

Ethno-religious identities of immigrants

A sociological analysis with theological implications

An exposition of Professor R. Stephen Warner's theoretical position on new immigrant religion

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Introduction and background

From the writings of Warner it is very clear that he is a qualitative sociologist of religion who is involved in doing research among various ethno religious immigrant communities, very especially in the USA. He is a professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of Illinois in Chicago, USA. The bulk of his research has been done in multi religious and ethnic context where different religious and ethnic immigrant groups meet in the same place of the society in the USA. It could be noticed that most of his researches have been done according to the “participant observation” method and his personal extensive exposures in the multi cultural, ethnic and religious contexts have enriched his academic positions. He points out how certain identities of religions are fast changing making ethno religious identities very complex and complicated. He elaborates this by showing how different religions come in all colours and the traditional association of religions are fast changing in the modern society in the USA. Therefore, according to him today in the USA Asians may be packed in a traditional Christian church while white Westerners may fill a Buddhist temple to get involved in meditation. In analysing the new immigrant religion Warner

cautious that it should not be assumed that the new immigrants are entirely different or similar to their predecessors. Although in many ways they are different from their predecessors yet they have many similarities and share the common heritage of their predecessors.

As a sociologist of religion Warner has acquired a wealth of knowledge from the theological field to enrich his sociological studies in order to broaden the boundaries of the sociological understanding of religion. In his sociological analyses he has made the effort to broaden the horizons of sociology by taking the repercussions of the theological implications of the immigrants' religions into consideration in the USA. This characteristic of his research has brought a wealth of knowledge to the sociological academic discipline and has enhanced the theologians to contemplate on the importance of sociology for meaningful theological articulation in the modern world. He argues that in many ethnographic researches the aspect of religion has been neglected. It has been noticed that often in the studies of "segmented assimilation" researchers mainly concentrate on race and class-condition identities but not so much at religious ones. On this issue he emphasizes that religion can not be neglected in ethnographic studies of segmented assimilation as it plays a vital and a continuous active role in identity making of immigrant communities. The following exposition is done on his writings and personal contact with him through e-mails, giving special attention to his thesis on five general principles on new immigrant religion.¹ Wherever it was appropriate, the theoretical positions of relevant sociologists and theologians are used to interpret Warner's theoretical positions in order to clarify his positions in clear and coherent manner.

Changing identities of "ethnicity and religion" of immigrant communities

Warner strongly recognises the link between religion and ethnicity of immigrant communities although as he mentions that this is fast changing in the modern society in the USA. He acknowledges that this link functions as a very important factor in establishing the new identities of the immigrant communities. At times he uses some interesting terminology such as "between religion, national origin and language identities" to highlight the above links effectively and meaningfully. By doing so he has made an effort to sharpen the understanding of the effect of ethno religious identities of the immigrant communities in the USA. In this regard generally he agrees with the position held by Fenggang Yang & Helen Rose Ebaugh in their article on the theme of "Religion and Ethnicity Among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/Minority Status in Home and Host Countries." That is Andrew Greeley's (1971) model where he suggested that some religious people do not associate with any ethnic identity,

¹ R. Stephen Warner, (2000), The new immigrant religion: an update and appraisal, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago. <<http://www.newschool.edu/icmec/nwsltr52.html>>

there are ethnic groups who are not religious but identify with a particular ethnic group and where the ethnicity and religion are intertwined and further developments by Harold J. Abramson (1973), Philip Hammond and Kee Warner (1993) making this case into a typology. On this typology Fenggang Yang & Helen Rose Ebaugh have noted,

“First is “ethnic fusion,” where religion is the foundation of ethnicity, or, ethnicity equals religion, such as in the case of the Amish and Jews. The second pattern is that of “ethnic religion,” where religion is one of several foundations of ethnicity. The Greek or Russian orthodox and the Dutch reformed are examples of this type. In this pattern, ethnic identification can be claimed without claiming the religious identification but the reverse is rare. The third form, “religious ethnicity,” occurs where an ethnic group is linked to a religious tradition that is shared by other ethnic groups. The Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics are such cases. In this pattern, religious identification can be claimed without claiming ethnic identification.”²

Warner often with examples shows how ethnicity or national origin, religion and language identities are salient to some immigrants than the others. In this regard he highlights how these factors functions in various ways to immigrants who come from different countries. In the USA at least in Chicago Muslim Indian and Pakistanis seems to be interesting in focusing their collective identities on Islamic centres than Muslim Arabs. In the case of Indian immigrants, they belong to many language groups such as Hindi, Jain, Sikh, Gujarati, Panjabi, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam and religions like Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Muslim and Christian. Here it is clear how Indian immigrants are divided into a multiplicity of ethno-religious identities in the USA Often for these Indian immigrants ethno religious identities have become more precious than their common Indian identity in the USA. At the same time, he points out that this ethno religious relation may change and be reshaped with the 2nd generation of immigrants as they are more exposed to the USA realities write from the beginning of their lives. Here it is important to notice that the second generations of immigrants are not attached to the context of the country of their origin in the same way as their first generation and that they become more familiar with the language of the host country often making it their first or more comfortable language for communication. For instance, second generation “Koreans” in the USA seem to eager to be known as “Christian” than “Korean”. Considering the above context, he emphases that religions decreasingly fit into the old cultural moulds.

Warner is very clear in pronouncing that the identities of immigrants whether individual or collective are predominantly not given but negotiated. On this statement

2 Yang, F. & Ebaugh, H.E. (2001 Sept), Religion and Ethnicity Among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/ Minority Status in Home and Host Countries, *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 40:3 (2001) p.369

of Warner it can be commented that when immigrants make the efforts to settle in the host country, they are not given official individual or collective identities to settle in. They acquire these identities by their living exercise and taking the prevailing circumstances in the host country into consideration. The home country material that they bring with them and the group alignment of the receiving country become important to facilitate them to negotiate these individual and collective identities in the host country that they settle in. In this manner Warner shows that the religious identities and the use of languages of the immigrants are “constructed” or “transmuted” in the host country. Therefore, their ethno-religious identities in the host country would be neither similar nor different from the ethno religious identities that they had in the home country of their origin. On the above background Warner generalises that the ethno religious identities of the immigrant communities are changing dynamic identities based on the realities of the home and host countries of those immigrant communities respectively.

In his analysis Warner uses the theoretical positions of Fenggang Yang on relation between older and newer cohorts of immigrants showing their occasional conflict in religious communities. By highlighting the study of Fenggang Yang in the east coast among the people of Chinese Christian church, Warner shows how immigrants’ wave after wave have renewed their ethnicity by successfully incorporating diverse array of diasporic Chinese communities, speakers of Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka and other dialects, nationals of the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other countries. Warner says according to Yang “this diverse array was kept together both by Christian and Confucian ideals of unity and a frequently adjusted system of smaller "fellowship groups" to facilitate the ethnically distinct social relations members wanted.” The above observations of Warner show how the different religions exist in the context of same ethnic origin of some immigrants are paying a new role in bringing the immigrants together. This opens up an area worthy of serious academic attention on immigrants in other parts of the western world who are from the same ethnic origin and influenced by different religions in the western society

In his theoretical position Warner recognises the change in roles and responsibilities of women inside the religious organisations in the immigrant communities. Among immigrants women are likely to serve in religious organisations in positions such as directors. He mentions that this happens even among the immigrant women of first generation. By giving the example of immigrant women nurses from Kerala, India Warner shows at times how women can be more important than men among some immigrant communities. These women from Kerala were the first to come as nurses to work in the USA and followed by their husbands and children. These men who are the husbands of these nurses, are often under-employed compared to the positions they held in India. Warner shows that these men have found that they could reconstruct their lost patriarchal authority inside the religious organisations in the USA society. This example makes the researchers aware that not only women of the immigrants can

obtain so called higher positions inside the immigrant religious institutions but also they may lose certain opportunities due to the circumstantial realities prevail within the families and communities.

Religion, Theology and immigrants

Warner strongly argues that religion is salient for migrants. According to him “migration is a theologising experience” where reflective immigrants ask the question “Why are we here?” The answers that the immigrants expect are often tied up with the emotions and feelings, which are part and parcel of the immigrant communities. Here it is interesting to note the use of this terminology by Warner to articulate the religious behaviour of immigrants sociologically. Deliberately he has borrowed this theological term “theologising experience” to explain the sociological aspects of immigrant communities in the USA. As a sociologist this is one of his important contributions to the academic field of sociology. He is confident of the importance of theology for sociology of religion of immigrant communities in the West. Consequently, it is necessary for the academic discipline of theology to recognise this contribution of Warner and to make theology coherent with the sociological articulations in order to make these two academic fields useful and meaningful to the humanity. In the context of this above background, it is justifiable to clarify his explanation with appropriate theological parallels. In a way Warner’s explanation is a sociological parallel of the theological articulation by John Macquarrie, a 20th century theologian. According to Macquarrie the following 6 formative factors are the base of any theologising experience in the society. These 6 formative factors are important for any theologising experience whether it is being done in the home or host country of the immigrants. It can be argued that these 6 formative factors are decisive for both sociological and theological fields in order to investigate into the shift in identity of an immigrant community in a given context of a host country.

According to Macquarrie the 6 formative factors are as follows,

1. Revelation
2. Experience
3. Scripture
4. Traditions
5. Culture
6. Reason ³

Along with these 6 formative factors, the theoretical position of the theologian Paul

3< http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showchapter?chapter_id=1584 >
John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, London: SCM, 1966, pp. -17.

Tillich on dialectical tension between two poles of theology that: "the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received" can be considered important.⁴ Warner suggests that the religious institutions are 'Free social spaces' where homesick immigrant feels a bit like home, "a little piece of Zion in the midst of Babylon". According to Paul Tillich's suggestion here the immigrants try to reconstruct their so-called eternal truth in the new situation in the host country.

By doing so they shift from their previous experience of the home country to the new experience in the host country by taking so called eternal truth as the pivotal point. In this regard their respective scripture plays a vital role in reinterpreting their religion in the new context in the host country. Here it is very interesting to note how Warner has explained one of the functions of religion of these immigrants on this basis by deriving an idiom from the Bible, the scripture of Christians. That is "a little piece of Zion in the midst of Babylon". Warner has recognized the importance of religion for cultural reproduction of these immigrants in the host country. Very especially he shows that this becomes important to interpret the differences that the children of these immigrants' experience in the school and to keep their cultural heritage alive. He goes on to explain how that the "why" questions of the children are answered by the religious specialists in churches, mosques etc. According to him for immigrants' religion is not just a psychological fact it is a public space. This is an important statement in the context of secular society in the USA where religion is often considered as a personal choice of individuals. Very especially for Asians, religion as a public space is very important for their existence in the society. Still in many Asian countries such as India and Sri Lanka religion is not divorced from ethics and philosophy. Therefore, for them religion as a public space gives them a way of life in and through religion. In this regard their culture and traditions play a vital role inside the religion and day-to-day existence in the society. For the immigrants from countries such as India and Sri Lanka, since their religion is a way of life, it is not that easy for them to practice religion without culture and traditions and vice versa.

In his writings Warner shows how the immigrants reclaim the honour denied in the host country in the religious institutions. For an example holding offices in religious institutions could revive the social roles that these immigrants held in their home country by re-enacting the traditional cultural patterns in the host country. It may be true, perhaps this is the only place in the USA society that this kind of immigrant cultural re-enactment is possible and tolerated.

According to the above description on 6 formative factors of Macquarrie and Warner's sociological position on immigrant religion it is clear that these two disciplines can go hand in hand except one formative factor, which is the revelation. Revelation in

4< http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showchapter?chapter_id=1584 >
Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63, p. 1:3.

theology is unique to this discipline as it derives inspiration from God who is supposed to be the ultimate reality. As sociology deals with empirical realities the revelation in theology doesn't fall within the boundaries of its discipline to be analysed. Yet the advantage in considering this concept of revelation in theology for sociological articulation is that it allows the sociologists to be aware of this reality in religions and to include the empirical repercussions of this factor among immigrant religious communities in their sociological analyses.

Disproportionate representation

Warner recognizes that when the percentages of the religious communities of the host country and the home country are compared, often they don't tally and that the Christian percentages in the host countries are higher in all most all immigrant communities in the West. On this observation of Warner it is important to look into the reasons behind this disproportionate representation of Christians among immigrant communities. Although he doesn't deliberately argue the influence of colonial past with its allegiance to Christian missionary work, it is very clear that this over proportionate Christian presence among western immigrant communities is directly connected to the above reality of colonial regimes very especially from 15th to 20th century. Perhaps one of the main reasons for this Warner's observation may be the colonial past of many of the home counties of immigrant communities. The fact the Western colonialism of 15th to 20th century was closely tied up with the various Christian missionary associations should be the main contributory factor in this regard. The type of Christianity that the colonial missionary enterprise proclaimed was clearly a "Westernise" form of Christianity with western socio-cultural realities. In the above set up those who became Christians in those colonies were more exposed to western realities than the other people in those countries. Therefore, those Christians became more familiar and comfortable with Western values, attitudes and customs making them westernise in their home countries before their arrival in the West. But after political independence of those countries in the context of cultural revivals it became necessary for those Christians to become more local in their motherlands. This gave those Christians the opportunity to have access to kind of both global and local realities in the post independence era of their motherlands.

As Warner clearly agrees that the happenings and the context in which the immigrants come from the home country directly affect the process of settlement of the immigrant communities. Perhaps on the above interpreted elaborated basis he generalises that what new immigrants is bringing about is "not the de-Christianization of the United States, but the de-Europeanization of American Christianity". Here he suggests that to understand "who comes to US and why?" the "Pull" and "Push" factors must be taken into account with appropriate variables. As "Pull" factors he gives examples such as welcoming co-religious and co-ethnics and jobs while highlighting "Push" factors such

as targeted persecution and discrimination as well as poverty-religion. It is understandable that by these two terms of Warner he tries to categorise the factors that attach and detach these immigrants to the host country. At the same time where migration process is concerned these “Pull” and Push” factors are useful to investigate into the realities that attract and distract these immigrants to migrate from the country of their origin. This theoretical articulation of Warner allows and facilitates the researchers in the field of sociology of religion to investigate into the reasons for shift in identities of these immigrants from home country to host country by deriving variable from “Pull” and Push” factors.

Congregationalism and other religious institutions of the immigrants

According to Warner the influence and adaptation of congregationalism and other institutional forms enable the immigrant communities to proceed with the inter-religious dynamics. These institutions are the places where relations between generations, genders, and immigrant cohorts are worked out. These religious institutions become vehicles in bringing these immigrant groups together by uniting them into common faiths. Warner's theoretical base on these institutions can be well explained by using the modals of religious institutions of Theravada Buddhists in the West presented by V.A. Gunasekara. In this regard V.A. Gunasekara has noted,

“.....the following institutional forms of Theravada Buddhism that have emerged in the West:

A. The Secular Buddhist Society Model. This is concerned with the intense study of the Dhamma in its original formulation as given in the Pali Canon, the development of norms of living in substantial conformity of the requirements of the Dhamma, and the encouragement of the observance of the Dhamma generally.

B. The Original London Vihara Model. This model encompasses the objectives of the secular societies, but places greater emphasis on the necessity to accommodate ordained monks to expound the Dhamma. In its interpretation of the canon it tends to place greater emphasis on Buddhaghosa's exegesis whereas the secular societies tend to go the original Canon itself.

C. The Lankarama Model. This is the ethnic Buddhist Model par excellence. Its main objective appears to be to cater to the spiritual needs of expatriate groups using the particular national models of Buddhism as practiced in their home countries without any consideration of its relevance to the universality of the Buddha's teaching or the external conditions in the host country.

D. The Meditation Centre Model. Here the Buddhist Institution is transformed into a centre for "meditation" under the guidance of a self-proclaimed "teacher". The meditation practiced is a simplified form of the first foundation of satipatthana ignoring all the preconditions which the Buddha was careful to lay down for the correct practice of this technique of mindfulness.”⁵

In the context of the USA with regard to institutional structures of religious organisations of immigrants, Warner is mainly interested in the models B & C of the explanations given by Gunasekara. Gunasekara has named model B as “London vihara model” by taking the model adopted by the pioneering Theravada Buddhist temple in London. This model is sensitive to the objectives and the needs of the secular society in the west. Although they have been sensitive to the secular-society they are careful not to become a mere secular institution or organisation as in the case of models A & C. They always emphasise the leadership of ordained monks accompanied by lay devotees. Warner recognises an immigrant religious institutional model in the USA, similar to this model C presented by Gunasekara as a model influenced by “congregational” form of religious organisations indigenous to Baptists and Jews in the USA. Warner shows that in this model created by the immigrants the typical congregational features such as lay leadership (a board of elders, directors, deacons etc), systematic fund raising and a system of trustees, a tendency for clergy to be professionals hired as employees, a tendency to ethnic exclusiveness and a tendency to be multi- functional with other activities like social services etc. are very visible in those religious institutions. As in the congregational form of religious institutions in these immigrant institutions membership is voluntary and in many cases people come to these places from faraway places to attend the activities of these institutions.

Considering the above factors Warner generalizes that the religions in the USA are subject to process of institutional isomorphism. Consequently, most of the immigrants very especially immigrants from Asian countries have to go through a paradigm shift from their home country temple centred worship patterns to congregational patterns in the USA. In the home country it may be possible for them to receive the ministries of the religious leaders at a convenient time. This is possible in a background of community religious activities where often extended families are in existence. These immigrants are placed in a situation in the USA where the society is not that healthy for the existence of extended families or community temple centred religious activities. In the above background immigrants may try to establish religious institutions similar to the model C of Gunasekara’s explanation. In this model immigrants try to reconstruct the exact copy of their religious activities in their home country. This model allows

⁵ Gunasekara, V.A. An Examination of the Institutional Forms of Buddhism in the West with Special Reference to Ethnic and Meditational Buddhism: THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY OF QUEENSLAND PO BOX 536, Toowong QLD 4066, AUSTRALIA. <<http://www.buddhanet.net/bsq14.htm>>

hardly any space for the universal aspects of religions where people from other cultures and countries can be accommodated. Therefore, often this sort of religious institution becomes inward looking and exclusive in their endeavours by making indifferent attitudes towards other ethno religious groups.

Universality and particularity of the religions of immigrants

According to Warner some of the religions of immigrants such as Christianity and Islam make universal claims highlighting that those religions cross the barriers of the nature of ethnic, cultural and language making them accessible to whole humanity of the World. Therefore, on principle those religions cannot be confined to particular ethno cultural and linguistic group. At times he gives certain theological arguments on the universality of some religions such as Christianity. For instance, according to theology a house of worship belongs to God. Therefore, theologically a place of worship cannot be confined to this or that group and irrespective of various differences anybody should be allowed to worship there. In this regard his theoretical position can be further elaborated by taking V.A. Gunasekara's description on the Characteristics of a universal religion. According to V.A. Gunasekara the Characteristics of a Universal Religion are as follows,

"The characteristics which make a religion universal in scope are the following:

Universality of Principle. There must be nothing in the basic beliefs of the religion that confine it to a particular nation, race or ethnic group. Thus, if there is a notion of a "chosen people" then this characteristic is violated.

Non-Exclusiveness of Membership. Any person could be an adherent of the religion concerned, and be entitled to the same privileges and obligations as every other person. This of course does not require every follower of the religion to be of the same level of achievement, but only that some external factor like race or caste prevents individuals from full participation in the religion.

Wide Geographical dispersion. The religion must have demonstrated an ability to find followers amongst a variety of nations or ethnic groups. Thus, even if a religion satisfies the first two requirements but have not been able to spread beyond its region of origin it may not qualify to be a universal religion. Thus again, Jainism is not generally regarded as a universal although its principles are universal in scope and it is non-exclusive.

Non-Exclusiveness of Language. The practices of the religion which require verbal communication should be capable of being done in any language. The

authoritative version of its basic texts may be maintained in the original language in which the original expositions were given, but translations of these should be valid, provided that they preserve the sense of the original texts.

Independence of Specific Cultural Practices. The practices of the religion should be free from the cultural practices of a particular group in such matters as food, dress, seating, etc.

Each one of these criteria raise problems but they have to be satisfied to a significant extent if the religion is to be deemed a universal one.”⁶

Yet when an immigrant community from a particular country comes together in Diaspora naturally their common cultural heritage becomes prominent for the immigrants to settle in the host country. Therefore, in this context of the importance of the local needs of the immigrant communities in the host countries the promotion of the global characteristics of their religions can become less important. Warner points out often when immigrants come together as a religious group the place of worship is used for more than mere religious worship or rituals. The place of worship is used for educational, cultural, social, political, and social services activities. Theologically the place of worship may be house of God but among immigrants those houses come up to fulfil the needs and aspirations of a particular community. When a house of God caters to the needs of a particular ethnic community that naturally excludes the needs of other communities. Very often in those places of worships the clergy is being hired by the members of the religious community makes the clergy obliged to fulfil the needs of the people who have hired them.

Warner points out that although many immigrants have tendencies towards ethnic exclusiveness, gradually they are venturing out to conduct religious activities in many languages. Perhaps with the increasing number of second generation who have been born in the USA this characteristic has become prominent. This development among immigrants can be underlined as one of the important features towards universalism of the immigrant religion in the USA.

Warner’s observation on the fact that the places of worship of immigrants are used for purposes such as educational, cultural and political matters can be considered in many ways. When the places of worships are used in the above manner it is inevitable that other Para religious organisations spring up in and around the religious places of worship. These organisations fulfil the needs and wants of immigrants related to home and host countries of these communities. For instance, when there are civil wars in some Asian countries the head quarters of some of the militant groups involved in those

6 Gunasekara, V.A. An Examination of the Institutional Forms of Buddhism in the West with Special Reference to Ethnic and Meditational Buddhism: THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY OF QUEENSLAND PO BOX 536, Toowong QLD 4066, AUSTRALIA. < <http://www.buddhanet.net/bsq14.htm>>

wars are based in Western countries such as the UK and USA. This kind of associations bring the immigrants connected to the happenings of home countries together and make those issues part and parcel of the socio-political system of the host country of the immigrants. At the same time these Para religious organisations contribute to the preservation of the non-religious cultural aspects and languages of the immigrant communities in the host country. In this manner as Warner has mentioned, religions and their institutions of the immigrants in the host countries have become cultural capitals based on their previous and present investments of the home and host countries respectively.

Posted January 2021