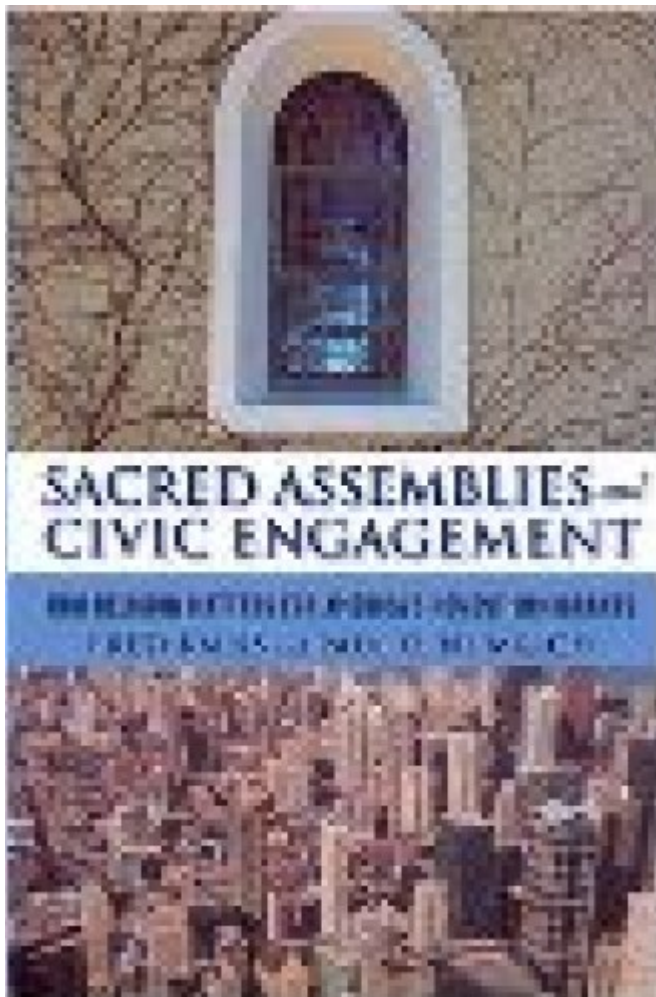


Sacred Assemblies and Civic Engagement: How Religion Matters for America's Newest Immigrants

reviewed by [Rhys H Williams](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Sacred Assemblies and Civic Engagement: How Religion Matters for America's Newest Immigrants

Fred Kniss and Paul D. Numrich

The landscape of American religion is changing rapidly. There are mosques, temples, shrines and gurdwaras in places they have never been before. Latino Catholics are beginning to rival their Anglo coreligionists in numbers, Korean Presbyterians and Methodists now have churches in almost every U.S. city, and Pentecostal forms of Protestantism can be found among African, Latino and Asian immigrant populations.

Such diversity is not a new story. Immigrants to these shores have always brought different faith traditions and religious practices. But two things make the current immigration scene distinct from those of earlier eras. The overwhelming majority of immigrants since the 1965 change in immigration policy have been non-European, either from Asia or Latin America, and for the first time significant numbers of immigrants are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Thus, racial, ethnic and religious diversity are all increasing markedly.

Much of the scholarly work on immigrants and religion has focused fairly tightly on individual congregations or small immigrant communities. It has been up-close and personal and has usually pointed to the groups' distinctiveness and the ways in which they are adjusting to their new social worlds. The research consistently shows that immigrants to the U.S. use their religious institutions as an important vehicle for negotiating their lives here even as those institutions provide cultural connections to the homeland. In their religious organizations, immigrants often learn English and how to negotiate American bureaucracies; they make connections with others who invest in their businesses or help them find jobs. As diversity and pluralism in the U.S. increase, religious groups help their constituencies fit in better in American society.

Many different types of organizations—especially voluntary associations—have these benefits for new immigrants. Other groups as well as religious congregations sponsor English classes, help people form social networks and provide an informal welfare or emergency-aid fund. Why are religious organizations distinct? What particular effects does religion—as a set of beliefs, practices and identities—have on how immigrants become incorporated into a new society?

In *Sacred Assemblies and Civic Engagement* Fred Kniss and Paul Numrich take an important step in answering these questions by examining immigrant religious congregations in the greater Chicago area. Kniss is associate professor and chair of

sociology at Loyola University Chicago, while Numrich is director of the Program in World Religions at the Theological Consortium of Greater Columbus in Ohio. (Disclosure note: I know both of the authors and was well aware of the project as it was in process; also, I know several of the sites about which they report, as I have done research on religion in Chicago myself. However, I did not read this book or comment on it before it was published.)

Kniss and Numrich explore how religion affects the ways in which immigrant religious groups adjust to American life and become active in public life beyond their congregations. Rather than focusing only on how religious groups respond to outside pressure to adjust and assimilate, Kniss and Numrich also examine how religion affects the groups' attempts to affect the surrounding society. The authors take religion seriously: they assume that religious beliefs and practices shape how congregations think about society and their role in it, and thus shape what type of public actions they engage in and with what goals. Because not all congregations within one faith will be the same in these matters, they found different kinds of congregations within each religion. They ended up with 16 different congregations—three Roman Catholic, three Protestant, two Orthodox Christian, two Muslim, three Hindu, two Buddhist and one Jewish. Each congregation has significant numbers of new immigrants among its members.

On the basis of their prior research, Kniss and Numrich identified three aspects of a group's religious life that affect the degree to which and the manner in which a group engages the larger civic sphere. The first factor is the amount of sectarianism in a group's approach to society. Are they in tension with their surroundings, believing that they need to closely watch their boundaries lest other ideas or practices influence their faith? Or are they more tolerant of and open to general trends in culture and religion?

The second factor is the way the group conceives of moral authority. Does moral authority emerge from the collective and its tradition—perhaps from sacred texts or a religious hierarchy? Or is moral authority placed in the individual and the individual's moral conscience and religious beliefs? Third is what the religious group considers its moral project. Is the group primarily interested in building a community of believers—in which case its moral project is collective and shared—or is its moral project to develop empowered but relatively autonomous individuals through efforts at reform, persuasion and education in the faith?

One can imagine how these factors influence a religious group's stance toward public affairs. A highly sectarian group may have difficulty participating in ventures with other religious groups, such as soup kitchens or neighborhood forums. A group that conceives of itself as building and protecting a moral community may be reluctant to allow its children into public education or may not be receptive to interfaith marriages. To illustrate these dynamics, the book pays particular attention to four important areas of social life—occupation and economic adaptation, education, marriage patterns and language. In each of these areas, the authors compare and contrast the experiences and perspectives of the congregations, asking about the extent to which sectarianism, moral authority and the moral project shape what happens.

For example, there is a very interesting section on Muslim schools, comparing the different approaches of the schools connected to the two congregations in the study. Kniss and Numrich then expand the comparison to Catholic and Lutheran parochial schools, which, of course, have a long history in the U.S. They conclude that a fairly high degree of sectarianism and a collectivist moral project lead groups to form parochial schools. However, these schools also require significant money and material resources and often open up as they develop. It is difficult to maintain them as separatist, subculture-protecting institutions.

The authors think of civic engagement in terms of both citizenship and what they call organizational ecology. They define citizenship broadly to include not just electoral politics but also participation in organizations such as the PTA. This type of engagement they find to be largely individual. The groups that put moral authority in the individual are more likely to encourage such individual involvement in public life and to provide programs or aid for doing so. The particularities of individuals' circumstances, such as how long they have been in the U.S. and whether they have children, matter greatly for this type of involvement.

Organizational ecology involves the range of relationships a congregation has with all other institutions and organizations. For example, a congregation has a geographic ecology in that it is located in a particular place and neighborhood. Some congregations relate more than others do to their immediate surroundings, thinking of the neighborhood as their parish. Congregations also have an economic ecology in that they deal with businesses from which they purchase goods and services. And congregations have a religious ecology in that they are often nested in ecclesiastical associations or hierarchies, and they themselves often spin off smaller associations.

Both citizenship and organizational ecology involve complex interactions among sectarianism, moral authority and the moral project.

Throughout the book, Kniss and Numrich weave together the personal stories of people they interviewed with observations they gleaned while visiting congregations. They also examine congregational Web sites, newsletters, worship service bulletins and so on. And as they consider each area of social life they compare and contrast how various issues play out in various congregations. This approach is extremely effective analytically, but there are some downsides to their style of presentation as well. The reader does not get to know the congregations or the immigrant groups being studied. There are plenty of books that offer an up-close and personal account of immigrant congregations, and Kniss and Numrich are deliberately not doing that. But the many comparisons and often fleeting references to the ways in which various congregations did one thing or another often had me paging back to remind myself which congregations were which and composed of what people. The analyses are persuasive, but the groups themselves do not come into focus.

This is a complex and sophisticated analysis: it takes three religious factors, examines them in four areas of social life and assesses the impact on two forms of civic engagement. Diagramming the arguments in the book would produce a lot of crisscrossing arrows indicating cause and influence. This is good—the world is a complex place and the authors don't try to reduce that complexity. But it is also difficult to come up with a bottom-line lesson here. Kniss and Numrich seem to recognize this because they devote the last chapter to recommendations for government, for other scholars studying immigrant religion and for religious groups that coexist with immigrant communities. This last section contains an interesting discussion about missionary initiatives and interfaith dialogues—how these often involve different groups but sometimes exist in tension within a single group. This will become more relevant as U.S. religious diversity grows while the nation remains a highly religious society.

There is a lot to learn here about immigrant religion and about congregational life generally. This is not a how-to book for interfaith relations, nor does it offer sound bite-style conclusions. But it is worth a careful reading. I found it to be generally optimistic—Kniss and Numrich show that there are several roads to adaptation to a new society and that religious organizations can be relevant in a variety of ways. Many people worry that increasing diversity is damaging the fabric of U.S. society.

Carefully researched books such as this one provide plenty of reason to think otherwise.