

Issue Brief: Bi/Multiracial and Minority Religions

Key Words

Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Race, Segregation/Integration

Description

This issue brief discusses the intersection of race and religion in American politics on both a macro and micro level. The macro level discusses the lingering effects of segregation in American places of worship and the effect of multiracial/multicultural congregations, and the micro level discusses the individualized experience of being bi or multi-racial in a minority religion.

Key Points

- America is unique in its high adherence to and diversity of religion
- Religious groups in America remain largely divided by race
- Racial segregation in American religion ties politics, sex and power
- Islam and Judaism are the largest minority religions, one is very racially segregated, the other is racially diverse
- Integrating religions may ease political and racial friction in the United States

Issue Brief

America's First Amendment guarantees among the most liberal protections of religious freedom in the Western world. Although the United States is a nation in which people are generally free to worship as they please, religions remain largely segregated by race within the U.S. This fact leads to tensions faced by newcomers to racially homogeneous religions that are not of the dominant race, and raises complications for those who do not fit comfortably within one racial category. Studies suggest that congregations that take a proactive stance in seeking racial diversity reduce interracial tensions and that a similar national effort would have the same effect on a grander scale.

According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 76% of Americans identify as Christians, 15% identify as non-religious or "none," 1.2% identify as Jewish and 0.6% identify as Muslim.¹ Though Christianity is by far the dominant religion in American society, it can be divided into factions and thus each Christian denomination, for the sake of this brief, may be considered a "minority religion." Thus, within

Christianity, racial composition varies by denomination, with Catholics being largely comprised of Latinos and Protestants are comprised mostly of whites.

Racial segregation in American religion stems from both racial and non-racial factors. In their article, “Multiracial Congregations: An analysis of Their Development and Typology,” Michael Emerson and Karen Chai Kim states that geography, in part, determines how congregations are racially divided, “religious congregations also reflect the racial composition of the neighborhoods and environments in which they are located.” This may be a remnant of legally proscribed racial segregation by neighborhood, but geography alone is not a racial motive. Emerson and Kim also argue that religious social networks were key to aiding immigrants to the U.S. facilitate a sense of community through support groups, and/or group identity.



76% of Americans identify as Christians

Outside of Christianity, two of the largest minority religions in the U.S. are Judaism and Islam, both of which have a unique relationship with race. On the one hand, Judaism is almost exclusively racially categorized as “white,” while Islam is among the most racially diverse religions in America.



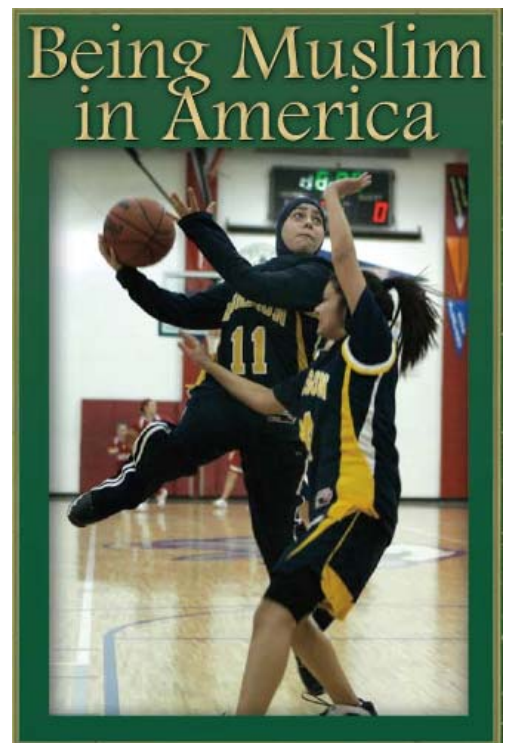
Judaism represents 1.2% of the American public and is predominantly comprised of white citizens. Bi/Multiracial Jews sometimes encounter definitional and social problems within Judaism.

Eric Goldstein's article "Contesting the Categories: Jews and Government Racial Classification in the United States," states that "Jews have found it difficult to find a comfortable space in the American racial schema." According to Goldstein, Jews in America had traditionally spoken of themselves as a "race," tracing their common religious and Eastern European heritage, but when the United States began imposing a racial category upon Jews, they found discomfort in its limiting definition and in its social and political power implications. As a result of their assimilative success and common phenotypic traits, American Jews are categorically grouped as "white," though Goldstein points out that government racial categorizations "can either vitiate or protect the rights, privileges and experiences commonly associated with citizenship." Thus, it is perhaps easy to see why religious groups might want to remain close to those most like them in race and social class.

On the opposite racial spectrum from Judaism is Islam. Though most Americans might assume that Muslims in the U.S. are of Arab descent, the U.S. State Department estimates that approximately 34 percent of American Muslims are of Pakistani or South Asian origin, 26 percent are of Arab descent, and 25 percent of Muslim Americans are African-American, making Islam one of, if not the, most diverse religions in the United States. Muslims in America are concentrated predominantly in urban areas and are noted to be particularly concentrated in areas surrounding universities.

Curtiss Paul DeYoung's book, United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation As an Answer to the Problem of Race, suggests that the racial divisions that permeate American society exacerbate racial tensions in the United States. DeYoung hypothesizes that racial tensions in the United States could be alleviated if religious congregations were more ethnically and racially diverse, though such an endeavor would require a proactive measure on the part of the congregations, as the Constitution forbids the government from endorsing one religion over another.

Religion in America remains entirely voluntary and protected from intervention on the part of the State. Thus, any racial integration will be catalyzed on the part of those who are religious. Still, while racial diversity within minority religious is not legally necessary, it may indeed provide a means of easing social tensions by allowing groups to look past racial difference and find common ground in religious ideology.



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- ⁱ http://b27.cc.trincoll.edu/weblogs/AmericanReligionSurveyARIS/reports/p3a_race.html
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