All Look the Same?
Asian American Catholics and Racism

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Generations of Asian Americans have experienced great adversity within the prejudicial matrix of society, religion and race in the U.S. What pastoral strategies can address the issue of racism and Asian American Catholics today?

Racism in America affects all areas of people’s lived-experience. Racism is not a matter only of individual attitude but also of social structure. The general discussion of racism in society can be contentious, and when addressed to the Catholic Church in America, it raises disturbing concerns, issues, and questions. Is racism recognized among faithful believers? Is it appropriately addressed in the Catholic Church? A struggle exists between actually showing that it occurs in light of the persistent denial of it. There is also the tendency to believe that if one is not actively engaged in racism, then it cannot persist. Discussing racism offers the church a chance to reflect and evaluate itself in light of the gospel message.

This article will specifically address the experience of racism among Asian Americans within the American Catholic Church. First, I will explain how race restrictions to naturalization and citizenship have affected the perception of Asians in America. Second, I will describe how religion and race were prominent factors of the immigrant experience in America, especially how the Catholic Church reacted to the growing population of Asian American Catholics. Finally, I will suggest some pastoral strategies to address the issue of racism and Asian American Catholics.

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“Asian American” a Brand Label?

The “Asian American” label attempts to identify foreign- and American-born individuals of Asian ancestry. It is a relatively new racial category that was coined over forty years ago during the height of the 1960s political activism to mobilize Asians, and also to counter the use of terms such as “Mongolian,” “Asiatic,” and “Oriental” that have been part of the racial vocabulary for decades. It also incorporates persons of Asian ancestry who were American permanent residents and citizens, to distinguish them from a white majority, while acknowledging commonality with other racial and ethnic groups. Interestingly, “Asian American” was not decreed by governmental or by other external authorities but rather was coined mainly by U.S.-born Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese college students and community-based organizations on the West Coast and in New York (Lott, 77). Many were second- and third-generation Asian Americans. For some, this label has worked well to unite disparate ethnics; for others it has created an uneasy alliance, especially when many of these cultures have been involved historically in conflict and hatred. Nevertheless, the label has survived and maintains a catch-all for identification. It should also be noted that the term “Asian” has traditionally referred to only Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. I will use “Asian” more broadly to include all ethnics from the Asian continent. Yet, how does it work as a racial category?

The United States government—through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies and through the processes of naturalization and citizenship—has attempted to identify who Asians are in America. These laws established racial differences through the construction of ethnic identities (Haney-Lopez, 20). Since the first naturalization act of 1790, the right to naturalization was restricted to “free white persons.” Asians, at this time, were considered to be “aliens ineligible to citizenship.” This was concretely expressed through the exclusionary laws against Chinese in 1882, against South Asians in 1917, against Koreans and Japanese in 1924, and against Filipinos in 1934.

Congress never enacted a law that specifically names “Asians” or “Orientals” as an Asiatic racial category...the sequence of laws in 1882, 1917, 1924, and 1934...combined with the series of repeal acts overturning these exclusions, constructed a common racial categorization for Asians that depended on consistently racializing each national-origin group as “nonwhite.” (Lowe, 19)

Thus, becoming a citizen meant also becoming white because during this period citizenship was guaranteed to whites and freed blacks (who consequently were “legally” white). The requirements for citizenship changed with a series of Asian exclusion repeal acts passed between 1943 and 1952 that dramatically transformed the status of immigrants of all Asian origins from “aliens ineligible” to that of citizen (Lowe, 7). Furthermore, the shift in Asian immigrants to the United States
after the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished former national-origin quotas and exclusions, yielded to the broadening of the identities of “Asian Americans.”

Currently, almost half of Asian Americans are U.S.-born citizens and of that group, many date the history of their settlement in the United States back four or five generations. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the population of Asians was counted at about 11 million, or 4.3% of the total population. It is projected that by the middle of the twenty-first century, 10% of the U.S. population will be Asians. This significant increase will make Asian Americans much more visible in all areas of American society.

How is racism experienced by Asian Americans? What occurs for Asian Americans is racial lumping, which generates the most common forms of discrimination against Asian Americans, including, on the one hand, the ascription of specific ethnic characteristics to all Asian Americans. On the other hand, each ethnic group loses its particular character under the umbrella of “Asian American.”

Inevitably, the ethnic characterization fall into two categories: positive or negative. Positive ethnic stereotypes to all Asian Americans glosses over educational and economic inequities among Asian Americans, and engenders resentment toward Asian Americans by other racial minorities. This is exemplified through the “model minority” stereotype that has created pressure on Asian Americans to succeed (Angelo, 44).

Negative ethnic stereotypes—such as the unwillingness to learn English, unfriendliness, and passivity—breed both racial defamation and racial aggression, including anti-Asian violence. Further, Asian Americans face racial demands, even though they are born and raised in America, to speak their native language fluently, practice all the traditions and customs of the “home” country, and to know the history of their “home” country. These expectations can be innocent, but when Asian Americans are confronted with these on a regular basis it reemphasizes the fact that they remain forever foreign in America (Angelo, 130).

Racial lumping also masks the fact of racism between the Asian cultures and within individual ethnic groups. Historical and cultural tensions have not created explicit hostilities in the United States, but rather maintain hardened attitudes that obstruct productive cooperation among individuals and communities. Within ethnic groups, there is discrimination against recent newcomers. Newcomers are a reminder of the “forever-foreign” place of established Asian Americans because
they struggle to learn the English language and the American culture. Newcomers represent a never-ending cycle of being marginalized people in which Asian Americans have worked hard to overcome.

Many problems of racism that Asian Americans encountered are similar to previous immigrant groups: obtaining language skills, joining the workforce, intermarriage, participating in civic duties and religions. An added difference is that Asian Americans’ physical features also created an easy target for discrimination. The strategy to overcome racism was sought in religion; however, the participation in religion created mixed results for the Asian American, especially with the expectation of religion as transcending the scourge of racism.

_Becoming American: Race and Religion_

From America’s birth, religious discourse was closely intertwined with the entities of race and culture. It played a pivotal role in the construction of the white race in America.

In 1875, with the publication of the first truly popular book on comparative religion in America . . . James Freeman Clarke’s *Ten Great Religions* oriented the reader with the statement that “each race, beside its special moral qualities, seems also to have special religious qualities, which, cause it to tend toward some one kind of religion more than to another kind. These religions are the flower of the race.” (Snow, 269)

The task of the mainstream American population was to connect whiteness to rationalist Christianity and nonwhiteness to heathen imagination and emotion, or else to spiritual wisdom transcending rationality. These links are no less prevalent, though perhaps more subtle in America today. It is relatively recent that Americans made a concerted effort to separate them (Snow, 269).

Moreover, recent studies of post-1965—mostly non-European—immigrant groups have neglected to examine the role of race in their religious experiences. For example, neither of two major edited volumes (*Gathering in Diaspora* and *Religion and the New Immigrants*) on contemporary immigrant groups’ religions has treated race as a significant category of analysis (although each has paid enough attention to the role of gender) (Min, 21). This may be contributed to the fact that religion tends to be seen as a garden for peacemaking rather than a patch for racism. David Yoo, an Asian American scholar, has stated that “religion does not necessarily transcend the bounds of race” (Yoo, xvii). The sentiment refers to the fact that race and religion have been so entwined that both must appear together in any discussion on American culture.
The complex interaction of religion and race shaped the lives of immigrants and the ideals of American citizenship. To become American translated into becoming Christian. Whites rallied around the hope that if blacks, Native Americans, and the masses of immigrants could only be converted to genuine Christianity, they would also become Anglo-Saxon (Lee, 104). This sentiment continues to be a part of the American psyche.

For the most part, Asians were automatically considered adherers to Eastern religions that deny the immediate authority of God (a Judeo-Christian God). Even if Asians were Christians or converts to Christianity, they were still suspect. The few contemporary American religious historians who give attention to Asian Americans gravitate toward either an assimilationist reading of the Asian American Christians or a sentimentalized reading of “non-Christian” Asian religious communities. Through these interpretations, Asian cultural difference is then either erased beneath the canopy of white Christianity or constructed as the untouchable “other.” As racial minorities, Asian Americans often find they lack full acceptance by members of the dominant society regardless of their level of religious and cultural assimilation and participation.

For Asian Americans, who are Christians, the designation of Christians as “assimilated” fails to recognize how individuals and communities have consciously forged a religious identity in opposition to the discrimination that they have faced and continue to face. The founding and ongoing presence of separate denominations and churches testify to the contested nature of Asian American Christianity (Yoo, xvii). For Catholics, the different ethnic parishes and churches also support this fact. The ethnic communities still feel misunderstood because of their incorporation of indigenous customs and symbols in the liturgies or they feel marginalized because they maintain more traditional devotions and practices.

Furthermore, historian Gary Okihiro contends that whatever it is that makes Asians different from what is considered American is construed as something that is permanent or something to be erased (Okihiro, 30). This type of consideration can be applied to the way mainline Protestants assumed that Asian Americans (as well as all immigrants) would inevitably assimilate into the mainstream and therefore did not require any special attention.

Originally our race stock was exclusively Caucasian, for though both the American Indian race and the African were found upon our territory, yet neither of these entered into the body politic or was a real factor in the social structure. So, too, we were a specifically English-speaking people and a Protestant nation as to all our mental habits and ideas of personal liberty both of thought and action; yet full of religious reverence, Sabbath keeping, Bible reading, and law abiding. (Lee, 101)

Chinese and Japanese transience and reluctance to embrace Christianity discouraged Protestant missionaries and contributed to the loss of confidence in Christian
conversion as a means of assimilation. By the end of World War I, many Protestant mission boards felt that they had overcommitted their ministry resources among Asian Americans (Lee, 105). The Catholic Church’s response to racism and the Asian Americans experience have not been particularly innovative either.

**American Catholic Church and Race Issues**

The first Vatican document to deal exclusively with racism was published in 1989. The U.S. Catholic Bishops issued three statements against racism in 1958, 1968, and then again in 1979. The 1979 pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us* describes racism as an “evil” that violates human dignity. The letter suggests that racism is manifested in contemporary life, with a sense of indifference to the marginalized and an overemphasis on individualism. The bishops call the U.S. church and society to conversion and renewal. The letter advocates domestic and international policies that alleviate the tragic effects of racism.

The bishops emphasize also that each of us as Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past. Many of us have been prisoners of fear and prejudice. We have preached the gospel while closing our eyes to the racism it condemns. We have allowed conformity to social pressures to replace compliance with social justice (USCCB, 31). The fact is that there have been attitudes and actions that have contributed to racism in the church. Highlighting a few of these attitudes will help us take better action in the future.

Of the over 11 million Asian Americans, more than 35% claim Christianity as their religion with over 21% embracing Catholicism. Among Asian Americans, the largest number of Catholics is found among Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Koreans with growing number of Catholics among other Asian ethnics (USCCB 2001, 9). I will highlight a few incidents of racism that was endured by Asian Americans, and then, discuss some attitudes of racism that hinder full inclusion of Asian Americans into the American Catholic Church.

A reaction from James Bouchard, S.J., challenged the immigration of Chinese into America in a published article in the *San Francisco Catholic Guardian* in 1873. He questioned the sincerity of the Chinese especially since the efforts to evangelize was not very fruitful. He stated that “they are an inferior race of people and consequently cannot be a safe class . . . of people in our country” (Burns, 233). This was in reaction to efforts of Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany of San Francisco to help the growing Chinese population.

Archbishop Alemany invited Father Thomas Cian, the first Chinese priest to work in the United States in 1854. Cian encountered a few Chinese Catholics widely scattered (some fifty or sixty in San Francisco and the mining regions), and a hostile, racist environment (many Catholics on the West Coast had difficulty believing Cian was a priest because he was Chinese). Cian wrote in 1855: “I cannot see much prospect of doing much good here.” He petitioned to build a small chapel
for Chinese Catholics in San Francisco, as he witnessed the inroads being made by Protestant clergymen among the Chinese. No chapel was ever built. At the heart of Cian’s difficulty was that he did not speak the same dialect as the majority of the Chinese in San Francisco. Discouraged by his lack of success, Cian returned to China via Italy in 1865 (McGloin, 50).

There is an estimated one million Filipino Catholics in the U.S.; however, they have been one of the least recognized communities either because members are mistakenly regarded as Hispanic due to their surnames or because they are taken for granted since they communicate well in English and are then expected to adhere strictly to the “American style” of Catholicism. “A singular complaint of Filipino Catholics is that the Roman Catholic Church is forcing them to be like everybody else” (Almirol, 309). Another immigrant added that “we were different and different was equated with inferiority. We were treated like dirt by the Americans, regardless of whether we professed to be Catholics or Protestants” (Almirol, 306). For these reasons, many Filippino Catholics have stopped going to church or have sought other religious groups more welcoming of them and more relevant to their needs (Almirol, 310). The Catholic Church has recently responded to this problem by revitalizing its Ethnic Ministries (in lieu of the earlier American church tradition of creating national parishes) and increasing its efforts to recruit, in this case, Filipino clergy and laypeople to these agencies.

The Vietnamese American Catholics in the Diocese of San Jose in 1981 petitioned to have an ethnic parish established. They felt that similar to previous immigrants such as the Germans, Irish, and Italians this request would be easily accommodated. However, Bishop Pierre DuMaine only set up a center but not an ethnic parish, which ignited controversy among the Vietnamese Catholics. This struggle between certain factions within the Vietnamese Catholic community and the bishop continued for almost twenty years when an ethnic parish was finally established (Burns, 290). Several newspaper accounts describe this controversy as an internal church struggle or a political power play. But the history of the national churches built by previous immigrants was very much instigated by the tension of racism.

Besides these public incidents of racism, there are overall attitudes about how Asian Americans practice Catholicism. One sentiment is that Asian American Catholics are traditional in their practices. This implies that the Asian Catholics are better accepted by “traditional” Catholics because they maintain an old world
Catholicism that distinguish them not only as traditional “white” Catholics but also as part of immigrant groups who have not adapted to the practices of Catholicism today. This contributes also to the “model minority” tension among Asian Americans as also succeeding in terms of religion. They are then distinguished from other minority groups that have become lapsed in devout practice.

Many experiences of racial discrimination have influenced first-generation immigrants to return or establish ethnic parishes. These ethnic parishes have become safe havens. Ethnic churches have a three-part role in dealing with cultural and Christian encounters; they have their own ethnic culture, the dominant American culture, and other American-ethnic cultures to consider (Park, 93).

Nevertheless, these ethnic parishes need to be reevaluated, especially since the vast majority is not only of one racial background but also as one ethnic heritage as well. There are a couple of reasons for this ethnic segregation. First, most Asian American churches are immigrant churches. Immigrants established them for the purpose of worshiping and socializing in their native tongue. The ethnic churches are most prominent among the first generation. The sole ethnic character is built into its original design. The uniformed ethnic aspect of the church is arguably the most significant drawing factor for new members and visitors. Many Asian American churchgoers admit that their initial reason for attending a church was to meet other ethnics. In a sense, any subsequent religious conversion stems from the original desire for ethnic fellowship.

Second, the large degree of ethnic separatism among Asian American churches is simply due to the enormous number of internal differences. The “Asian” racial category is a social construct in the United States that encompasses a wide range of cultures and histories. Although East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China do share some cultural similarities based on Confucian ideals, each country has its own distinct culture, including language.

**Taking Action: What Next?**

It is difficult to eradicate racism; however, the attitudes of religiously minded people can change in order for right behavior to be actualized. The spiritual giant of Christianity, Saint Francis has been an inspiration not only to his own religious order but to the church universal. During his lifetime, St. Francis allowed the other to be other. He demonstrated the real possibility of living in peace with diverse others while at the same time remaining totally himself. Francis showed us the kind of self we have to be to live in harmony with others (Blastic, 12).

Reflecting on Francis’s engagement not only with the Muslims but with his own brothers, Michael Blastic concludes three points that will help us elaborate what concrete things dioceses and parishes can do to develop strong Asian American Catholic communities: (1) To live among and not stand over against others. (2) To be
subject to others for God’s sake. This means not having power over others. (3) To preach the word, one must listen for the word from God in order to determine that the preaching is pleasing to God.

The first consideration to live among and not over against is appropriately applied to dioceses where offices of ethnicity ministries have been collapsed or eliminated. There is a need to revitalize these ministries. These ministerial programs should be revamped in order to take into consideration the diverse experiences of the various Asian ethnicities. Where the cost cutting is necessary to maintain a viable organization, the dioceses must consider where growth in the church is viable. The growth will be among the ethnic communities. Asian Americans will remain within a church that will recognize their value and worth.

The second consideration of being subject to others applies to social ministries to Asian Americans and also Asian Americans toward others. It was not until 1975 when the American Catholic Church got involved with resettling Southeast Asian refugees that the church recognized a presence of Asian American Catholics. Since then the bishops have encouraged Asian American Catholics to create a national organization that is in its seminal stages now. With the revamping at the USCCB, there are efforts to create an office for Asian and Pacific American concerns. Furthermore, Bishop Dominic Luong (one of three Asian American bishops) has stated that Vietnamese American Catholics tend to care for one another and do not extend a helping hand to other groups. Andrew Sung Park has also stated the same about Korean Christian communities. This is a concern that needs to be addressed in order for Asian Americans to live fully the gospel message of caring for the other while they have been welcomed as members of the larger society. The reality is also that Asian Americans are moving into leadership positions in the various parishes and dioceses and the necessity to help others outside of the particular ethnic group is important.

The third consideration of preaching can help with the training of new priests and lay leaders. Seminaries and theologates must become places where pastors and lay leaders are trained and equipped with skills to minister effectively in culturally diverse environments. Some complaints have been that seminaries had seen Asian Americans as training to minister only to their ethnic group. This overlooks the second-, third-, or fourth-generation Asian American who only speaks English. There is also a need to have teachers and administrators who are aware of the needs of the Asian American. We need innovative parishes that are willing to take the lead in the church in modeling what it means to welcome persons

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from outside their racial constituency into their communal life. Parishes should intentionally use race as a factor to help them maintain, or build on, their racial diversity.

Worship style is an important way to symbolize to visitors acceptance of other races. An inclusive worship style communicates to visitors of different races that they, and their cultures, are respected. Justo Gonzalez states that “worship is a rehearsal and an act of proclamation.” This means that the church needs to make every effort that “every nation and tribe and people and language be present and represented; that no one be excluded or diminished because of their tribe, or nation, or people, or language” (Gonzalez, 110).

Finally, the current debates over immigration regulations have drawn the attention of the American Catholic hierarchy, especially Cardinal Mahony of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He has launched a campaign for immigrant justice to care for immigrants both documented and undocumented. There were over 500,000 undocumented Asians in 2000 (Office of Policy, 10). It is predicted that the number will continue to increase substantially in the future. Hence, it is necessary to pay attention to immigration issues, especially because racism has determined the naturalization process in America.

Conclusion

Breaking down obstacles and challenges of racism, Asians have inserted themselves into the American Catholic Church, which has always been a mixture of immigrants and refugees. Asian Americans will continue to participate and grow in the Catholic Church. Their presence is already secured by the increasing number of priestly and religious vocations. It is necessary to nurture these aspiring new leaders to not only bridge stronger ties between Asian American Catholics with others, but also to have them claim ownership in a church that opens doors to the other in the spirit of God’s love.

References


