

Religious Diversity in America:
The Emergence of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Others

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Introduction

As the Reverend J. Gordon Melton - the country's champion church counter, once remarked, American society has the "most diversely religious people on earth." Our tradition of religious pluralism goes deeply into our colonial history. Edwin S. Gaustad noted that even in the early 17th century one found "Huguenots in Charleston, Anglicans in Tidewater Virginia, Catholics in St. Mary's City, Swedish Lutherans along the Delaware, Quakers and Presbyterians further up the river, Dutch Reform in Manhattan, Puritans in New England, Baptists, and Heaven-knows-what-else in Rhode Island." Early in the history of the American republic, the French aristocrat Talleyrand is reported to have derisively observed that the United States had 32 religions, but only one sauce (Smith, 1990).

Since then America has continued to both import foreign and spawn indigenous religions. In recent decades religious diversity has surged forward as the 1965 change in immigrant laws increased the flow of adherents from all the world's faiths and new religions continually formed (Numrich, 2000 and 2001; Sherkat, 1999 and 2001; Smith, 1991; Warner 1998a and 1998b).

However, the magnitude and nature of America's religious diversity should not be exaggerated. It has become common for the recent and projected growth of alternative religions and their current prominence to be described as revolutionary and as having transformed American society. Eck (2001) writes of "a new multireligious America" in which "the religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past thirty years." The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches (Linder, 1998) in 1998 switched their basis for estimating non-Judeo-Christian religions and showed one-year gains of 6 to 72 fold for Muslims, Hindus, New Religionists, and Sikhs and described these totally artifactual gains as "a vivid example of that accelerating rate of change" in America's religious profile. The Muslim population is commonly overestimated by a factor of 3-4 and there are assertions that Muslims outnumber the third largest denomination in the US - Methodists (Smith, 2001). Impressive as the actual changes in non-traditional religions have been, they can not match these and many related claims about the growth and size of these religions.¹

This article studies the changing religious composition of America over the last generation. Special attention is given to non-Judeo-Christian religions that until recently had not been a prominent part of America's religious heritage. In particular, the position of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism is examined.

Trends

Non-Judeo-Christian religions make up a small, but growing, share of America's religious mosaic. In 1973-1980 the General Social Surveys (GSS) indicated that they accounted for 0.8% of the adult population. This grew to 1.3% in 1981-1990 and 2.6% in 1990-2000.² Similarly, the American Religious Identity Surveys (ARIS)

put the non-Judeo-Christian religions at 1.5% in 1990 and 2.4% in 2001 (Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001).³

Three faiths, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, account for about half of those following other religions. According the GSSs, they totaled 0.4% in 1973-1980, 0.7% in 1981-1990, and 1.1% in 1991-2000. The ARIS found that they were 0.7% in 1990 and 1.4% in 2001. Likewise, Barna Research placed their share at about 1% in 2001 (Barna, 2001).

The remaining non-traditional religions consists of a wide mix of faiths, all so small that detailed delineation is not practical. On the GSSs in 1991-2000 the leading other alternative religions were non-/inter-denominational believers with 0.45% and other Eastern religions (e.g. Jainism, Sikhism, and Taoism), Native American religions, pagans and witches/Wiccans, and those with "personal" religions - all about 0.1%. The 2001 ARIS lists the top remaining faiths as pagan, Wiccan, Spiritualist, and Native American.

Of the three major non-Judeo-Christian faiths, the GSS finds Muslims growing from 0.2% in 1973-1980 to 0.3% in 1981-1990, to 0.45% in 1991-2000 (Table 1). Unadjusted figures from the ARIS place Muslims at 0.3% in 1990 and 0.5% in 2001. Among the two student samples, the high school seniors in Monitoring the Future (MTF) show no clear trend during the 1990s, but first-year college students in American Freshmen (AF) do indicate a nine-fold rise from 0.1% in the late 1960s to 0.9% in 2000.⁴

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The GSS estimates that Buddhists increased from 0.1% of the adult population in 1973-1980 to 0.3% in 1981-1990 to 0.4% in 1991-2000 (Table 2). The ARIS finds Buddhists growing from 0.2% in 1990 to 0.5% in 2001. AF finds that Buddhists grew from 0.2% of first-year college students in 1982 to 1.0% in 2000.⁵ On MTF Buddhists also appear to make up a growing share of high school seniors, but this trend is somewhat obscured by the dropping of California from the coverage starting in 1997.⁶

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

For Hindus the GSS indicates a rise from 0.1% of adults in 1973-1980 to 0.1% in 1981-1990 to 0.2% in 1991-2000 (Table 3). The ARIS shows a gain from 0.1% in 1990 to 0.4% in 2001.⁷

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Current Size of Major Non-Judeo-Christian Religions

Smith (2001) finds that the best estimate of the contemporary Muslim population with adjustments for non-English speakers is about 0.67%. This comes to about 1.4 million adults or a total population of about 1.9 million.⁸

There is no consensus on the number of Buddhists in America. As Table 4 indicates, recent estimates range from under 500,000 to over 5,000,000. Estimates are about equally common from a half-million to a million all the way up to 4,000,000+. The average estimate is about 2.3 million.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Contemporary estimates of the Buddhist share of the adult

population from surveys range from 0.2-0.6% (Table 5). Estimates of the total population from the GSS fall in the same range, 0.2-0.6%.⁹ However, the samples of high-school seniors and first-year college students both find a higher proportion Buddhist, 1.0%. This may reflect the fact that immigrant populations tend to be younger than the general population. It could also indicate that Buddhism is more popular among the young than among adults of all ages, but that appears unlikely since the parents of first-year college students are more Buddhist than the students themselves. Taking the range of estimates of 0.5-1.0%, would mean that Buddhists would account for 1.0-2.1 million adults and 1.4-2.8 million in the total population. Given that several general population surveys point towards the lower end of this range and only the student samples towards the higher end, it is likely that the total number of Buddhists is closer to 1.4 million than 2.8 million.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

In contrast to the Buddhist figures, there is great consensus that the Hindu population is a little over 1,000,000 (Table 4). No estimates are below 500,000 or above 2 million and 74% are in the 1-1.5 million range.

Surveys estimate the Hindu adult population at between 0.1% and 0.4% (Table 5). The GSS estimates of the Hindu share of the total population are between 0.2-0.3%. (No figures are available from either Monitoring the Future or American Freshmen studies.) At 0.3-0.4% Hindus would make up from 627,000 to 837,000 adults and 844,000-1,126,000 in the total population.

The 2000 Census reports 1,718,778 identifying their race as Asian Indian. Two estimates of the Hindu share among immigrants from India are 45% and 65% (Hofrenning and Chiswick, 1999 and Kurien, 2001). Using these rates would put the number of Asian Indian Hindus in the total population between 773,000 and 1,117,000. It is generally believed that the vast majority of Hindus in the US are immigrants from India (rather than converts or immigrants from other countries - see footnote 6), but no numerical estimates appear available.¹⁰ Unless the number of non-Asian Indian Hindus are much greater than commonly assumed, the survey estimates of 0.8-1.1 million are very consistent with the Census-adjusted figures of 0.8-1.1 million.

Discussion

Non-Judeo-Christian faiths are increasing their religious market share. From the 1970s to the present the proportion in these religions grew about 3-4 fold. But even given their rapid rate of growth, their absolute size remains small. The 1998-2000 GSSs find that only 2.7% of adults are followers of non-traditional religions (even counting those with mixed Christian/non-Judeo-Christian faiths, the non-/inter-denominational, and those with "personal" religions). Likewise, the 2001 ARIS puts other religions at 2.1%.

This indicates that non-Judeo-Christian religions are much smaller than frequently cited high-end estimates and have hardly transformed the religious landscape as much as often portrayed.

There are several reasons why the size and prominence of these religions have sometimes been exaggerated. First, as Warner (1998a) has noted, these faiths are not only "increasingly numerous," but also are "increasingly visible."¹¹ New temples, celebrity-converts to Buddhism, turbaned Sikhs, and visits by the Dalai Lama create an impression of prominence beyond the actual size of these groups.

Second, elements of the emerging religions have attracted the interest of many more Americans than have been won over as genuine adherents. Tweed (1999), for example, describes "night-stand Buddhists" who adopt some trappings of the this faith without becoming adherents or even abandoning their existing faith. Similarly, as Ankerberg and Weldon (1991) have noted about Hinduism:

In all its forms, Hinduism has influenced tens of million of people in America. By itself Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, a form of advaita Vedanta Hinduism, has over three million graduates....The New Age movement, with a collective following in the millions, has been powerfully influenced by Hinduism....In addition, literally tens of millions of Americans have taken up Hindu practices, such as yoga, meditation, developing altered states of consciousness, seeking Hindu "enlightenment," and various other occultic practices.

America has always been a religiously diverse nation and recent changes in immigration patterns as well as indigenous religious developments have increased that diversity. While Americans still overwhelmingly adhere to their traditional faiths, the United States is home to all of the world's religions and non-Judeo-Christian religions make up a small, but growing, share of America's religious mosaic.

1. Nor is the rise in adherents of alternative religions the largest religious change occurring in America. Changes that are as important and larger in size include the increase in those without any religious affiliation (Hout and Fischer, 2001) and the rising proportion of Protestants who are Fundamentalists (Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, 2001).
2. On the GSSs see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001. Also see Sherkat, 1999 for similar figures.
3. The GSS and ARIS differ in various ways in what constitutes alternative religions. For example, ARIS includes Unitarian/Universalist and Spiritualist under this group, but puts all non-denominational in the Christian category. The GSS counts the Unitarians/Universalists and Spiritualists as Protestants and puts those who said non/inter-denominational, but who did not identify themselves as Catholic, Protestant, or Christian, in the alternative category.
4. The AF figures for 2000 are suspect however since they show such a large, one-year increase since 1999. On Muslims in America see Smith, 2001.
5. The increase among students from 1998-2000 and for parents for 1999-2000 is rather steep and probably exaggerates the rate of short-term change.
6. On Buddhists in America see Baumann, 1997; Coleman, 2001; Eck, 2001; Miller, 1995; Numrich, 2000; Prebish and Tanka, 1998; and Warner and Wittner, 1998.

7. On Hindus in America see Ankerberg and Weldon, 1991; Eck, 2001; Kurien, 2001; Miller, 1995; Rajagopal, 2000; and Warner and Witttner, 1998.
8. Smith (2001) discusses estimates of the Muslim population, so they are not covered in detail in this report.
9. GSS estimates for the total population assigns respondent's religion to all household members.
10. Other countries with majority or near majority Hindu populations are relatively small (Ash, 1997 and Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, 2001), most contribute a small number of immigrants to the US (INS, 1999), and their immigrants are not separately distinguished on the Census race item. For 1987-1997 immigrants from Indian constituted 99.2% of all immigrants from majority Hindu countries and 76.5% of all immigrants from countries that were a third or more Hindu (INS, 1999).
11. On the "visibility" factor see also Eck, 2001, p. 1.

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Table 1

Trends in Muslim Religious Identity

Monitoring the Future:
High School Seniors

1991	0.5%
1992	0.5
1993	0.8
1994	0.6
1995	0.4
1996	0.8
1997*	0.7
1998*	0.7
1999*	0.6
2000*	0.5

*California omitted starting in 1997

American Freshmen:

	Students	Mothers	Fathers
1969	0.1	---	---
1970	0.1	0.1	---
1973	0.1	---	---
1974	0.2	0.1	0.2
1975	0.2	0.1	0.2
1976	0.2	0.2	0.2
1977	0.2	0.2	0.2
1978	0.2	0.2	0.2
1984	0.2	0.2	0.2
1985	0.2	0.2	0.2
1986	---	---	---
1987	0.2	0.2	0.3
1988	0.3	0.3	0.4
1989	0.4	0.4	0.5
1990	0.3	0.3	0.4
1991	0.3	0.3	0.4
1992	0.4	0.4	0.5
1993	0.5	0.5	0.6
1994	0.4	0.4	0.5
1995	0.5	0.4	0.5
1996	0.5	0.5	0.7
1997	0.6	0.6	0.8
1998	0.5	0.5	0.6
1999	0.6	0.6	0.8
2000	0.9	0.9	1.2

Table 1 (continued)

General Social Surveys

1973-1980	0.2%
1981-1990	0.3
1991-2000	0.45

American Religious Identity Survey

1990	0.3
2001	0.5

Source: ISR, 1991-2000; Sax, et al., 2001; Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001

Table 2

Trends in Buddhist Religious Identity

Monitoring the Future:
High School Seniors

1991	0.9%
1992	0.9
1993	1.1
1994	0.9
1995	1.2
1996	1.3
1997*	0.9
1998*	1.0
1999*	0.7
2000*	1.0

*California omitted starting in 1997

American Freshmen:

	Students	Mothers	Fathers
1984	0.2	0.3	0.3
1985	0.3	0.4	0.4
1986	---	---	---
1987	0.4	0.5	0.5
1988	0.4	0.6	0.5
1989	0.3	0.5	0.5
1990	0.4	0.6	0.5
1991	0.3	0.6	0.6
1992	0.4	0.7	0.6
1993	0.5	0.8	0.8
1994	0.5	0.9	0.8
1995	0.7	1.0	1.0
1996	0.6	1.0	1.0
1997	0.7	1.1	1.0
1998	0.6	0.9	0.8
1999	0.8	1.1	1.1
2000	1.0	1.5	1.5

American Religious Identification Survey

1990	0.2
2001	0.5

General Social Surveys

1973-1980	0.1
1981-1990	0.3
1991-2000	0.4

Table 2 (continued)

Source: Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001; Sax, et al., 2001; ISR, 1991-2000

Table 3

Trends in Hindu Religious Identification

General Social Survey

1973-1980	0.1
1981-1990	0.1
1991-2000	0.2

American Religious Identity Survey

1990	0.1
2001	0.4

Source: Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993;
Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001

Table 4

Recent Estimates of the Buddhist and Hindu Population in the US

Population	Buddhist	Hindu
Less than 500,000	1	0
500,000-999,999	3	5
1,000,000-1,499,999	3	17
1,500,000-1,999,999	4	1
2,000,000-2,999,999	4	0
3,000,000-3,999,999	5	0
4,000,000-4,999,999	1	0
5,000,000+	2	0
	23	23
Average	2,300,000	1,110,000

Source: "95%...", 2001; Ash, 1997; Robinson, 2001a and 2001b, "United States...", 2000; "Hinduism...", 2001; "World Religion...", 2001; Halverson and Bhattacharya, 1999; Arriaga, 1997; "United States Hindus...", 2001; "Hindus...", 2001; Prichard, 2001; "Facts...", 1997; Ostling, 1999; Long, n.d.; Broadwater, 2000; Kurtz, 2001; George, 1995; Engley, 1999; Pluralism, n.d.; World Almanac, 2000; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000; Linden, 1996; Prothero, 2001; Nattier, 1998 and 1999; Woo, 2000; Queen, 1999; Baumann, 1997; Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, 2001; "Non-Christians...", 1998.

Table 5

Current Survey Estimates of Buddhists and Hindus

	Buddhists	Hindus
General Social Survey		
Adults:		
1998	0.3	0.3
2000	0.6	0.4
Total Population:		
1998	0.2	0.2
2000	0.6	0.3
American Religious Identification Survey		
2001	0.5	0.4
Gallup		
1999	NL	less than 1%
2000	NL	less than 1%
1999-2001	NL	0.1
2000-2001	0.2	NL
American National Election Studies		
1996	0.3-0.5	0.1-0.2 ^a
2000	0.2-0.4	0.1-0.1
American Freshman First-Year College Students		
2000	1.0	NL

NL=Not listed

^aThe first number is based on all respondents and second is among those who were asked their religion. Only those who attended services or who said they were members of a church were asked their religion.

Source: ANES, 1996 and 2000; Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Sax et al., 2001; "Latest...", 2000 and 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001