in a particular way by God. God calls particular people to work through. The responsibility of Korean Americans is to renew the Kingdom of God in America, help better its morality and value system. Morality in the US is declining. Korean Americans have a special place in a struggle against that. I believe that God works through marginalized people. They can see the real problems of society. Korean Americans are sometimes too busy trying to be successful but they can contribute a lot to this. We still have the tradition of respecting elders, taking care of children” (Chong, 1998: pp. 278). This second generation immigrant group is not only creating a boundary around themselves that excludes members of the American population, but also creating comparisons and value judgments against the broad American society. How is the role of the Church transformed or structured so that this belief in ones ‘higher rank’ evolves?

Sharon Kim (2010) proposes that not all newly formed Korean immigrant Churches want non-Koreans involved in their Church, nor do they desire a multi-racial Church. Kim argues that some pastors want their Church pre-dominantly
Korean American because they believe that the Church is the main institution for preservation and passing down of traditional Korean culture to generations. For instance, in Los Angeles, the second generation Korean American immigrant population is reestablishing the ethnic Church at a new level. This group is initiating a new religious path, while departing from the original immigrant Church in pursuit of new spiritual, self-constructed identities, and is specifically defining who and who is not permitted to attend their Church (Kim, 2010).

DeYoung (2004) defines a multiracial Church as one in which no one racial group is 80% of the congregation. Multiracial congregations are rare in the US, with less than 8% of over 300,000 religious congregations being racially mixed. This is hypothesized to be a result of racism and cultural preservation (Kim, 2010). Of the twenty-two Churches in Kim’s (2010) study, six were mono-ethnic and sixteen were Pan-Asian. One senior pastor in the mono-ethnic Churches argued that Korean’s “will not and should not disappear or evolve into multiracial organizations” (Kim, 2010: pp. 104). Pastors such as this one believe that the ethnic Church is the main institution responsible for preserving culture, and that there is a required commitment to cultural preservation. Pastors of mono-ethnic Churches promote ethnic homogeneity, which they believe will increase the level of efficiency within the Church, while acting as a site of resistance against pressures of the American mainstream culture (Kim, 2010). Another Pastor in the study argued that God created different ethnic groups, not to blend them into one culture, but to preserve distinct cultures. Furthermore, the Church functions as a refuge from marginalization along with formation of a positive social identity. One of the issues of mono-ethnic Churches, however, is the internal contradiction it represents. Ethnic exclusivity limits outreach to fellow Korean Americans, which poses several levels of “discontent, guilt, and ambivalence among” membership (Kim, 2010: pp. 108).

Sixteen of the twenty-two Churches in Kim’s study were considered to be Pan-Asian. Of these sixteen, six remained predominantly Asian American, while ten were viewed as being in the transitional stage towards becoming a Church of all races. One issue to consider in the context of ethnic division among the Churches is the issue of racial preservation as opposed to ethnic preservation. The defense used in support of Church division based along the lines of racial segregation, is that Asian Americans have commonalities of race and culture that are only common to them. Jeung (2004) argues that the role of pan-ethnicity in the formation of religious organizations in Northern California revolve around Evangelical minister’s emphasis of lifestyles, value systems, and social net works that are viewed as being ‘racialized experiences’ that provide the primary bond for Pan-Asian solidarity.

There are some Pan-Asian Churches that do not share a sense of common history, but do share common experiences as children of immigrants and racial minorities (Kim, 2010). Church attendees, who feel this way, are more inclined to increase their level of connection to people outside their racial and ethnic lines. Several Churches in Kim’s study that started as exclusively Korean have modified, and are now intentionally omitting Korean expressions while opting for more inclusive language, promoting diversified leadership among non-Korean’s. This situation highlights how the emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic group experiences in the US often confuse the important distinction between race and ethnicity.

Multi-racial Churches are based on the ideology that mono-ethnic Churches are inherently problematic for those who believe in a Christian worldview. Ten
Churches in the study were counted as having the desire to transform their Church into a multi-racial congregation. Seven of the ten took a ‘color blind’ approach, whereas three out of the ten openly addressed ethnic and racial differences in an ‘affirmative action’ policy. Churches that employed the ‘color blind’ strategy were observed to attract more membership than those highlighting race and racial differences (Kim, 2010).

What are the implications of segregated congregations that specify and focus on different areas of religious study that conform to the general, normative values of those attendees? One result, as demonstrated by Kim, is that marriage is predominantly kept with in same race relations. This speaks to the magnitude of racially segregated congregations, and the perceived ‘taboo act’ of marrying outside ones race. Of concern, is how ethnic purity is viewed, and how ethnic preservation is deemed so important that marriage outside of ones ethnic circle is often forbidden, or at the very least, strongly discouraged. Among unmarried Korean American’s in Kim’s study, 12% indicated that in choosing a marriage partner, race is not important, compared to 88% who preferred to marry within their own race. Contrasting this to the 95% of non-Asians who replied that race does not matter when choosing a partner, it becomes apparent that mono-ethnic practices may be impacting the general society in American life (Kim, 2010).

H.B. Entzinger distinguishes between three policies regarding immigrant adaptation: first, assimilation, which is the total immersion in the receiving society and accommodation to its dominant culture; second, integration, which is a reciprocal process whereby the dominant group and the ethnic-cultural groups adopt certain elements of each other’s culture, with out the disappearance of all culture; and third, pluralism, where the different groups respect each other’s culture, but retain their cultural distinctiveness (Musschenga, 1998). Many social scientists that take a social justice stance that advocate for the preservation of culture, race and ethnicity agree with John Rawls, who considers the passing of forms of life as a social loss. If we side with the argument that all cultures must be protected against being assimilated into dominant societal culture, does the idea of ethnic segregation among Church goers and the confinement of marriage between races become more easily accepted? For future research, a question that may be considered is, what are the long-term effects of ‘ethnic purification’ that appears to be happening in some second generation churches and is there a way to successfully maintain cultural and ethnic identity formation without having to exclude the non-ethnic members?