The Rise and Geographic Dispersion of Non-Christian Faith Traditions in the United States

Mike McMullen

The U.S. is experiencing a new wave of immigration in the first two decades of the 21st century, similar to that of the turn of the previous century. As Sullivan notes, “Sometime between 1910 and 2020, the population of the United States passed 100 million (behind only China, India and the Russian Empire at the time), and about 14% were immigrants.” As of Aug. 1, 2019, the United States was home to just under 330 million people, and, again, about 14% were born in other countries. However, the origin of this foreign-born population, the religious faiths they practice, as well as the cities they settle in, have changed dramatically. This unprecedented social change has ushered in new forms of religious diversity.

New Immigrants, New Faith Traditions

Because of the perceived threat that the early 20th century immigrants, many of them Catholic, posed to the “cultural identity” of a mostly-Protestant America, as well as anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic fears and subsequent resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, in 1924 Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which limited immigrants overall and imposed quotas in favor of nationalities that were already in the U.S. in significant numbers (Sullivan 2019, p. 20). As a result, by 1970, the foreign-born share of the U.S. population fell to 4.7%. However, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that reversed the 1924 law, in part as a response to the need for immigrant labor as the birth rates of natural born Americans fell. This ended preferences for northern European immigrants. The result over the next four decades was 59 million immigrants entered the U.S. However, the vast majority of these new foreign-born residents were from Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean, not from Europe.

As a result, this led to: 1) the de-Europeanization of American Christianity with the influx of, for example, Vietnamese, Filipino and Mexican Catholics, Korean Presbyterians, and Nigerian Pentecostals; as well as 2) the increase in non-Christian faith traditions such as the Bahá’í Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. In addition, the Catholic church is one of the few non-Evangelical denominations to not lose membership over the last 20 years, but their gains have come mostly through not only Latin American immigration, but also Catholic migrants from Vietnam, the Philippines, and African countries. As of 2019, one in five U.S. Catholics are foreign-born.

New Gateway Urban Areas

The pattern of immigrant settlement in the 20th century was for those who were foreign-born to move into the urban core, with subsequent generations moving up the economic ladder and out to the suburbs. However, the trend shifted in the 21st century as immigrants from outside of Europe were less likely to settle in urban centers first, and more likely to immigrate directly to suburbs. “The story of ethnic enclaves in the heart of major gateway cities has been fundamentally altered with the restructuring of the U.S. economy, the decentralization of cities, and the growth of the suburbs as major employment centers.” Until the 1990s, there were effectively six gateway states for recent immigrants: California (led by San Francisco and Los Angeles), Texas (led by Houston), Florida (led by Miami), greater New Jersey and New York (led by New York City) and Illinois (led by Chicago). These gateway entry points to American society have expanded and diversified. The reasons for continued interest in the U.S. as an immigrant destination are economic opportunity, escape from political or religious persecution, and refugee resettlement.

Lichter and Johnson posit that the proliferation of gateway access to American culture by 21st century immigrants accelerates two change processes in society: 1) population deconcentration (or suburbanization) and greater exposure to the native-born white majority; and 2) the possible erosion of ethnic or immigrant identity and the weakening attachment to place (i.e., the fading importance of ethnic enclaves). As a result, America has visibly become more ethnically, and therefore also more religiously, diverse as the nation’s ethnic make-up continues to diversify. Their research found that over the last 30 years, the American immigrant population has indeed

spread itself over a more diverse geographical space. Not only are immigrants less concentrated today than in the past, but they are less segregated from other ethnic groups, including majority whites. Singer, et al, have developed a typology of six types of immigrant gateways, describing cities that have become the focus of immigration in the in the last 50 years.10

The first three are what they call established immigrant gateways (the primary settlement cities for European immigrants of the 19th and 20th Century):

1. Former gateways (Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and St. Louis) which attracted considerable numbers of immigrants at the turn of the last century, but as rust-belt “deindustrialization” took place, they diminished in importance. These are the earliest foreign-born gateways, and therefore historically the oldest, as America welcomed immigrants during the manufacturing boom of the U.S. industrial revolution.

2. Continuous gateways (Boston, New York/Newark/Jersey City, Chicago, San Francisco) are long-standing destinations for immigrants and continue to receive large numbers of foreign-born. These cities continue to be the major entry point for immigrants from around the world.

3. Post-World War II gateways (Houston, Los Angeles, Riverside/San Bernadino, Orange County, San Diego, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami) began attracting immigrants in the post-war period and especially after the 1965 changes to immigration laws (see also Klineberg 2020). These cities also continue to diversify with new waves of immigrants.

The newer set of immigrant gateways cites are what they call twenty-first-century gateways (the result of changes in 1965 to immigration laws that ushered in non-Christian religious and ethnic diversity):

4. Emerging gateways are those places that have had rapidly growing immigrant populations during the past 25 years (Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth, Las Vegas, Orlando, West Palm Beach, and Washington, DC).

5. Re-emerging gateways (Minneapolis-St. Paul, Denver, Oakland, Phoenix, Portland OR, Sacramento, San Jose, Tampa and Seattle) saw significant immigrant population growth at the beginning of the 20th century, but waned as destinations as the 20th century progressed, and are now re-emerging in the 21st century as immigrant gateways.

6. Pre-emerging gateways are those places (like Raleigh-Durham, Charlotte, Greensboro/Winston-Salem, Salt Lake City and Austin) where immigrant populations have grown rapidly starting in the 1990s and are likely to continue their trajectory of growth.11

By 2005, 20% of the U.S. foreign-born population (more than 7 million people) lived in 21st century gateways, up from less than 8% of the total in 1970. All these 21st century gateway cities are booming because of economic growth, refugee resettlement, and chain migration as newer immigrants follow settled immigrants via existing social networks.12

Findings for Religious Bodies

I wanted to analyze where the concentrations of non-Christian houses of worship were in the U.S. by using the 2020 U.S. Religion Census data (see usreligioncensus.org). Since 1990, the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies has collected and analyzed the data, and has produced maps of the geographic dispersion of over 450 denominations and faith groups aggregated at the county level. I focused on metropolitan areas that had at least six houses of worship (what I am calling “high-concentration” areas) for the following non-Christian religious traditions: the Bahá’í Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, the Sikh religion, and Zoroastrianism. Below I summarize the findings of these seven major non-Christian faith traditions, and we see that there is a high correlation between urban areas that have high-concentrations of non-Christian houses of worship (six or more), and the gateway cities, both established and 21st century gateways, that have historically and more recently witnessed the influx of immigrant Americans.

Bahá’í Faith

The first Bahá’ís came to the U.S. at the end of the 19th century from the religion’s country of origin, Iran. Bahá’ís believe that the prophet-founder, Baha’u’llah (which means the “Glory of God” in Arabic), is the most recent in a historical progression of “manifestations” that God has sent to humanity for spiritual guidance, and which form the core of the varied global civilizations. They include, but are not limited to: Buddha, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, and most recently, Baha’u’llah. The American Bahá’í community is approximately 70% converts, as well as about 30% ethnic Persians who escaped persecution in Iran and immigrated to America over the past century.13 Because of the parish-like geographic boundaries defining a Bahá’í community, a large metro area may consist of multiple communities, depending on the number of suburbs surrounding the urban core. Many of the largest concentrations of Bahá’ís in the U.S. are also where Persian immigrants are concentrated, such as the gateway cities of Atlanta, Dallas, Washington DC, Houston, Los Angeles, and Miami, as well as the continuous gateway of Chicago, which is the national headquarters of the American Bahá’í community.

As seen in Table 1, of the 417 identified Bahá’í communities in high-concentration metros, we can see below that over half (52.7%) are in 21st century gateway cities. (Note that the percentages in Table 1 do not perfectly add up to 100% because not all “high-concentration” Bahá’í communities are in gateway cities—but the

vast majority are). Again, given that nearly one-third of the American Bahá’í community are Persian immigrants, or descendants of immigrants who came to the U.S. in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, it is not surprising that over half of Bahá’ís who live in high-concentration urban areas (with 6 or more communities) reside in twenty-first-century gateways.

See Map 1 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Bahá’í communities.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism traces its roots to Siddhartha Gautama, a prince from a kingdom in southern Nepal whose experience with suffering in approximately 500 BCE led to his teachings on the Four Noble Truths. His desire to free humanity from this suffering led to Buddhist spiritual practices called the Eight-Fold Noble Path. The Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Noble Path both constitute the core teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism spread throughout southeast Asia, China, the Korean peninsula, and Japan over the next 1,300 years. Buddhism made its appearance in the U.S. on the West Coast, as immigrants came to America from Asia initially in the latter 19th century as Chinese laborers who built the transcontinental railroad. The first Buddhist temple was constructed in San Francisco in 1853. Over the next 100 years, various Buddhist organizations and publications adapted to the American religious landscape, such as the Buddhist Churches of America and Nichiren Shoshu of America and Tricycle: The Buddhist Review magazine. This institutional development accelerated after the 1965 changes to immigration laws that ushered in millions of immigrants from Asia. One scholar said this resulted in two categories of American Buddhism: *ethnic Buddhism* “in which the traditions and practices serve as a way of maintaining the ethnic identity of an immigrant community”; and *convert Buddhism* “in which American-born converts adopt Buddhist ideas and adapt them to an American way of life.”

---


15 Ibid. Page 201.
The full scope of Buddhism in America is difficult to determine because there is no central record-keeping organization and there are a multitude of organizations that promote a plethora of Buddhist philosophies and practices. This challenge is compounded by the fact that many white Americans continue to identify as Christian or Jewish but also practice Buddhist meditation syncretically.16

As seen in Table 2, of the 1,545 Buddhist temples in high-concentration metro areas, over 70% are in gateways cities. The more than 45% of temples in established gateway cities are primarily in West-coast cities reflecting earlier 20th century Asian immigration patterns; but the 25% in 21st century gateways are more evenly spread throughout the United States. (Note again that the percentages do not add up to 100% because some of the high-concentration Buddhist temples—and all subsequent houses of worship for remaining faith groups—are not in identified gateway cities, but the vast majority are).

See Map 2 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Buddhist temples.

Table 2. Percentages of High-Concentration Buddhist Temples in Each Type of Gateway City, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Established Gateways</th>
<th>21st-Century Gateways</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>Re-Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-WWII</td>
<td>Pre-Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hinduism

Hinduism is a collection of beliefs and practices that evolved from 3,000 years ago in the Indian subcontinent. Hindu philosophy is found in the collection of texts known as the Upanishads, and ritual practices are found in the Vedas. The first Hindu temple was dedicated in the U.S. in 1976 in the metropolitan Pittsburgh area. Since then, Larson says that five different types of Hindu practitioners have come to characterize American Hinduism: 1) “Secular Hindus” are those Hindu immigrants who tend to have higher levels of education and do not identify with any particular beliefs or practices of traditional Hinduism and have not joined any other religious groups; 2) “Nonsectarian Hindus” are those immigrants who do not identify with any particular branch, but practice a form of cultural Hinduism that is connected to their family caste; 3) “Devotional

Hindus” are those who identify with a particular sectarian tradition or God/Goddess cult; 4) “Reformist-Nationalist Neo-Hindus” are those immigrants who follow groups such as Ramakrishna Mission and are mostly interested in their Indian homeland and are not conversion-seeking or proselytizing; and finally 5) “Guru-Internationalist Missionizing Neo-Hindus” are followers of movements such as the Hare Krishnas who explicitly seek converts from outside the Asian Indian population. \(^{17}\) Researching Hindu temples is complicated by the fact that data collected for the U.S. Religion Census included not only Hindu temples specifically, but also thoroughly American-style non-profit organizations like Vendanta Societies that serve as meditation centers, educational institutions, and cultural centers.

As seen in Table 3, of the 230 Hindu temples specifically identified in the U.S. Religious Census data in high-concentration urban areas, over three-quarters (77%) are located in established gateway cities, while nearly one-fourth (23%) are in 21st century gateways. Interestingly, while there are Hindu temples and Indian immigrants spread throughout the cities of the U.S., the highest concentration of Hindu places of worship (defined in this analysis as urban areas with at least 6 or more houses of worship for each faith group), are all in the six types of immigrant gateway cities.

See Map 3 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Hindu temples.

### Judaism

Judaism has a long history in the U.S., predating even the formal constitutional formation of the nation. The Jewish community in the U.S. was officially founded in New York City in 1654. \(^{18}\) The U.S. is home to several branches of Judaism, some of which were founded here in America. In addition, many American Jews are secular and...

---


identify as an ethnic/cultural group, but do not necessarily practice the religion of Judaism. The U.S. Religion Census collected data on six Jewish branches here in the U.S.: Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Independent, and Chabad. Jews make up approximately 2% of the U.S. population, and just over half marry non-Jews (or “gentiles”). Most Orthodox Jews practice Jewish law in such a way that “segregates” them from the majority in society with distinctive dress, diet, neighborhoods, etc.; whereas “integrationist” Jews live among gentiles while adhering to Jewish law in greater (Conservative) or lesser (Reform or Reconstructionist) degrees. Reform Judaism was founded in the U.S. in 1873 and the Jewish Theological Seminary was founded here in 1886 to train Conservative rabbis.19

Although there were a sizable number of Muslims who were brought to the U.S. during the slave trade between the mid-16th century and the mid-19th century,20 the non-Christian religious tradition that has the longest history and deepest roots in the U.S. is Judaism. That said, as can be seen in Table 4, only about 14% of the 2,082 synagogues in high-concentration synagogue areas in the U.S. are in 21st century gateway cities, which is to be expected since Jewish immigration was largely a pre-WWII phenomenon. In other words, over 84% of urban areas with high concentrations of Jewish synagogues (6 or more) are in established urban gateways, with nearly half in the continuous gateway cities of New York, Boston, and Chicago. In fact, New York City has one of the largest concentration of Jews in the world outside of Israel. Jews came to the U.S. in the greatest numbers to escape the ghettos of Eastern Europe during the huge wave of immigrants to America between 1880 and 1920, and therefore not surprisingly settled in established gateway urban areas.21

See Map 4 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Jewish synagogues.

---

19 Ibid.


Muslims

The Islamic religion was born in the 7th century in the Arabian peninsula, when a merchant named Muhammad had a religious revelation that he was a prophet of God. Muslims believe that God revealed a message for humanity through Muhammad. This message, which became their holy scripture, the Qur'an, establishes laws and ethical principles to guide one's whole life. Islam shares theological and historical roots with Judaism and Christianity, and over the next centuries spread throughout the Middle East, North African, India and the Far East. Islam is now the second-most populous religion in the world, with over 1.2 billion followers. Islam has two main branches: Sunnis (who comprise about 85% of Muslims worldwide) and Shi’ites (about 15% of Muslims). All Muslims, no matter their branch or sectarian background, believe in the five pillars (or foundational beliefs) of Islam: 1) the profession of faith in Muhammad as God’s messenger (the Shahada); 2) prayer five times a day (Salat); 3) giving to the poor (Zakat); 4) fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan (Sawn); and 5) pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj). The American Muslim community is about two-thirds immigrants or their descendants from around the world, and one-third African-American converts (many who were initially members of the Nation of Islam), plus a small number of white converts. American Muslims have adapted to what Warner called a “congregational” model of religion from Protestant Christianity, where the mosque has become not just a place for prayer, but a community center, educational institution, and place where immigrants can learn English, hear about jobs and housing, and the imam takes on the role of counselor, social worker, and public relations specialist.22

As can be seen in Table 5, over half of the 2,296 mosques in high-concentration urban areas are in established gateway cities, with another quarter in 21st century gateways. These include continuous gateway urban areas like New York, Chicago and Boston; as well as

Table 5. Percentages of High-Concentration Islamic Mosques in Each Type of Gateway City, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Gateway City</th>
<th>Established Gateways</th>
<th>21st-Century Gateways</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>Re-Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-WWII</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>Pre-Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

former gateways like Detroit, which has one of the largest concentrations of Arab Muslims outside of the Middle East. Finally, higher-concentrations of Muslims can be found in emerging gateway cities such as Atlanta, Dallas and Orlando.

See Map 5 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Islamic mosques.

**Sikhs**

The Sikh religion developed in the Punjab region of India in the 15th century with the spiritual teachings of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the faith’s first guru or leader. There were nine successive gurus after him. The last living guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708) declared that the holy text would be the 11th and final eternal guru. A copy of the Guru Granth Sahib (fundamental holy scripture) is housed in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, India and is considered by Sikhs a pilgrimage site. Sikh beliefs are a syncretic combination of Hindu and Islamic concepts.24 The vast majority of Sikhs in the U.S. are immigrants from India, and their largest communities are on the West Coast (Seattle, San Francisco, San Jose, Fresno, Bakersfield, and Los Angeles).

Based on the 2020 U.S. Religion Census data, looking at metropolitan areas with 6 or more Sikh gurdwaras (or temples), nearly all

---


are on the West Coast, with the exception of those in Houston, New York City, Dallas, Detroit, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. As seen in Table 6, of the 129 gurdwaras in high-concentration urban areas, half of them are in established gateway cities, mostly in Washington state and California. Nearly one-third are in 21st century gateways.

See Map 6 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Sikh gurdwaras.

**Zoroastrianism**

The Zoroastrian faith originated in Iran prior to the arrival of Islam. The founder, the prophet Zoroaster, founded his movement in possibly the 2nd millennium BCE, and it served as the official state religion of the Persian empire from approximately 600 BCE to 650 CE with the conquest of Islam. Zoroaster taught a dualistic worldview...
of good versus evil in which the supreme being, Ahura Mazda, would win the cosmic battle for good. Nearly all American Zoroastrians are Iranian immigrants.\textsuperscript{25} The cities of San Jose, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and New York each have two Zoroastrian temples (re-emerging, continuous and Post-WWII gateways), while several established and 21st century gateway cities have one each.

Based on the 2020 U.S. Religion Census data, looking at metropolitan areas with two or more Zoroastrian temples, they are fairly evenly divided into established and 21st century gateways as seen in Table 7. Again, in no metropolitan area are there more than two Zoroastrian temples (San Jose, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and New York City). Presumably, many Zoroastrians left Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and settled in both established and 21st century gateway cities. Only four Zoroastrian temples out of 33 identified are located in non-gateway urban areas: Kansas City, Eugene OR, Richmond and Cincinnati.

See Map 7 for the graphic distribution of U.S. Zoroastrian temples.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Established Gateways} & \textbf{21st-Century Gateways} \\
\hline
Former & 15.2% & Emerging & 12.1% \\
Continuous & 12.1% & Re-Emerging & 24.2% \\
Post-WWII & 18.2% & Pre-Emerging & 3.0% \\
Total & 45.5% & Total & 39.3% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Percentages of High-Concentration Zoroastrian Temples in Each Type of Gateway City, 2020}
\end{table}

\textbf{Summary}

This chapter has reviewed data from the U.S. Religion Census for seven non-Christian faith traditions. Whereas Jews and Muslims each make up approximately 2-3% of the U.S. population, the Bahá’í, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Hindu and Buddhist populations each make up less than 1% of Americans. Currently, non-Christian faith traditions make up 6% of the total American population, but that proportion is expected to at least double in the next half-century,\textsuperscript{26} again, mostly via immigration. As we have seen from the above analysis, the growth of non-Christian religions in the U.S. happens in parallel with the phenomenon of new sources of immigration. Since the changes in


the 1965 immigration laws, the vast majority of U.S. immigrants have not been from Europe, but from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America and the Caribbean. These new immigrants have entered the U.S. more and more via what Singer et al.\textsuperscript{27} have called twenty-first-century gateway cities. These include \textbf{emerging gateways} (such as Atlanta, Dallas and Washington, DC); \textbf{re-emerging gateways} (such as Minneapolis, Phoenix, Sacramento and Seattle); and \textbf{pre-emerging gateways} (such as Austin, Charlotte, Raleigh-Durham and Salt Lake City). These cities are where we are seeing rapid increases in religious diversity.

There are non-Christian Americans and houses of worship spread throughout the United States, from small towns to our largest cities. To simplify this analysis, I have chosen to focus on where non-Christian houses of worship are most highly concentrated, and have defined these high-concentration locations as those metropolitan areas with at least 6 or more non-Christian houses of worship. As it turns out, those urban areas that I have defined as high-concentration house of worship cities (with at least 6 or more mosques, synagogues, or temples) are highly correlated with both established and 21st century gateway cities. In fact, for all the faith groups discussed here – the range was from 70\% of high-concentration Buddhist temples being in gateway cities, to 100\% of high-concentration Hindu temples being in gateway cities – that relationship holds true. We are a society of immigrants, who have brought their faith traditions with them and build their houses of worship in the cities to which they immigrated. It is no surprise, therefore, that the vast majority of the highest concentrations of non-Christians are in gateway cities that were welcoming to these newcomers. This is especially true of the faith traditions practiced by immigrants of the last 50 years, who settled and build churches, temples, synagogues and mosques in 21st century gateway cities.