



Brick by Brick: The Struggles for Religious Freedom

Author:

Khyati Y. Joshi

To those who would honor (or pay lip service to) the dramatic increase in the nation's religious diversity over the past half-century, an often-celebrated theme is the proliferation of houses of worship across the land.

So we point to minarets rising in an Iowa cornfield or Georgia's 20-plus Hindu temples as evidence of America's new pluralism.

There's no doubt the contemporary US is peppered not only with churches but also with gurdwaras, mosques, synagogues, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and other houses of worship. But the story of how those sites came to be – and how so many others didn't – is not just a story of America's new diversity but also a reminder that religion and race remain a barrier to equal opportunity even in the 21st century.

When thinking about pluralism in America, let us not fall into easy affirmations of the most famous American founding myth: that this is a place of “equality” for all religions, founded by those who learned the lessons of their own oppression in old Europe. On the contrary, the Puritans and other early-arriving groups sought not freedom for all but freedom for themselves. Successive waves of “undesirable” religious others – German Anabaptists, southern European Catholics, Orthodox Slavs, Jews, and others – have found American hospitality to be limited and grudging at best, hostile and violent at worst.

We must acknowledge that discussions about religious pluralism are not just about religion. In the period since the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, many new American religious minorities trace their heritage to Asia, Africa, and the Arab world. To understand their minority religious experiences, our analysis must also consider their racial minority status. In a country obsessed with race, we should understand religious pluralism is never just about faith and doctrine but also about race, ethnicity, and culture.

Racialized Religion

In fact, race and religion share a history, function, and impact across American social history, and remain intertwined in how we approach identity. In recent years, religion has become a particularly powerful method of classifying the “enemy” or “other” in national life, affecting primarily non-Christian peoples of color. Muslims in particular have become demonized, as the vicious acts of a miniscule handful of their co-religionists shape their image in the American mind. Islam has repeatedly been characterized in an inaccurate, misleading, and blatantly racist fashion, their property and religious sites vandalized, and their bodies targeted for hate crimes.

Looking closer at many of those incidents, we discover that anti-Muslim bias is manifested racially. South Asian American Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and even Hispanics have been the targets of post- 9/11 backlash attacks – suffering injury, and sometimes death, because of their brown skin, beards, clothing, or turbans. Their racial and cultural markers are associated with Islam in the popular mind, even though they are not Muslim. I identify this phenomenon as the *racialization of religion* in my scholarly work.

Government Neutrality?

Keeping the racialization of religion in mind, let us return to the subject of houses of worship. The First Amendment guarantees that government will stay out of religion, neither interfering with people's worship or religious practices nor favoring one religion over any other. However, when Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, or other racial/religious minority communities attempt to build houses of worship, the apparatus of government is often used to limit or outright prevent them from proceeding. The hurdles put forth by



opponents of the construction of sacred sites are often no more than thinly veiled xenophobia against a racialized non-Christian religious minority group that is entering their community in sizable numbers.

For example:

- In San Jose, CA., in 1997, opponents organized against the construction of a gurdwara. Although the Sikh community sponsoring the building had satisfied all applicable zoning requirements, local residents argued, among other things, that “the architecture would not fit into the neighborhood scheme,” and that Sikhs visiting the gurdwara would “loiter” in local neighborhoods. One commentator identifies “thinly veiled racism” in the opposition’s motives: “To assert that Sikhs will ‘loiter’ in the neighborhood such a distance ... from their site of worship is to depict them as a gang, instead of as a highly respected religious congregation. Imagine the public outrage if the same accusation had been directed against a Judeo-Christian religious group.”¹
- In Basking Ridge, NJ., this year, a Muslim community has been forced to file suit, after more than five years of delays in the construction of a proposed mosque. Despite having a former mayor among their leadership, the Islamic Center of Basking Ridge faced “39 public hearings, and nearly four years of demands by town officials and planning board members for one change after another. Each solution proposed or agreed to by the Islamic Society led to objections on other grounds.”²

Not Welcome

Sometimes the religious minorities win in the end, as they did in litigation against Wayne Township, NJ., where a proposed Albanian mosque had been labeled a “public nuisance,” and the township seized the site as “open space” rather than allow construction to proceed. But knowing they are unwelcome, some give up or go elsewhere, to the detriment of their members. The Wayne group, despite prevailing in federal court, took a settlement payment from the town and built their mosque in an office park miles away from where most congregants live.

In such cases, opponents use mechanisms of government – traffic concerns, parking and noise ordinances, and the like – as “neutral” pretexts for their racial and religious discrimination, and the Constitutional rights of affected communities are disregarded. Instead, these non-profit congregations face mounting costs for architects, surveyors, traffic engineers, and lawyers. Despite “freedom of religion,” it literally costs these Americans more to be Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, or Buddhist than it would cost them to be Christian.

True Spiritual Home

For post-1965 immigrant communities whose second and third generations are now growing and thriving, houses of worship are crucial visual representations of their *presence*. To have one’s own spiritual and cultural home feels tremendously important – as I remember it did for my parents and their friends, when the Hindu community I grew up in, in Atlanta, could finally stop meeting in members’ homes and acquire a building (formerly a church) that became our first “real” temple and community space. Opposition to such houses of worship from the wider community cuts to the heart of one’s sense of belonging in what is supposed to be a pluralistic democracy.

As scholars and citizens, we should draw three lessons here: First, to recognize and resist the racial dimensions of religious oppression, and reject the notion that to be racially different is to be religiously suspicious. Second, to recognize pretext and oppose the misuse of laws and government to achieve religious or racial oppression. And third, to be allies to communities facing such opposition, whatever our own religious or racial affiliation may be.

For American pluralism – racial and religious – to be meaningful, all must have the equal opportunity not only to believe and to pray but also to build a place where they may do so together.



khyatijoshi.com



Khyati Y. Joshi, professor of education at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, NJ., consults widely on diversity and religion with school districts and teachers. She is the author of New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America (Rutgers, 2006). Her current book project examines how race and religion are intertwined throughout American history and in US policy, politics, and society. See khyatijoshi.com.

Notes

1 Jaideep Singh, "The Racialization of Minoritized Religious Identity: Constructing Sacred Sites at the Intersection of White and Christian Supremacy," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, edited by Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (Routledge, 2003), pp. 92-93.

2 Jim Dwyer, *The New York Times*, March 10, 2016, p. A-22.

Issue Title:

All Together Now: Pluralism and Faith

Issue Year:

2016