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Liberal Individualism and Civic Integration among America's New Religious Communities

This presentation addresses the ways in which liberal individualism, as a cultural paradigm shapes public life and civic action in American society, particularly with reference to communities of “new immigrants” – those groups who have arrived in large numbers since the change in immigration law in 1965. Two things make this historical moment distinct from the narratives and experiences of previous groups of newcomers to the U.S. (although I will also point to significant similarities as well).

First, there is a diversity to the most recent immigrants that was less true of earlier generations. Many of our most recent arrivals are not Christians, and communities of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists populate our cities (and increasingly smaller places) in ways they had not before. And new immigrants are not uniformly coming here as impoverished. While that is still true for some groups, changes in immigration policy has also opened the door to numbers of highly educated, middle-class people. Thus, the characteristics of our current immigrant populations have changed.

Second, the assumption of assimilation – or “Anglo conformity” – as the path to American success has been seriously challenged, both in theory and in practice.

I wish to investigate the construction of public identities, especially by second and third generation non-Christians, and the use of those identities as a means of civic engagement. Almost two generations have passed since the explosion of “civil rights” rocked American political culture. One outcome has been an assertion of the value of pluralism to our national life, as well as a concomitant resistance to that development. But the assumption of “blending” into American culture has been largely abandoned by many people – even as it often happens in practice.

Along with historical and theoretical considerations, I draw on a recent research project that includes groups of second-generation non-Christians. I examine what these groups can show us about American political culture and civic life – how it simultaneously makes room for innovative forms of engagement even as it often enforces conformity to hegemonic forms of talk and organization.