“They keep asking me where I am from. When I tell them I am from Chicago, they then ask where I was born. When I tell them I was born in Mercy Hospital, they follow-up by asking where my parents come from. When I tell them my parents are from Houston, they will ask further and further until they hear an exotic Asian name,” whines Vinh while sharing his experience of being an American of Asian descent. Vinh’s experience is by no means unique.

Asian Americans feel they are living in what Vietnamese American theologian Peter Phan calls “at the margin.” They are betwixt and between: neither Asian (since they are disengaged from their ancestral homeland) nor American (since their phenotype differs from that of the majority Euro-American population). They don’t seem to be accepted by either Asia or America. While European and African immigrants and their descendants encounter little difficulty in being identified as Americans, immigrants from Asia continue to be looked upon as guests, visitors, or outsiders.

This becomes even more challenging, because among themselves there is no agreement as to whether they prefer to be identified as Asians or Americans. Some consider “Asian” as an adjective for “American,” while others look upon the “American” as qualifier for “Asian.” We can actually identify basic intergenerational trends in this regard.

Generational Differences

First Generation

The first generation, especially those who arrived in the United States as adults, is more prone to placing the accent on the Asian. Some, in particular those who had come reluctantly or were forced to take refuge here, continue to reminisce nostalgically about their beloved homeland and have secret hopes of returning to it someday. They cling to their ancestral cultures and customs and are emphatic about preserving and perpetuating their roots. Ethnic churches and traditional religious practices become important as are the continued use of the mother tongue and the sociocentric way of being and relating.

In the process they find themselves more and more segregated from not only the

Edmund K. F. Chia is assistant professor of doctrinal studies at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. His e-mail address is echia@ctu.edu.
mainstream of American society but also from the younger generation within their own Asian American community. Not caring much about integrating with the mainstream, these first-generation Asian Americans, many of whom were forced into a downward socioeconomic mobility upon their arrival in the United States, have little hope but to live their upward dreams vicariously in their children. This is evidenced in the constant push they give their children to work hard so that the latter can achieve the success necessary in order to be able to give the former a better life in their old age and retirement. Ironically, it is this that exacerbates the generational differences, further compounded by the cultural differences.

Second Generation

The more they are expected to excel, the more the younger generation Asian Americans strive to work against the ways of their parents. This is by no means an act of infidelity or a lack of filial piety but a necessary act in order to succeed in the American culture. The key, as the younger generation sees it, is that they need to be better assimilated if not integrated into the majority Euro-American community. Otherwise they will continue to be marginalized much the same way their parents had been.

Thus, younger Asian Americans, especially those of the second and also the “1.5-generation,” prefer to stress their American identity and are even at times embarrassed of their Asian roots. In their need to identify with the majority they strive hard to speak without an accent and do all they can to adopt the habits and behaviors of their Euro-American peers. Some even go to the extent of obtaining “corrective” surgery on their almond-shaped eyes, pint-sized nose, or work on their straight black hair.

To accentuate further their American identity they begin to see their parents’ ways as representing the “old world” and regard the return to the various symbols of tradition as regressive. They also tend to look at the norms and rules established by their elders as unreasonable and even indicative of backwardness. For instance, the rigid, authoritarian, and stifling ways in which they have been brought up are outright old-fashioned when compared to the more democratic and respectful ways their Euro-American peers grew up in.

They also have little interest in attending ethnic churches or participating in rituals and devotions peculiar to their homeland, such as rosary recitations, feast-day novenas, or devotions to the Santo Niño or Our Lady of La Vang. This younger generation also has a more critical appreciation of the church and religion in general, partly on account of their exposures in American schools and partly on account of peer influence and the need to be individuated from their parents and their culture. This has in part contributed to Asian Americans actually losing their Asian identity, a seemingly inevitable process given the challenges confronting this minority group.

History of Discrimination

Even history has not been too kind on this nascent community in their attempt to establish a place for themselves ever since arriving in what is supposed to be the “land of freedom.” If the Chinese were the first wave of Asians to come to the United States, they were also the first to experience drastic discrimination. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, renewed in 1892, and permanently instituted in 1902, suspended Chinese immigration to the United States even as they had provided years of cheap labor for backbreaking work in the gold mines and on the railroads since the 1850s. (Or, was it their willingness to work for such low wages that brought upon them the ire of the dominant and more organized European immigrants? Does this not sound familiar in today’s
immigration debate?) The Chinese were thus the first group of people to be discriminated against by the U.S. legal system solely on the basis of their race and nationality.

The Japanese, who were the second wave of Asians to migrate to the United States, found themselves at one point being forcibly removed, relocated, and incarcerated—a tragedy that befell them after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. By contrast, no such draconian measure was taken out on Germans and Italians living in the United States, the other enemies of the Allied forces. (Again, history repeats itself: Muslims and peoples of Middle-Eastern descent are currently the targets of such acts of racial profiling, as the United States continues to deal with the aftermath of 9/11 and the so-called “war on terror.”)

Such acts of direct and indirect discrimination against Asians (read: inferior race) continued, mainly sanctioned by the U.S. legislation, making it difficult for migrants of Asian descent to integrate with the mainstream American society. With the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act and the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, the situation improved as the laws made it easier for Asian Americans to attain citizenship in the United States. This was also about the time the label “Asian American” began to gain currency.

Asian American Consciousness

Historically, it was the civil rights movement of the 1960s that gave rise to Asian American consciousness. Ethnic studies programs began developing in response so that by the late 1970s more than a dozen universities had Asian American studies in their faculties. This development was also in part due to the disproportional intake of Asian Americans into universities, especially the Ivy League schools (current statistics point to Asian Americans representing 4 percent of the population but making up 6 percent of students in universities and 10–30 percent in Ivy Leagues).

Model Minority

Ironically, if it was the civil rights movement that birthed Asian American consciousness, it was also this same movement that the Asian Americans were used to counter. In 1966 the New York Times and U.S. News & World Report labeled Asian Americans as the “model minority” of American society. The stereotype perpetuated was that through sheer hard work, supported by a close-knit family espousing the so-called “Asian family values” of discipline, delayed gratification, and self-sacrifice, the Asian American community has been able to accomplish much and attain the American dream, mainly by themselves and without support from the government.

This was actually no more than a myth: the Asian American community is also disproportionately represented among the least educated and those below the poverty level in American society. This is especially true of the migrants from Indo-China, victims and refugees of the Vietnam and Indo-China wars of the 1970s, and those who lack the education and language skills for adequate adjustment in the United States.

Middle Minority

The model minority myth was also seen as having been perpetuated by the dominant white class to counter the demands of the minority black class for access to greater privileges and government-funded affirmative action programs. It was used as a kind of “weapon” to attribute the failure of the black community to dysfunction within the family, sheer laziness, and the lack of ambition and will power.

As expected, the myth pits the yellow Asian American community against the black African American community, both
minorities competing for the same scarce resources. This antagonistic relationship irrupted at the Los Angeles race riots following the Rodney King trial of 1992. The yellow-skinned Asian community has thus been used as the “middle minority,” acting as a buffer between the dominant and power-wielding white class against the disadvantaged and power-seeking black class.

Long Road Ahead

The situation has by no means improved in any significant measure. Asian Americans have a long way to go before they are fully accepted as Americans. In the meantime they will have no place to call “home” as even when they go to Asia the local people will be asking them, “Where are you from?”

References


Min, Pyong Gap, and Jung Ha Kim, eds. Religions in Asian America: Building Faith Communities. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta-Mira, 2002.
