

Article

The Grammar of Belonging: Asian Immigrant Religions and the Discipline of American Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

This article examines how Asian immigrant religious identities in the United States are formed through the ambivalent conditions of American religious pluralism. While scholarship on immigrant religion has emphasized the empowering role of religious institutions in adaptation, community formation, and civic incorporation, this article foregrounds the disciplinary effects of pluralism itself. It argues that Asian immigrant communities become legible within an American religious field structured by an Anglo-Protestant grammar that privileges belief, scripture, voluntary association, congregational organization, and the distinction between religion and culture. This grammar enables recognition and belonging, but also reorganizes Asian traditions through inherited Protestant, racial, colonial, and imperial categories. Bringing immigrant religion scholarship into conversation with postcolonial and decolonial critiques of “religion,” the article situates Asian American religious formation within both U.S. pluralism and transpacific histories of missionary, colonial, Orientalist, and postcolonial classification. It develops a framework of religionization, racialization, and ethnicization to show how Asian immigrant religions are translated into recognizable forms, marked through racial and civilizational hierarchies, and institutionalized as sites of communal boundary-making. The article thus reframes Asian immigrant religious life not simply as adaptation or empowerment but as a negotiation with the regulatory conditions of American religious pluralism.

Keywords: Asian religious immigrants; American religious pluralism; race; ethnicity; American religious history

1. Introduction

In recent decades, scholars of immigrant religion have shown that religious institutions play a crucial role in the incorporation, adaptation, and identity formation of immigrant communities in the United States. For Asian immigrants in particular, churches, temples, mosques, meditation centers, and other religious institutions have provided spaces for preserving cultural memory, transmitting ethnic traditions, building social networks, offering practical support, and negotiating belonging in a racially stratified society (Hurh and Kim 1990; Min 1992; Kurien 1998; Yang 1999; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Cadge and Ecklund 2007). This scholarship has importantly challenged earlier assimilationist assumptions that successful incorporation requires the erosion of ethnic and religious distinctiveness. It has also demonstrated that religion remains central to immigrant life, not merely as a private matter of belief but as a public and communal resource through which migrants make sense of displacement, marginalization, and incorporation.

This emphasis marked a significant shift in the study of immigrant incorporation. Classical assimilation theory, associated with the Chicago School of sociology and the work



Academic Editors: Eduardo Duque,
José Francisco Durán Vázquez and
Salam Al Rabadi

Received: 1 August 2026

Revised: 29 August 2026

Accepted: 1 September 2026

Published: 10 September 2026

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of Robert E. Park, generally understood immigrant incorporation as a gradual process through which newcomers and their descendants entered the dominant social order (Park 1950). Later formulations described this process either as conformity to Anglo-American cultural norms, often termed “Anglo-conformity,” or as the gradual emergence of a new American people through the “melting pot” (Gordon 1964, p. 64). Although these models differed in important ways, they tended to assume that ethnic distinctions would diminish over time as immigrants were absorbed into a more or less unified American mainstream. By the late twentieth century, however, this expectation was increasingly challenged. The Civil Rights Movement and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 transformed both the demographic composition of the United States and scholarly approaches to immigrant incorporation. Rather than viewing assimilation as a uniform or “straight-line” process, scholars emphasized the continuing flexibility of ethnic identities, the structural significance of racialization, and the multiple pathways through which immigrants entered American society (Alba and Nee 2003; Gans 1979; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters 1990).

Religion has been central to this revision. Studies of post-1965 immigrants have shown that ethnic and religious identities often function not as obstacles to incorporation but as resources through which immigrants negotiate discrimination, pursue mobility, and build communities of belonging (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Kurien 1998; Min 1992; Yang 1999). R. Stephen Warner’s influential account of “de facto congregationalism” has been especially important in explaining the flexibility of American religious life. According to Warner, religious communities in the United States, including immigrant communities, tend to organize themselves through local, voluntary, and relatively autonomous congregations rather than through state-established or nationally centralized institutions (Warner 1993, 1994, 1998; Warner and Wittner 1998). This congregational structure has allowed immigrants to reconstruct religious life in native languages, preserve familiar rituals, cultivate ethnic networks, and address the practical needs of newcomers.

Yet the dominant emphasis on religion as a source of empowerment, adaptation, and communal resilience risks obscuring another dimension of immigrant religious formation. The American religious field does not simply offer immigrants a neutral space in which to preserve inherited traditions or freely construct new identities. Rather, it is structured by historically specific assumptions about what counts as “religion,” what legitimate religious institutions should look like, and how religious, racial, and ethnic identities should be organized. The same congregational and voluntaristic structure that enables minority religious formation also imposes particular institutional expectations. Traditions that may not historically have centered on congregational membership, doctrinal belief, textual authority, or clergy-led worship often become reorganized through forms more readily legible within an American religious order. This article therefore examines the disciplinary underside of immigrant religious incorporation: its capacity not only to empower Asian immigrant communities but also to differentiate, discipline, and fragment them.

I describe these organizing assumptions as an Anglo-Protestant grammar: a set of normative categories that privileges belief, scripture, voluntary association, congregational organization, clerical leadership, privatized faith, and the distinction between religion and culture. This grammar is not reducible to formal theology or church affiliation. It refers instead to a broader epistemological and institutional structure that shapes how religion is recognized in law, public culture, scholarship, and everyday institutional life. Despite constitutional disestablishment and public commitments to pluralism, the United States has never been religiously neutral. American public life continues to operate through Protestant-derived distinctions between religion and the secular, belief and practice, private conscience and public order, and legitimate religion and illegitimate superstition (Asad 1993; Cadge 2008; Seales 2013; Vásquez 2005). Chad Seales argues that American

secularism continues to depend on an Anglo-Protestant epistemological framework that determines which forms of religion can be recognized, accommodated, or marginalized. Similarly, Prema Kurien contends that Protestant Christianity functions as the nation's "unofficial religion," requiring non-Christian immigrants to negotiate the alterity produced by its enduring cultural and institutional dominance (Kurien 2025, p. 276).

This article therefore shifts attention from the empowering functions of immigrant religion to the ambivalent and often fragmenting effects of American religious pluralism. It asks not only how Asian immigrants use religion to negotiate identity, but also how the very terms of that negotiation are structured by Protestant, racial, colonial, and imperial categories of religion, race, ethnicity, civilization, and culture. American religious pluralism may allow Asian immigrant communities to organize, preserve traditions, and claim public visibility, but it also requires them to translate diverse practices, rituals, lineages, philosophies, and communal forms into categories recognizable within a religious field historically shaped by Protestant norms. In this sense, pluralism is not simply a hospitable space of diversity. It is also a regulatory formation that organizes difference through inherited categories of legitimate religion, acceptable difference, and recognizable belonging.

This argument also requires a transpacific and postcolonial frame. Asian immigrant communities did not encounter Protestant and modern Western categories of religion, race, civilization, and culture only after arriving in the United States. Many of these categories had already circulated across Asia through missionary activity, colonial governance, Orientalist scholarship, comparative religion, imperial education, and postcolonial state formation. Postcolonial and decolonial scholars of religion have shown that the modern category of "religion" itself emerged through Christian, colonial, and imperial histories that distinguished religion from culture, belief from practice, and legitimate faith from superstition (Asad 1993; Chidester 1996; King 1999; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012; Nongbri 2013). Migration, therefore, did not introduce Asian immigrants to these categories for the first time. Rather, it relocated them within a U.S. religious field where similar categories had already been institutionalized through public culture, religious pluralism, and congregational forms of organization.

Asian immigrant religious identity formation must therefore be understood as a second moment of translation. Traditions already shaped by colonial, missionary, Orientalist, and postcolonial classifications are retranslated within an American field governed by its own Protestant-derived norms of recognition. This process can generate agency, visibility, and institutional power, but it can also reproduce older hierarchies in new forms. To become recognizable as "religious" in the United States may require Asian communities to foreground scripture over ritual, doctrine over practice, clergy over lay authority, congregation over lineage or temple network, and voluntary affiliation over inherited or embedded forms of belonging. The American religious field is thus not merely a national arena into which Asian religions enter; it is part of a larger colonial-modern system that has long shaped how Asian traditions are named, ranked, racialized, and institutionalized.

To clarify this process, the article develops a typology of three overlapping modes of negotiation: religionization, racialization, and ethnicization. By religionization, I refer to the process through which diverse Asian traditions are translated into recognizable forms of "religion" modeled on Protestant and modern Western assumptions about belief, scripture, doctrine, clergy, institutional membership, and voluntary affiliation. This process can provide legal recognition and public legitimacy, but it can also narrow the range of practices deemed properly religious.

By racialization, I refer to the process through which Asian religions are interpreted through racial and civilizational hierarchies. In the American context, Asian religious traditions have often been marked as foreign, exotic, mystical, authoritarian, backward,

threatening, or insufficiently compatible with American norms. At the same time, selected elements of Asian traditions—such as meditation, yoga, mindfulness, or philosophical spirituality—may be detached from Asian communities and rendered acceptable when consumed by white or mainstream publics. Religious difference is thus not merely tolerated or excluded; it is sorted through racialized distinctions between acceptable practices and suspect practitioners (Prashad 2000; Joshi 2006; Iwamura 2011; Koshy 2013; Hsu 2015; Weisenfeld 2016; GhaneaBassiri 2010; H. D. Curtis 2018).

By ethnicization, I refer to the process through which religious institutions become sites for producing and policing communal boundaries. For Asian immigrant communities, religious institutions often preserve language, culture, memory, and solidarity. Yet these same institutions may also intensify internal distinctions based on nationality, ethnicity, region, caste, sect, language, class, generation, or migration history. Religion becomes a resource for ethnic formation, but it can also become a mechanism of internal differentiation and exclusion. This ambivalence is central to immigrant religious life: religious institutions sustain community, but they also help define who properly belongs to that community.

These three processes are analytically distinct but historically intertwined. Religionization makes Asian traditions legible within an American religious field; racialization marks those traditions and their practitioners through hierarchies of foreignness, civilization, and acceptability; ethnicization organizes religious institutions as sites of communal preservation and boundary-making. Together, they show that Asian immigrant religious identity formation is not simply a matter of adaptation, hybridity, or empowerment. It is a structured negotiation with the conditions of recognition that govern American religious pluralism.

The article's intervention, then, is not the claim that Asian immigrants negotiate religious, racial, and ethnic identities—a point already well established in scholarship on immigrant religion and Asian American religions—but rather an account of the epistemological and institutional grammar that structures the terms of that negotiation. The contribution is threefold. First, the article challenges empowerment-centered readings of immigrant religion by foregrounding the ambivalent and fragmenting effects of American religious pluralism. Second, it connects Asian American religious formation to postcolonial and decolonial critiques of the category of religion, showing that the American religious field is shaped by transpacific and imperial histories rather than by domestic pluralism alone. Third, it offers the analytical framework of religionization, racialization, and ethnicization to explain how Asian immigrant religious identities are produced, disciplined, and contested.

In this sense, Asian immigrant religions are not merely incorporated into an already pluralistic American society. They are transformed through a religious grammar that defines what counts as legitimate religion, acceptable difference, and recognizable belonging. American religious pluralism enables minority communities to claim visibility, protection, and belonging, but it does so by requiring them to become recognizable within inherited Protestant, racial, colonial, and imperial categories. Attending to this disciplinary underside of pluralism allows us to better understand not only the formation of Asian immigrant religious identities but also the unequal structure of American religion itself.

The article develops this argument in four sections: Section 2 reconstructs the formation of Anglo-Protestant modernity in American religious history, showing how Protestant assumptions about scripture, conscience, voluntary association, and religious experience shaped both religious freedom and religious fragmentation. Section 3 traces the transpacific circulation of these categories through colonial and imperial encounters in Asia, where religion, race, and civilization were reorganized through missionary, colonial, and post-

colonial projects. Section 4 examines how Asian immigrant religions were reconstructed within the American religious field, especially through expectations concerning authenticity, institutional legitimacy, voluntary association, and the distinction between religion and culture. Section 5 analyzes becoming American as an ongoing process of religionization, racialization, and ethnicization, showing how Asian American religious identities are formed through both empowerment and exclusion.

2. Anglo-Protestant Modernity in American Religious History

If American religious pluralism is not a neutral space but a historically formed grammar of recognition, then it is necessary to ask how that grammar emerged. This section traces the formation of what I call Anglo-Protestant modernity: not as a comprehensive history of American religion, but as an account of the theological and institutional logic that came to shape dominant assumptions about what counts as religion in the United States. This focus does not deny the profound role of Catholic and Jewish immigration in pluralizing the American religious landscape. Irish, Italian, Polish, German, and later Latin American Catholics, along with Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere, transformed American religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and challenged Protestant dominance (Herberg 1955; Dolan 1985; McGreevy 2003; Sarna 2004; Matovina 2012). Yet this demographic pluralization did not erase the Protestant-derived grammar through which religion was publicly recognized; rather, it made that grammar more flexible, contested, and adaptive. Across civic culture, and religious organization, religion continued to be understood primarily through categories of belief, scripture, voluntary affiliation, congregational organization, individual conscience, and transformative experience (Ahlstrom 1972; Butler 1990; Warner 1993; Sullivan 2005). These assumptions later became implicit standards through which minority and immigrant traditions were recognized, translated, and judged. They also reveal a paradox central to this article's argument: the same Protestant grammar that enabled dissent, pluralism, and religious vitality also produced discipline, fragmentation, and exclusion.

In the classical Weberian sense, Western modernity challenged older conceptions of a divinely ordained and meaningfully ordered cosmos that legitimated inherited social and political authority. Modernity presented itself as a project of emancipation from traditional religious, political, and cultural structures (Eisenstadt 2000, pp. 4–8). Yet this emancipatory project was never simply liberating. As Eisenstadt argues, modernity unfolded through competing efforts to universalize new visions of order after older centers of authority had weakened, often producing fragmentation, exclusion, violence, and conflict alongside innovation and freedom (Eisenstadt 2000, pp. 12–13). Anglo-Protestantism was one of the earliest and most influential sites in which this modern paradox took institutional form.

The migration of English Puritans to New England in the 1620s and 1630s illustrates this dynamic clearly. The Puritans challenged the authority of the established English church by appealing to Scripture, conscience, and the gathered community of true believers. Like other seventeenth-century Calvinists, they understood salvation as dependent entirely on divine grace and upheld Scripture as the highest source of religious authority. Yet their rebellion against inherited ecclesiastical authority did not produce a religiously open or neutral order. In colonial Massachusetts, founded in 1630, the Puritans sought to construct a homogeneous covenantal society grounded in their interpretation of biblical truth. John Winthrop's (1588–1649) 1630 vision of a "city upon a hill" expressed not merely a desire for religious freedom but a demand for communal discipline, moral conformity, and collective witness (Winthrop 1630; Noll 1992, pp. 32–34; Ahlstrom 1972; Butler et al. 2011).

This tension was institutionalized through the “New England Way.” Church membership required not only assent to Puritan doctrine and moral discipline but also a public testimony of conversion before the congregation. These practices sought to preserve ecclesiastical purity and the integrity of the covenantal community (Noll 1992, p. 42). In this respect, early New England Protestantism already displayed a grammar that would become central to American religion: individual conversion, public testimony, scriptural authority, voluntary membership, congregational discipline, and the distinction between authentic and inauthentic religious life. Liberation from one religious establishment thus produced a new order with its own mechanisms of recognition and exclusion.

The limits of this order became visible almost immediately. Roger Williams (c. 1603–1683), banished from Massachusetts in 1635 and founder of Providence in 1636, rejected the magistrates’ authority to enforce religious obligations and challenged English claims to Native lands (Noll 1992, p. 58). Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643), tried and banished during the Antinomian Controversy of 1636–1638, insisted that salvation rested solely on God’s grace rather than on obedience to the moral and ecclesiastical discipline of the Puritan order (Noll 1992, p. 61). Influenced by John Cotton (1585–1652), she claimed direct assurance from the Holy Spirit, thereby radicalizing the Protestant appeal to inward grace and individual spiritual experience. Williams and Hutchinson exposed the instability at the heart of Puritan authority: if religious truth rests on Scripture, conscience, and divine grace rather than inherited institution, then no single community can easily contain the interpretations that follow. The Salem witch trials of 1692 further revealed how the pursuit of religious purity could produce suspicion, exclusion, and violence. From the beginning, then, Anglo-Protestant religion in America generated both emancipation and coercion, dissent and discipline, pluralization and boundary-making.

The First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s accelerated this relocation of religious authority from institution to experience. George Whitefield (1714–1770), though formally Anglican and Calvinist, departed from conventional ecclesiastical practice through itinerant preaching, emotional appeal, extemporaneous delivery, and extraordinary charisma. His sermons invited hearers to experience God’s saving grace directly and helped popularize an experiential and affective model of Protestant religion across the colonies (Noll 1992, p. 93; Marsden 2003; Wacker 2014). Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) similarly emphasized the affections of the believer, the beauty of Christ, and the transformative experience of grace, even as he remained committed to Calvinist theology (Noll 1992, pp. 96–97; Marsden 2003). His dismissal from Northampton in 1750 after disputes over admission to the Lord’s Supper revealed how attempts to define authentic religious experience could generate new conflicts over authority, legitimacy, and communal boundaries.

The revivalist turn did not resolve the tensions of Anglo-Protestant soteriology; it intensified them. New England Congregationalists divided over election, original sin, conversion, and eternal punishment, while Arminian and evangelical critics challenged inherited Calvinist doctrines. Edwardsean theologians such as Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803) and Joseph Bellamy (1719–1790) reinterpreted Edwards’s theology, while Old Calvinists such as Moses Hemmenway (1735–1811) criticized these innovations as distortions of Reformed orthodoxy (Holifield 2003, pp. 140–54). The details of these disputes varied, but their broader significance is clear: Protestant appeals to Scripture, experience, and conscience did not produce consensus. They generated repeated reinterpretation, institutional division, and competing visions of salvation. Fragmentation was therefore not an accidental byproduct of American Protestantism but one of its constitutive dynamics.

The American Revolution (1765–1789) further democratized religious authority. As Nathan Hatch argues, the Revolution was not only a political break from British rule but

also a cultural transformation that destabilized inherited hierarchies and encouraged popular challenges to elite authority (Hatch 1989, p. 23). Revolutionary ideals of liberty and popular sovereignty migrated into religious life, strengthening anticlerical attitudes and legitimating ordinary believers as interpreters of divine truth. The image of Christ as the carpenter's son and the apostles as uneducated men became a powerful resource for challenging the assumption that religious truth was best guarded by educated clergy or social elites (Hatch 1989, p. 45). Popular preachers such as Herman Husband (1724–1795) and Samuel Ely (1740–c. 1795) drew on biblical and apocalyptic imagery to interpret the economic hardships of farmers and laborers and to give religious meaning to political unrest, including Shays's Rebellion (1786–1787) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1791–1794). Religion thus became a language through which ordinary people contested political, economic, and ecclesiastical authority.

Elite Protestant leaders resisted this democratizing impulse. Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, helped found Andover Theological Seminary in 1808 as part of a broader effort to restore Calvinist orthodoxy and clerical authority. Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) likewise insisted that uneducated men had never been the “chosen instruments of God” (Hatch 1989, p. 18). Yet these efforts could not reverse the expansion of popular religious culture. By the early nineteenth century, leaders such as Francis Asbury (1745–1816), John Leland (1754–1841), Richard Allen (1760–1831), Joseph Smith (1805–1844), and William Miller (1782–1849) had become major religious figures despite lacking the formal theological credentials of New England clergy. Their movements embodied a distinctly American form of religious democracy: anti-elitist, populist, voluntaristic, experiential, and charismatic (Hatch 1989; Albanese 2007; Butler et al. 2011).

This democratic religious culture also normalized a broadly experiential and voluntaristic understanding of salvation. By emphasizing conversion, moral agency, direct encounter with God, and individual interpretation of Scripture, popular evangelical movements displaced inherited ecclesiastical authority and encouraged increasingly subjective approaches to religious truth (Hatch 1989, pp. 41–43; McLoughlin 1978). Yet this was not simply a story of liberation. Charismatic and democratic religious movements also produced new forms of authority, boundaries of belonging, and mechanisms of discipline. The democratization of religion multiplied religious options, but it also intensified competition among movements claiming to represent authentic Christianity.

Disestablishment and religious voluntarism gave this Protestant dynamic a durable institutional form. Unlike many European societies, where established churches enjoyed state support and dissenting groups were often restricted, the United States developed a comparatively deregulated religious environment in which voluntary associations and new sects could flourish. Roger Finke argues that this institutional freedom became a principal engine of American religious vitality, allowing religious organizations to respond to the diverse needs of racial, ethnic, regional, and social communities (Finke 1997, pp. 121–24). In this context, religious groups survived not by relying on state patronage but by attracting adherents in a competitive religious marketplace. Other scholars have similarly emphasized that American religion was shaped by disestablishment, voluntarism, denominational competition, and congregational organization, even as Protestant cultural assumptions continued to define the normative center of public religious life (Bellah 1967; Ahlstrom 1972; Hatch 1989; Warner 1993; Albanese 2007).

This environment did not simply permit pluralism; it gave institutional form to an Anglo-Protestant grammar of religion. Religion came to be understood as something chosen, believed, joined, practiced, and organized through voluntary association. Congregations became the normative institutional form, while doctrinal statements, clergy, property ownership, membership rolls, public worship, and denominational structures became rec-

ognizable signs of legitimate religion. The American religious field therefore appeared open and pluralistic, but its openness was structured by Protestant assumptions about what religion is, where religious authority resides, and how religious communities should be organized.

This history matters for immigrant and minority traditions because entry into American pluralism required translation into this Protestant-derived grammar. Communities organized around ritual practice, lineage, caste, kinship, monastic authority, ancestral obligation, temple networks, or civilizational identity often had to become legible as “religions” with doctrines, scriptures, leaders, congregations, memberships, and voluntary adherents. The same grammar that enabled pluralism therefore also disciplined difference: it allowed minority communities to become visible as legitimate religious actors, but only by shaping the terms on which that visibility could occur.

American pluralism, then, did not emerge as a neutral space into which all traditions entered on equal terms. It developed through Protestant assumptions about belief, scripture, voluntarism, congregational life, religious experience, and institutional organization. For Asian immigrant communities, however, this process did not begin only upon arrival in the United States. The categories through which their traditions would later be recognized as “religions” had already circulated through colonial, missionary, and imperial encounters in Asia. The following section therefore turns from the domestic formation of Anglo-Protestant modernity to its transpacific extension, showing how Protestant and colonial categories of religion, race, civilization, and culture were already reshaping Asian traditions before immigrants encountered American religious pluralism.

3. (Post)Colonial Indelibility in Asian Religious Modernities

If the previous section showed how American religious pluralism was institutionally shaped by an Anglo-Protestant grammar, this section extends that argument beyond the United States. The categories through which Asian immigrants become legible as “religious” in America were not encountered for the first time upon migration. They had already circulated through colonial administration, missionary activity, Orientalist scholarship, legal reform, education, and print culture in Asia. This transpacific genealogy is central to the article’s larger argument: Asian immigrant religious identities are shaped not only by adaptation to American pluralism but also by earlier histories of colonial classification, racial hierarchy, and religious reform.

Modernity was never a culturally neutral process. It was historically shaped by Christian dualism, Enlightenment rationality, and later Social Darwinist assumptions that distinguished civilized from uncivilized societies, modern from traditional forms of life, and legitimate from illegitimate forms of knowledge (Eisenstadt 2000; Mandair 2016). Walter D. Mignolo argues that coloniality is not a byproduct of Western modernity but one of its constitutive dimensions. Colonial rule organized both space and time by placing Indigenous and colonized peoples in an “underdeveloped,” “primitive,” or “savage” past within a linear narrative of Western progress (Mignolo 2005, pp. 20–27; 2011, pp. 152–53). In this sense, colonialism did not merely impose political domination; it also shaped the conceptual possibilities through which modern identities could be imagined and institutionalized.

The modern category of religion was part of this colonial epistemology. Jonathan Z. Smith argues that “religion is not a native term” but a second-order scholarly category created for comparative and analytic purposes (J. Z. Smith 2004, p. 194). The colonial “explosion of data” about non-Christian peoples—produced by missionaries, travelers, Orientalists, and administrators—was interpreted through inherited Christian frameworks that distinguished “true religion” from “idolatry,” “superstition,” or “false worship” (J. Z. Smith 2004, pp. 181–87). Religion, therefore, did not circulate globally as a neutral de-

scriptor. It carried Christian and colonial assumptions about belief, doctrine, scripture, institutional organization, and civilizational hierarchy.

This article does not define religion as Anglo-Protestantism, nor does it treat Anglo-Protestantism as representative of religion as such. Rather, “Anglo-Protestant grammar” names a historically dominant framework through which religion has often been made publicly legible in the United States. Religious studies has increasingly challenged universal definitions of religion, especially those that assume religion is primarily defined by supernatural belief, doctrinal assent, scriptural authority, or otherworldly salvation. Clifford Geertz’s influential account of religion as a cultural system of symbols that establishes powerful moods and motivations remains important because it moves beyond a narrowly doctrinal understanding of religion. Yet subsequent scholars have shown that definitions of religion are themselves historically situated acts of boundary-making, often shaped by Christian and colonial assumptions about what counts as legitimate religion (Asad 1993; Tweed 2005). Jonathan Z. Smith and Robert Orsi, for example, emphasize religion as a form of human activity through which people map, negotiate, and inhabit meaningful worlds amid the ambiguities and contingencies of everyday life (J. Z. Smith 1978, pp. 291–92; Orsi 1999, p. 47). The analytical task, then, is not to reduce religion to Protestantism but to ask how Asian traditions become recognized, translated, and sometimes disciplined when they enter religious fields organized by Protestant-derived assumptions.

The Indian subcontinent provides a particularly important example. Under British rule, “religion-making” became part of colonial governmentality alongside law, bureaucracy, census-taking, education, and the modern press. As Arvind-Pal Mandair argues, these institutions classified religions, civilizations, histories, and communities through hierarchical developmental schemes (Mandair 2016, pp. 186–87). Religion became an administrative category through which colonial authorities, missionaries, Orientalists, and local elites governed Indian society. Embedded within this project was a Christian-derived distinction between “true religion” and “superstition,” which reorganized indigenous traditions according to categories foreign to many of their historical forms.

Precolonial religious life in the Indian subcontinent was far more fluid and heterogeneous than colonial classifications suggested. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and numerous local traditions existed through overlapping ritual, linguistic, caste, regional, and devotional networks, though not always peacefully. The category “Hinduism” itself did not function as a unified native religious identity before the colonial period in the way it later came to operate under modern classificatory regimes (King 1999). Likewise, the Thomas Christians of Kerala had long lived within a predominantly Hindu social world, adapting to local customs, including aspects of caste, without necessarily understanding themselves as members of a sharply bounded religious community (Kurien 2017). Colonial rule altered these configurations by encouraging communities to define themselves as discrete, mutually exclusive religions. Indigenous actors, especially Western-educated elites, often participated in this process by reforming and systematizing their traditions according to Protestant-derived assumptions about scripture, doctrine, interior belief, institutional organization, and rationalized practice (van der Veer 2001).

This process also ethnicized and racialized religious identity. Mandair describes an “ontology of negation,” in which religious selfhood came to be articulated through opposition to religious others: “I am Hindu because I am not Muslim,” or “I am Sikh because I am neither Hindu nor Muslim” (Mandair 2016, pp. 187–89). Colonial administration reinforced such distinctions by aligning religions with particular texts, languages, regions, and communities. At the same time, nineteenth-century philologists and Orientalists interpreted caste through racial categories, identifying upper castes with a supposedly superior “Aryan” race and lower or southern populations with darker, “Dravidian” origins. Caste

was thus recast from a complex social, ritual, and regional order into a racialized hierarchy that linked Indian civilization to Western evolutionary narratives.

Prema Kurien shows that this colonial epistemology later shaped Indian diasporic identity formation. During early waves of Indian immigration to the United States, some Indian immigrants appealed to their supposed “Aryan” ancestry and racial proximity to Europeans in order to claim legal recognition as “white” and qualify for citizenship (Kurien 2025, p. 23). This episode shows that colonial subjects did not simply inherit Western racial and religious categories; they strategically appropriated them in negotiating legal status and social belonging. Yet such agency remained conditioned by the frameworks through which colonial modernity had already linked race, religion, civilization, and whiteness.

Modern Chinese history reveals a parallel but distinct process. China was never colonized in the same manner as India, yet the Opium Wars and subsequent imperial pressures forced China into a modern international order structured by Western power. Chinese intellectuals and reformers responded by appropriating, adapting, and contesting Western frameworks in projects of national renewal, including socialism, communism, liberal democracy, nationalism, and religious reform (Yang 1999, pp. 49–50). These transformations reshaped not only political institutions but also the categories through which Chinese traditions were interpreted.

Fenggang Yang observes that many modern Chinese have tended to regard Confucianism primarily as ethics or moral philosophy rather than religion because it appears to lack a transcendent deity, an afterlife, or other supernatural elements conventionally associated with religion (Yang 1999, pp. 47–48). Confucianism has traditionally been understood as a way of cultivating moral persons and harmonious social order through *ren*, or benevolence, and *li*, or ritual propriety, principles that shaped Chinese political and cultural life for centuries (Yang 1999, p. 44). From the broader perspective of religious studies, however, Confucianism is no less religious because its ultimate concern is not escape from this world. Grounded in cosmologies of harmony, ritual cultivation, ancestral reverence, and moral transformation, Confucian traditions seek to form persons capable of realizing social and cosmic order through disciplined ethical practice (Esposito et al. 2018, pp. 420–25). Its soteriological concern lies not in leaving the world but in transforming persons, relationships, and social order.

The modern question of whether Confucianism “counts” as religion therefore reveals the limits of Protestant-centered definitions that privilege belief, transcendence, scripture, and salvation as religion’s defining features. Like colonial India, modern China demonstrates that Western modernity did not simply introduce new political institutions; it reshaped the language through which religion itself became thinkable. Even when Chinese intellectuals appropriated, modified, or resisted Western concepts, they increasingly did so within frameworks shaped by Protestant and post-Enlightenment assumptions about religion, ethics, civilization, and progress. Thus, debates over Confucianism are part of a broader history in which Asian traditions were made legible through Western classificatory schemes.

The cases of India and China therefore show how Asian religious modernities were shaped by colonial and imperial encounters before migration to the United States. In India, colonial rule religionized diverse ritual, caste, devotional, and regional formations into bounded traditions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam; racialized caste and civilization through Aryan and Dravidian categories; and ethnicized religious identity by linking community, language, territory, and peoplehood. In China, imperial pressure and modern reform reconfigured Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and popular practice through imported distinctions between religion, superstition, ethics, philosophy, and culture. These processes did not erase Asian agency. Rather, Asian actors actively reworked

colonial categories in the service of reform, nationalism, resistance, legal recognition, and communal consolidation. But their agency unfolded within a field of concepts already marked by colonial power.

This history directly informs the central argument of this article. Asian immigrants do not enter the American religious field as bearers of untouched traditions that are only later transformed by American pluralism. They arrive with identities already shaped by colonial and postcolonial projects of classification. Once in the United States, these inherited formations encounter an American religious order structured by its own Anglo-Protestant grammar of voluntarism, congregationalism, scripturalism, belief, and institutional membership. The result is a layered process of negotiation. Asian immigrant communities become visible by translating themselves into recognizable American religious forms, but this visibility often requires further religionization, racialization, and ethnicization. The same grammar that makes pluralism possible also disciplines difference by determining which forms of religious life appear legitimate, modern, and worthy of recognition.

In this sense, the “disciplinary underside” of American religious pluralism is not simply that immigrant religions must adapt to a new environment. It is that adaptation takes place within a transpacific history of classification in which colonial and Anglo-Protestant categories have already shaped the terms of religious self-understanding. American pluralism appears open because it allows multiple traditions to enter the public religious field. Yet its openness depends on forms of legibility that require communities to reorganize themselves as recognizable religions, racialized minorities, and bounded ethnic groups. The postcolonial indelibility of Asian religious modernities therefore reveals why Asian immigrant religion cannot be understood only as empowerment, preservation, or incorporation. Asian immigrants arrive in the United States with traditions already shaped by colonial and postcolonial regimes of classification; they then encounter an American religious field structured by its own Anglo-Protestant grammar of belief, voluntarism, congregationalism, scripturalism, and explicit affiliation. The next section examines this second moment of translation. It shows how Hindu, Buddhist, and Protestant Asian immigrants reconstruct religious identity in the United States by negotiating inherited traditions, racial and ethnic boundaries, and the Protestant-derived norms through which religion becomes publicly recognizable in American life.

4. Asian Religions and the Religious Identities of Asian Immigrants in the United States

Long before large-scale Asian immigration transformed the American religious landscape, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Asian traditions had already been interpreted through Christian, colonial, Orientalist, and reformist frameworks that often privileged belief, scripture, inward spirituality, ethical universalism, and institutional identity. These encounters were not exclusively American: Catholic missions, British colonial Protestantism, Dutch and German missions, Jesuit scholarship, and American evangelical institutions shaped Asian religious fields in uneven and regionally specific ways. In the United States, however, these older classificatory histories encountered a specifically Anglo-Protestant religious grammar that further privileged individual belief, personal experience, voluntary affiliation, and inward spirituality. Asian immigrants therefore entered a religious landscape in which their traditions had already been translated more than once: first through colonial, missionary, and reformist encounters in Asia, and then through American frameworks of religious pluralism. The cases discussed here are illustrative rather than exhaustive. They do not represent the full diversity of post-1965 Asian immigrant religious life, which includes Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, and other communities; rather, they are selected to show how different tradi-

tions negotiated a U.S. religious field shaped by Protestant-inflected assumptions about belief, voluntary affiliation, congregational organization, and public legitimacy. This section examines both how Asian religions were received by American intellectuals and spiritual seekers and how Asian immigrants themselves reconstructed religious identities while negotiating race, ethnicity, citizenship, and belonging in the United States.

Vasudha Narayanan argues that the presentation of Hinduism in the United States was significantly reshaped to conform to post-Enlightenment conceptions of religion. Religion came to be understood as a private matter with little connection to clothing, food, or public behavior, and instead as a domain of “inner transformation,” whether expressed as higher consciousness or the discovery of the divine within the self (Narayanan 2012, pp. 339–40). American intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman introduced texts such as the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā* to American audiences through the lenses of Transcendentalism, Romanticism, and individual spirituality. Emerson’s poem “Brahma,” for example, drew on the *Bhagavad Gītā* to express the transience of worldly life and material attachment while detaching these ideas from their broader Hindu philosophical, ritual, and devotional contexts. In this way, Transcendentalists contributed to an Orientalist interpretation of Hindu traditions that simultaneously romanticized and decontextualized them (Narayanan 2012, p. 335).

This framework continued to shape the reception of Hindu traditions into the twentieth century. The Vedanta Societies established by Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna, presented Hinduism in ways that resonated with American ideals of individual spirituality, religious universalism, and self-realization. Contemporary American publications often described Hinduism as a religion that encouraged individuals to discover their own paths toward moral, mental, and spiritual development (Narayanan 2012, p. 336). Later movements such as Transcendental Meditation similarly emphasized yoga and meditation as techniques of personal enlightenment and psychological transformation rather than as practices embedded in broader Hindu ritual, communal, and theological traditions.

Theravada Buddhism underwent a similar process of reinterpretation. Like Hinduism, it was introduced to many American audiences not primarily as a culturally embedded tradition but as a universal philosophy of individual spiritual transformation. At the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, the Sri Lankan Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala presented Theravada Buddhism in a universalist idiom that resonated with Protestant and Enlightenment assumptions about religion. He emphasized Buddhism’s compatibility with Christianity and modern science, highlighted self-reliance and individual moral cultivation, and argued that all religions ultimately pointed toward the same truth (Cadge 2005, p. 15).

The later institutional development of American convert Buddhism reinforced this individualized interpretation. Founded in the mid-1970s by American practitioners who had studied Buddhism in Asia, the Insight Meditation Society adopted meditation—especially *vipassanā*—as its central practice while retaining teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Wendy Cadge’s study of the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center shows that American convert Buddhism emphasized the “simplicity” and “straight-forwardness” of mindfulness while distancing itself from rituals, ceremonies, and devotional practices often dismissed as “cultural baggage” (Cadge 2005, pp. 28–29). Its leaders were drawn to Buddhism through personal spirituality, psychology, therapeutic culture, and interreligious exploration rather than through ethnically rooted Buddhist communities. Accordingly, the center understood itself less as a Buddhist temple than as a place for meditation, retreats, and spiritual practice. Although concepts such as *nibbāna* remained important, they were often interpreted in psychological or existential terms—as freedom

from suffering attainable in this life—rather than within the broader cosmological framework of karma and *samsāra* that has historically shaped Theravada Buddhist traditions in Asia.

The American reception of Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism shows that Asian religious traditions were not simply transplanted into the United States. They were selectively translated through an Anglo-Protestant religious grammar that privileged individual experience, inward spirituality, and voluntary practice over communal ritual, inherited tradition, and ethnocultural belonging. The conceptual language through which many Americans understood Asian religions had already been shaped by the epistemological assumptions of Anglo-Protestant modernity.

Yet the reception of Asian religions by white American intellectuals and spiritual seekers tells only part of the story. Asian immigrants themselves also reconstructed religious identity in the United States. As they negotiated race, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship, immigrant communities rearticulated inherited traditions in ways that both preserved and transformed them. Their religious lives therefore cannot be described either as simple continuity with the homeland or as straightforward assimilation into American culture. They are better understood as diasporic formations produced through the interaction between inherited Asian traditions and the classificatory pressures of American religious life.

Unlike the individualized Hindu spirituality popularized by American intellectuals and spiritual movements, the Hinduism practiced by Indian immigrants has often retained ritual, linguistic, and communal dimensions frequently dismissed in convert or elite spiritual contexts as “cultural baggage.” Scholarship on immigrant religion has shown that religious institutions often function as central sites for preserving and negotiating ethnic identity. Whereas earlier assimilation theories tended to view ethnic retention as an obstacle to Americanization, more recent scholarship argues that immigrant religious communities provide arenas through which non-European immigrants claim both ethnic distinctiveness and belonging within a multicultural United States (Warner and Wittner 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000).

Yet ethnic preservation should not be mistaken for simple reproduction of homeland traditions. Migration itself generates new forms of religious self-understanding. Drawing on Timothy L. Smith’s observation that migration to the United States is a “theologizing experience” (T. L. Smith 1978, p. 1178), Prema Kurien argues that Hindu identities are “reinvented” in diaspora through selective reinterpretation and institutional innovation. Her study of a Hindu community in California illustrates this process. Rather than privileging Vishnu or Shiva—the two major devotional orientations in much of India—the community organized a special *pūjā* devoted to Lord Ayyappa, whose worship provided a shared devotional focus that avoided sectarian tensions between Vaishnavites and Shaivites in the American setting (Kurien 1998, pp. 38–41). The congregation also used Malayalam to serve immigrants from Kerala while establishing Bala Vihar, a Sunday-school program that introduced second-generation children to Hindu traditions through classical epics taught in Tamil. These practices were not direct reproductions of religious life in India but adaptive responses to the challenges of maintaining religious continuity, ethnic solidarity, and intergenerational transmission in diaspora.

Kurien describes this emerging formation as “American Hinduism” or “Ecumenical Hinduism” (Kurien 1998, pp. 55, 62). Hindu immigrants became American not by abandoning religion or ethnicity, but by rearticulating both within a new social and institutional environment. In this sense, diaspora did more than preserve Hinduism; it transformed it. The pressure to define, organize, and publicly articulate Hindu identity reflects the influence of an Anglo-Protestant religious field that privileges bounded communities, voluntary membership, formal institutions, and explicit self-identification. American Hinduism

therefore exemplifies not the persistence of an unchanged tradition but the translation of Asian religious life into the religious grammar of American modernity.

Buddhism among Asian immigrants demonstrates a related but distinct pattern: the gradual differentiation of ethnic belonging from religious identity. Some Thai immigrants born into Theravada Buddhism continue to practice Buddhism as part of Thai cultural and ethnic life. In Cadge's study of a Thai Buddhist temple in Philadelphia, such members identify Buddhism primarily through Thai ethnicity, a form of belonging she describes as an "ascribed identity" (Cadge 2005, p. 157). Yet Cadge also shows that other members of the same community develop a Buddhist identity increasingly detached from ethnic inheritance. Life in a religiously pluralistic American environment requires them to interpret and articulate Buddhism more consciously. Encounters with other religious communities, and especially higher education, encourage some Thai Buddhists to engage more deliberately with Buddhist teachings and to adopt practices such as vegetarianism and meditation through reflective choice. While some retain their inherited identity, others increasingly understand Buddhism as something personally "achieved" through conscious commitment (Cadge 2005, pp. 159–62).

Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist immigrants practicing Mahayana Buddhism reveal a similar movement toward individualized and reflective religious identity. Di Di's study of Chinese Buddhist immigrants in California shows that many no longer rely exclusively on inherited temple structures or traditional religious authorities. Instead, they seek religious knowledge through external resources, including interreligious encounters and on-line lectures. These experiences encourage more critical engagement with Buddhist practices and authorities associated with mainland China. Di argues that this transformation reflects the influence of American religious culture, especially its emphasis on individual choice, voluntary participation, and the rejection of purely inherited religious identities among the educated middle class (Di 2018, pp. 461–62).

Carolyn Chen's research on Taiwanese Buddhist immigrants further illustrates this shift. In Taiwan, Buddhist practice often exists within a broader religious ecology intertwined with Daoism, Confucianism, ancestral rites, and local folk traditions. Taiwanese Buddhists commonly participate in ancestral veneration and visit temples dedicated to Daoist deities, producing a religious identity that is embedded, overlapping, and not always explicitly differentiated (Chen 2008, p. 83). Migration to the United States, however, places these practices in a context that encourages classification and articulation. Immigrants are increasingly asked to explain Buddhism as a distinct religious identity, separate from other traditions, and to define its beliefs and practices in explicit conceptual terms.

Many Taiwanese Buddhist immigrants therefore present Buddhism as individual, rational, and spiritually transformative, often emphasizing its compatibility with science and sometimes contrasting it with Christianity (Chen 2008, pp. 91–92). Unlike Christian churches, which often function as ethnic and social centers for immigrant communities, Buddhist temples are frequently understood as spaces for religious learning, meditation, and personal cultivation. Chen argues that Taiwanese Buddhists become American through religion not simply by preserving ethnic identity but by developing a new religious selfhood organized around individualism, voluntarism, and cognitive reflection—the very qualities associated with the Anglo-Protestant configuration of modern American religious consciousness (Chen 2008, p. 191).

Asian Protestant immigrants reveal yet another dimension of this process. Because Christianity already fits more comfortably within the dominant American grammar of religion, Protestant Asian immigrants do not need to translate their traditions in the same way as Hindu or Buddhist immigrants. Yet their religious identities are still shaped by the Protestant-derived distinction between religion and culture, the privileging of individual

faith over inherited practice, and the demand for clear religious boundaries. Among Chinese Protestants, Christianity often facilitates the reconstruction of ethnic identity; among Taiwanese Protestants, it may enable a more decisive break from ethnically embedded religious traditions. In both cases, Protestantism reorganizes the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and belonging.

As discussed in the previous section, modern Chinese understandings of religion had already been shaped by Western categories. Fenggang Yang observes that many contemporary Chinese regard Confucianism not as religion but as ethics or philosophy because it lacks the supernatural features conventionally associated with religion (Yang 1999, p. 133). This distinction continues to shape the lives of Chinese Protestant immigrants. In Yang's account, Chinese identity remains closely associated with Confucian values, Mandarin language, and traditional festivals. Chinese Protestant congregations may therefore affirm values such as *ren* or benevolence, filial piety, social harmony, and even concepts such as yin and yang because these are interpreted as ethical or cultural resources compatible with Christianity rather than as religious practices (Yang 1999, p. 44).

Practices identified as religious, however, are treated differently. Ancestor veneration, historically integral to Confucian family life, is often rejected as idolatry because it conflicts with Protestant understandings of proper worship. Similar reinterpretations occur in celebrations of Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival. Historically linked to agricultural cycles and family ritual, these festivals often include offerings to ancestors and local deities, the burning of incense and paper money, and rites intended to secure the well-being of the living and the dead (Yang 1999, p. 144). Many Chinese immigrants continue to celebrate these festivals as cultural heritage, but Protestant converts frequently reject or modify ritual elements regarded as "superstitious" or "idolatrous." The result is not the preservation of an unchanged Chinese identity but its reconstruction through an Anglo-Protestant grammar that separates acceptable culture from unacceptable religion.

Chen argues that Taiwanese Protestant immigrants reveal an even more pronounced transformation. Rather than preserving ethnicity through Christianity, Protestant conversion often enables Taiwanese immigrants to become "truly religious" by loosening the ties between religious identity and inherited ethnic culture while cultivating self-reliance, voluntarism, and personal faith (Chen 2008, pp. 73–75). As with Taiwanese Buddhists, becoming American through religion requires immigrants to articulate a clearly bounded religious identity. For Protestant converts, however, this process often involves distancing themselves from practices now regarded as "superstitious" or "idolatrous."

Taiwanese religious culture has long been characterized by the overlap of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, ancestral rites, and local folk practice. Participation in ancestor veneration and other family rituals often expresses filial obligation rather than exclusive commitment to a single religious tradition. Conversion to Protestant Christianity therefore creates profound tensions within immigrant families because it can require converts to withdraw from practices that relatives regard as essential expressions of familial responsibility (Chen 2008, p. 70). For many Taiwanese families, conversion represents not merely a change of affiliation but a rejection of a broader moral and cultural order.

Contrary to scholarship that treats immigrant churches primarily as ethnic enclaves, Chen argues that Taiwanese Protestant churches function as transformative socioreligious communities rather than mere preservers of ethnicity (Chen 2008, p. 47). Although churches provide social resources such as friendship networks, business connections, and potential spouses, their central purpose is to cultivate a new Christian identity organized around a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Protestant congregations thus become alternative families that may replace, rather than simply reproduce, homeland kinship structures. Conversion entails the reconstruction of the self through an Anglo-Protestant reli-

gious grammar that privileges individual commitment, voluntary association, and explicit belief over inherited religious and familial obligations.

Taken together, these cases show that Asian immigrant religions were neither preserved unchanged nor simply assimilated into American society. They were reconstructed through a religious field that encouraged immigrants to distinguish religion from culture, articulate explicit religious identities, and organize communal life through voluntary institutions. Hindu immigrants often preserved ethnicity by reconfiguring it within new religious institutions. Buddhist immigrants frequently learned to distinguish inherited ethnic belonging from consciously chosen religious identity. Protestant immigrants, already situated within a Christian framework, nevertheless reconstructed Asian cultural practices by separating acceptable culture from unacceptable religion. Despite these different trajectories, each case demonstrates that becoming American involved more than social or political incorporation. It required learning to inhabit a distinctly American understanding of religion.

The religious identities of Asian immigrants therefore emerged through the continual negotiation between inherited Asian traditions, postcolonial histories of classification, and the Anglo-Protestant grammar of modern American religious life. This process produced new forms of belonging, but it also imposed new boundaries. The same pluralist field that enabled Hindu, Buddhist, and Protestant Asian immigrants to claim recognition also required them to translate themselves into recognizable religious, ethnic, and racial forms. Asian immigrant religion thus reveals both the promise and the disciplinary underside of American pluralism: it creates space for minority traditions, but only by making them legible through inherited structures of classification.

5. Becoming American: Racialization and Ethnicization Through Religion in America

Although the meaning of “American” has changed over time, it has been repeatedly negotiated within a social field shaped by the enduring authority of Anglo-Protestant categories of religion, morality, citizenship, and personhood. As the previous sections argued, the historical development of American Christianity generated a distinctive epistemological grammar. Its emancipatory soteriology relocated religious authority from inherited ecclesiastical institutions to the individual’s direct engagement with Scripture, conscience, and religious experience (Noll 1992; Hatch 1989; Holifield 2003). Yet this emancipatory logic was paradoxical. Movements that challenged established religious authority often institutionalized their own claims to truth, producing new communities, new orthodoxies, and new forms of exclusion. In the relatively deregulated religious environment of the United States, this cycle of dissent, institutionalization, and fragmentation was intensified by democratic politics, voluntary association, and religious competition.

The significance of this paradox extended beyond Protestant theology. As Anglo-Protestant assumptions became embedded in the political, cultural, and moral institutions of the United States, they shaped the categories through which religion, belonging, citizenship, and social difference were understood. Jonathan Z. Smith’s conception of religion as a “locative power” is particularly useful here. Religion does not merely organize belief; it constructs symbolic maps that establish centers and margins, define legitimate identities, and position others beyond those boundaries (J. Z. Smith 1978, pp. 291–95). Protestant dissenters who fled European religious establishments became settlers who created new religious and political orders in North America. Consequently, the same emancipatory logic that challenged inherited ecclesiastical authority in Europe also legitimated new forms of colonial settlement, social ordering, and exclusion in America. The history of American religion therefore reveals not a linear movement from oppression to freedom but a recurring

pattern in which projects of religious liberation also produced new religious, social, and political boundaries.

This logic did not operate in the same way for later racial and ethnic minorities as it had for earlier Protestant dissenters. Successive Protestant movements could challenge established authorities and, through the expanding religious marketplace of the nineteenth century, eventually become new centers of religious and cultural influence (Finke 1997). Later racial and ethnic minorities, by contrast, were incorporated into an American social order whose dominant terms had already been structured by Anglo-Protestant assumptions about civilization, morality, religion, and individual subjectivity. European Catholics and Jews gained recognition as “American religions” only through complex negotiations with Protestant definitions of legitimate religion and citizenship (McGreevy 2003; Goldscheider 2009; Eisen 2009). Indigenous peoples and African Americans, meanwhile, encountered Christianity as both an instrument of domination and a resource for resistance. For Indigenous communities, Christianization was inseparable from territorial expansion, cultural transformation, and settler colonialism (Martin 1997; Richter 2001; Wheeler 2008). African American Christians appropriated Protestant forms to articulate visions of spiritual and social empowerment while continuing to confront enduring structures of racial exclusion (Raboteau 2004; Higginbotham 1993).

For underrepresented populations with non-Protestant or non-European backgrounds, becoming American therefore involved more than legal incorporation or cultural adaptation. It required negotiating a social order organized through racial, cultural, and religious classifications rooted in the intertwined histories of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism (Orsi 1992; Maffly-Kipp 1997; C. J. Kim 1999; Lee and Kye 2016). Religion played a central role in this process. It provided minority communities with symbolic resources through which they interpreted their place within American society, forged collective identities, preserved cultural memory, and pursued social mobility. Yet these negotiations rarely dissolved hierarchy. As minority communities adopted, reworked, or contested dominant categories of race, ethnicity, and religion in their pursuit of legitimacy and belonging, they often reproduced new forms of differentiation within and among themselves (Orsi 1992; Serrao 2022; Kurien 2025).

Robert Orsi’s studies of Italian Catholic immigrants illustrate this paradox. Their large-scale migration to the United States coincided with the industrial expansion of the postbellum era, when employers sought inexpensive immigrant labor after the abolition of slavery (Maffly-Kipp 1997, pp. 143–44; Patterson 2000). Upon arrival, Southern Italian Catholics were often regarded by the white Protestant majority as racially suspect because of their darker complexion, Catholic faith, and lower socioeconomic status. In Mississippi, they were described as “another unassimilable race” (Orsi 1992, pp. 313–14). Branded as “dangerous immigrants” by the media and public, many entered occupations previously associated with African Americans, including barbering, restaurant service, brickmaking, and garbage collection. At the same time, a unified “Italian American” identity emerged less from a shared premigratory national consciousness than from the experience of racialization in the United States (Sarna 1978). Drawing on Paul Ricoeur, Orsi describes this process as a “self-constitutive strategy of alterity,” through which Italian Americans increasingly defined themselves by distinguishing themselves from African Americans (Orsi 1992, pp. 321, 337–38). Religious life was central to this process. Orsi’s study of devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Harlem shows how Catholic festivals fostered solidarity and collective identity while also reinforcing racial and social boundaries (Orsi 1985). The same religious practices that unified Italian Americans also participated in the production of difference by excluding those perceived as darker-skinned, culturally inferior, or economically undesirable.

The experiences of Jewish and Muslim immigrants further suggest that this pattern was not limited to Catholics, even though each group entered the United States through distinct historical conditions. Jewish immigrants, particularly those arriving from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, negotiated an American religious field in which Judaism was increasingly translated into congregational, denominational, educational, and civic forms legible within a Protestant-inflected model of religion (Sarna 2004; Moore 1981; Eisen 2009). Synagogues, schools, benevolent associations, and communal organizations helped Jewish immigrants preserve collective identity while also presenting Judaism as a respectable American religion. Yet this process also generated internal distinctions among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, secular, and ethnically identified Jews, revealing how incorporation into American pluralism could strengthen communal visibility while fragmenting religious and ethnic authority.

Muslim immigrants have faced a related but differently racialized process. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Muslim communities have had to negotiate not only Protestant-derived expectations of religion as voluntary belief, textual tradition, and institutional representation, but also racialization through Orientalism, immigration restriction, and post-9/11 suspicion (Haddad 2004; Leonard 2003; E. E. Curtis 2009). Mosques, schools, advocacy organizations, and Muslim civic institutions have provided resources for community formation and public recognition, yet they have also been pressured to represent Islam as peaceful, rational, moderate, and compatible with American citizenship. These comparisons clarify that Asian immigrants were not alone in having to translate non-Protestant traditions into an American grammar of legitimate religion. What distinguishes many Asian religious immigrants, however, is that this American process of translation occurred after earlier colonial, missionary, and Orientalist classifications had already reshaped Asian religious identities before migration.

Asian Americans entered this broader pattern of non-Protestant incorporation, but their experience was shaped by a distinct convergence of racial exclusion, Orientalist representation, and transpacific colonial histories. Like other racial minorities, Asian immigrants negotiated their place within a racial order structured by the opposition between white and Black America. At the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. media, journalists, and business leaders sometimes positioned Asian immigrants as racially or culturally “superior” to African Americans as part of a strategy of racial “valorization.” Yet this apparent elevation did not produce full inclusion. Rather, Asian immigrants were simultaneously marked as “immutable” and “unassimilable” foreigners, excluded from white American society even when praised for qualities allegedly lacking in other racialized groups (C. J. Kim 1999, p. 107).

After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, this logic persisted through the emergence of the “model minority” discourse. First popularized in 1966 and initially based on Japanese American experiences, the model minority narrative attributed Asian Americans’ apparent success to cultural values such as diligence, family solidarity, respect for education, and political quietism (C. J. Kim 1999, pp. 118, 121). At the same time, it implicitly contrasted Asian Americans with African Americans, portraying the former as disciplined and self-reliant while pathologizing Black political activism and poverty as signs of cultural deficiency. In doing so, the model minority discourse reinforced anti-Black racial hierarchies while racializing East Asian immigrants as “Confucian Americans,” reducing diverse histories, religions, and social locations to an essentialized cultural identity (C. J. Kim 1999, p. 121).

Ethnic identities that emerged in response to racialization, hostility, and discrimination in the United States have therefore been both empowering and constraining. They provide solidarity, belonging, and cultural continuity, yet they also depend on boundaries that

may produce new forms of exclusion. Among Asian religious immigrants, efforts to construct and preserve ethnic identity have often generated tensions not only between ethnic communities and the wider society but also among people who ostensibly share the same ethnic background. Religion is central to this process because it serves as both a resource for ethnic preservation and a site where competing visions of authenticity, authority, and belonging are negotiated.

Fenggang Yang's study of a Chinese immigrant church in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area illustrates this dynamic. Established by first-generation Chinese immigrants, the church sought to preserve a unified ethnic identity by holding worship services in Mandarin with simultaneous Cantonese translation and, later, English translation for second-generation Chinese Americans and non-Chinese attendees (Yang 1999). Tensions emerged when the white American pastor and several American-born Chinese members proposed establishing a separate English-language worship service. Although the proposal was initially rejected, the controversy intensified through accusations concerning the pastor's financial management and personal relationships within the congregation. Eventually, the pastor and members of the English ministry left to establish a separate church. Only after more than two decades did the original congregation approve an independent English-language service for second-generation Chinese Americans and non-Chinese members. In this case, the ethnic church provided first-generation immigrants with community and cultural continuity, but its very effort to preserve ethnic unity marginalized those whose linguistic, generational, or cultural identities did not fit the congregation's dominant model.

The marginalization of second-generation Asian Americans within predominantly ethnic Christian congregations has been widely documented (Cha 2001; Chen and Jeung 2012; S. Kim 2010; Kurien 2017). Responding to feelings of exclusion from their parents' churches, many American-born Asian Christians have developed religious identities that further complicate Asian American Christianity. Influenced by white evangelical Christianity, with its emphasis on biblical authority, contemporary worship, and a personal relationship with Christ, many second-generation Asian Americans distinguish what they regard as "true Christian faith" from the ethnically oriented practices of the first generation. Some establish independent congregations that combine elements of their parents' ethnic traditions with white evangelical forms (S. Kim 2010), while others join pan-Asian or multiracial churches (Jeung 2004; R. Y. Kim 2006). Among South Asian Christians, some leave ethnic churches altogether, whereas others seek to incorporate evangelical practices into their parents' congregations (Kurien 2017). In each case, racialization and ethnicization remain central to Asian American religious life. Rather than resolving these tensions, successive generations often generate new religious ideals that differentiate communities internally and reshape their relationship to broader American society.

Religion, then, does not simply reinforce ethnic homogeneity, even within the same ethnic and generational communities. It may also work against ethnic consolidation by generating competing claims to religious authenticity that redefine the meaning of ethnicity itself. As discussed in the previous section, ethnicity has long been a site of contestation among Taiwanese Christian and Buddhist immigrants. Although these communities distinguish themselves from one another by asserting the authenticity of their respective religious traditions, both are critical of the religious practices they associate with Taiwan.

For Taiwanese Christian immigrants, conversion is often narrated through the revolutionary image of Jesus Christ, who challenged what they regard as the "false" religious traditions of Judaism, especially ancestral practices and idolatry under Roman rule. Social and familial opposition therefore becomes an important sign of Christian faithfulness. This narrative enables converts to reinterpret criticism from family members and relatives in Tai-

wan as confirmation of their commitment to God's truth, even when conversion requires distancing themselves from familial obligations associated with Taiwanese Confucian legacies. In doing so, they understand themselves as becoming not only "true Christians" but also "true Americans" (Chen 2008, p. 75).

Taiwanese Buddhist immigrants similarly distinguish themselves from Buddhists who, in their view, "blindly follow" syncretic and "superstitious" practices or pursue worldly blessings without understanding the Buddha's authentic teachings. Instead, they emphasize a form of Buddhism centered on individual cultivation, rational understanding, and personal responsibility—values they regard as compatible with the individualistic ethos of American society (Chen 2008, pp. 105–6). In both Christian and Buddhist cases, becoming American involves more than assimilation into a shared ethnic community. It also involves reinterpreting religion through ideals of authenticity, individual agency, rationality, and moral self-cultivation that resonate with dominant American religious and cultural norms.

Indian American religious communities further demonstrate how religion can fragment what might otherwise appear to be a shared ethnic identity. This is especially evident in political organization. Although Hindu Americans constitute the largest religious group among Indian Americans, they have established a wide range of organizations reflecting divergent religious, ideological, caste, and national commitments. Some organizations, founded primarily by first-generation, economically successful businessmen, seek to influence U.S. foreign policy in ways that advance India's national interests (Kurien 2025, pp. 146–47). Others, particularly those aligned with Hindutva, define Indian identity primarily through Hinduism and often marginalize religious minorities and lower-caste Indians (Kurien 2025, p. 191). Some rearticulate caste-based and religious hierarchies through the language of religious freedom and minority rights within American pluralism, while others invoke the memory of September 11 to portray Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Iran as threats to the national interests of both the United States and India.

Dalit Indian Americans represent one of the principal counterforces to Hindu nationalist organizations. Many identify as Ambedkarites in honor of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whose activism transformed the political and social status of historically oppressed castes in India. Dalit Indian Americans seek to expose and challenge continuing caste discrimination in both India and the United States by appealing to transnational discourses of equality, human rights, and social justice (Kurien 2025, pp. 22, 191). Their activism demonstrates that Indian American religious identity cannot be reduced to Hindu identity and that the language of minority rights within American pluralism can be used both to reinforce and to contest inherited hierarchies.

Religious divisions also shape the political engagement of other Indian American communities. Indian Muslims often remain in tension with Hindu nationalist organizations because of conflicts rooted in the histories of Punjab, Kashmir, and other contested regions of South Asia. At the same time, they frequently collaborate with broader Muslim communities in the United States to combat Islamophobia and religious discrimination (Kurien 2025, p. 191). Sikh Indian Americans have established political organizations to improve public understanding of Sikhism and to challenge its misrepresentation in schools, textbooks, and the media. Indian Christian immigrants, by contrast, often do not perceive themselves primarily as a religious minority within the predominantly Christian United States. Many instead direct their advocacy toward improving the conditions of Christian minority communities in India (Kurien 2025, p. 191). These examples show that religion does not simply reinforce a shared Indian ethnic identity. It differentiates that identity by producing distinct political affiliations, transnational commitments, and competing understandings of what it means to be Indian in the United States.

The experience of becoming American for recent Asian religious immigrants is therefore far from a value-neutral process in which diverse racial, ethnic, and religious traditions are harmoniously incorporated into an expanding pluralistic society. Rather, it is an ongoing negotiation with a social and religious order historically shaped by Anglo-Protestant modernity. The Anglo-Protestant epistemological grammar that many Asian immigrants had already encountered through colonial and postcolonial histories is neither abandoned nor simply imposed upon their arrival in the United States. It is further reinterpreted, contested, and reproduced as they seek recognition within the American religious field.

Religion plays a paradoxical role in this process. As Smith's notion of religion as a "locative power" suggests, religion provides symbolic resources through which Asian immigrants construct communities, preserve cultural continuity, and articulate new ethnic identities in an unfamiliar society. Yet these same processes of identity formation also operate through what Orsi calls a "self-constitutive strategy of alterity," generating new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the U.S. context. As the cases examined in this section demonstrate, religious communities that empower ethnic solidarity may simultaneously marginalize later generations, non-ethnic members, lower-caste groups, religious minorities, or those who embrace alternative understandings of religious authenticity. Migration therefore does not simply preserve ethnic identity; it continually reconstructs and fragments it through competing religious ideals.

The American religious marketplace offers Asian religious immigrants opportunities for institutional development, religious freedom, and community formation, but it does not erase the unequal historical conditions under which that marketplace was constituted. Unlike earlier Protestant dissenters who repeatedly challenged established authorities and eventually reshaped the American religious center, Asian religious immigrants continue to negotiate an order whose dominant epistemological grammar remains indebted to Anglo-Protestant modernity. Consequently, religionization, racialization, and ethnicization remain ongoing and mutually constitutive processes in the making of Asian American religious life. Rather than culminating in a stable or unified American identity, becoming American is better understood as a continual process of differentiation, negotiation, and reconstruction through which new forms of belonging are created alongside new forms of fragmentation and exclusion.

6. Conclusions

While the emancipatory logic of Anglo-Protestant modernity enabled successive Protestant movements to challenge established authorities, form voluntary associations, and generate new religious centers within the American religious marketplace, later racial and ethnic minorities entered a field whose terms of legitimate religion, citizenship, and belonging had already been shaped by Anglo-Protestant assumptions. For Asian immigrants, this encounter was further complicated by transpacific histories of colonialism, missionary activity, and Orientalist classification. Many Asian religious traditions had already been translated, reorganized, or rendered legible through Christian and colonial categories before migration. Arrival in the United States therefore did not mark a first encounter with Protestant-inflected modernity but a second moment of translation in which inherited classifications were reworked through American racial, ethnic, and religious norms.

This article therefore contributes to scholarship in sociology and American religious history by incorporating postcolonial and decolonial perspectives into the study of Asian immigrant religions. Existing studies have often emphasized the empowering aspects of immigrant religion, showing how religious communities provide social capital, cultural continuity, moral authority, civic visibility, and resources for resisting racial marginalization. While these insights remain indispensable, they do not fully provide us with a theo-

retical and analytical lens to capture the disempowering effects of the Protestant-centered framework through which religion becomes recognizable in the American public sphere. For Asian religious immigrants, agency is therefore deeply ambivalent. Their religious institutions and identities may enable belonging and recognition, but they also emerge within a pluralist order that requires minority traditions to conform to inherited norms of textuality, voluntary affiliation, institutional coherence, moral respectability, and civic legibility. What appears as empowerment may also involve discipline, translation, and the narrowing of religious possibilities. By placing Asian immigrant religion in conversation with postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, this article shows that American religious pluralism is not merely a neutral expansion of diversity, but a colonial and imperial formation that organizes difference even as it claims to include it.

The contribution of this article, then, is not simply to add Asian immigrant communities to existing accounts of American religious pluralism. It is to use their experiences to reconsider the conditions under which pluralism itself operates. American religious pluralism does not merely include preexisting differences; it organizes, disciplines, and fragments difference through historically inherited norms of recognition. To be recognized as a religion in the American public sphere, minority traditions are often pressed to present themselves as bounded, coherent, voluntary, textual, ethical, and institutionally representative. These norms can create opportunities for visibility, legal protection, civic participation, and communal empowerment. But they also produce exclusions by privileging certain leaders, institutions, practices, and identities over others.

Viewed from this perspective, American religious pluralism is not simply the progressive expansion of religious diversity or freedom. It is a historical formation whose boundaries, assumptions, and possibilities have been shaped by Anglo-Protestant modernity, racial hierarchy, immigration restriction, and colonial knowledge. The same religious logic that expanded individual freedom and voluntary religious association within earlier American Protestantism also established the normative categories through which later racial and ethnic minorities have been recognized, accommodated, or marginalized. Becoming American therefore entails more than adapting to a pluralistic society. It involves ongoing processes of religionization, racialization, and ethnicization through which religious identities, ethnic communities, and the boundaries of American religion are continually negotiated and transformed.

Asian immigrant religions thus reveal both the promise and the disciplinary underside of American pluralism. They show how minority communities create belonging within inherited structures of recognition but also how those structures generate new forms of alterity, fragmentation, and exclusion. The history of Asian immigrant religions therefore broadens our understanding of immigrant incorporation and agency while also challenging celebratory narratives of American religious pluralism. It invites us to reconsider pluralism not only as an achievement of diversity and freedom but also as a historically produced regime through which difference is made visible, organized, and governed.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author sincerely thanks the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and insightful suggestions, and editors for handling the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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