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NETWORKS, HOMES, OR CONGREGATIONS? EXPLORING THE LOCUS OF IMMIGRANT RELIGIOSITY\*

by

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ABSTRACT

The sociology of religion in the United States has considerable experience with the study of immigrant religion. Unfortunately, the assimilationist model that has dominated this study is only partly relevant to contemporary transnational migrations. This chapter assesses the latest version of this assimilationist model, R. Stephen Warner's "new congregationalism". While rightly focusing attention on the role that local congregations play in adjusting immigrants to American life, this approach underplays two key aspects of contemporary immigrant religiosity: 1) the transnational religious networks that make immigration no one-way street; and 2) the importance of non-churched religious practices, with their implications for the sustenance of religious identity. These two structural matters, along with the issue of race, question the completeness of "the new congregationalism" as a paradigm for understanding immigrant religion. They also throw doubt on any point of view that focuses primarily on religion's role in adjusting immigrants to their host societies.

The United States has long been described as a national of immigrants, wave after wave of which gradually moved from being "foreigners" to being "Americans". Conceived as riding an escalator, immigrants are imagined to work their way up from poverty and strangeness to become upstanding members of the American middle class.

While it is technically true that most Americans are descended from immigrants, this description hides as much as it reveals. The earliest English immigrants quickly re-imagined themselves as natives, annihilating or expelling the true natives – the American Indians. Two centuries of westward expansion transformed those natives who remained, along with the residents of Mexico's northern third, into foreigners in their own land. Early German and Dutch settlers were granted status as honorary natives, while slavery made African involuntary migrants into permanent foreigners. Only the Irish, beginning in the 1840s, and the waves of Italians, Poles, and southern and eastern Europeans who arrived between 1880 and 1920 actually followed the "classical" immigrant pattern. Both groups first developed their own institutions – among them religious ones – to aid their transition to American life. Over time, they were absorbed into the White majority.<sup>1</sup>

America is now in the midst of its third wave of immigration, which many assume will follow this assimilationist pattern. A 1965 change in immigration laws produced an influx of migrants from Latin America, East and South Asia, Africa, and other formerly excluded regions. According to the 2000 Census, 11% of the total population is foreign born, half of those coming from Latin America and one-fourth from Asia. 18% of the total population speaks a language other than English in the home; fewer than half of these report speaking English well. In California alone, some school children speak some 140 different languages.<sup>2</sup> The former American "melting-pot" has become a "salad" of quite diverse ingredients.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Information Online: [http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/\\_lang=en\\_vt\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF3\\_U\\_DP2\\_geo\\_id=01000US.html](http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/_lang=en_vt_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U_DP2_geo_id=01000US.html) (accessed 6 March, 2003). Ron Unz, "Bilingualism Vs. Bilingual Education," Los Angeles Times, October 19th 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Melting-pot language is now passé, though salad-language is no less assimilationist, recalling the American tendency to reduce ethnic differences to matters of food and dress (see John Van Maanen and André Laurent, "The Flow of Culture: Some Notes on Globalization and the Multinational Corporation," in Organization Theory and the Multinational Corporation, ed. Sumantra Ghoshal and D. Eleanor Westney, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993, 275-312).

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\* Pp 23-41 in Religion in the Context of African Migration, edited by Afe Adogame & Cordula Weissköppel. Bayreuth African Studies Series, No. 75, 2005.

American scholars have long recognized the important role that churches played in immigration assimilation. From H.R. Niebuhr's reflections on the relationship between immigration and denominationalization in the 1920s, through Will Herberg's claim in the 1950s that American immigration is a process of transforming oneself from ethnic foreigner to Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, up to the present day, sociologists have explored the ways that immigration and religion mediate one another.

Niebuhr's view is well known.<sup>4</sup> He focused on the fact that American denominations result from social divisions, among them the divisions between immigrants of different national origin. National denominations (among Protestants) and ethnic parishes (among Catholics) provided safe crucibles in which Croats, Norwegians, Dutch, Italians, Greeks, and others could become Americans. Thus Swedish Baptists – to take just one example – moved from being an old-country sect to a new-country denomination, using religion as a means to maintain a quasi-Swedishness as they became more and more like their neighbors. Their identity shifted from foreigner to hyphenated-American; their church served as midwife to this transformation.

Herberg, likewise, claimed that the American melting-pot re-sorted immigrants from many lands into three large baskets.<sup>5</sup> Where national origin was once their most salient characteristic, that salience has now been replaced by religion. Whether one accepts Herberg's original tripartite division of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, or splits Protestantism into its liberal and fundamentalist wings, the claim is still that ethnicity ultimately vanishes behind religion as a social boundary. Add to this the American sense that, to use a phrase attributed to our former President Dwight Eisenhower, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious

belief, and I don't care what it is"<sup>6</sup>, mutually tolerant religiosity becomes – in this assimilationist view – a means to social peace.

Nonetheless, the assimilationist approach is alive and well in American sociology of religion. The last decade has seen a renewal of interest in immigrant religion, spearheaded by R. Stephen Warner and his New Immigrant Religions project at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His Gatherings in Diaspora<sup>7</sup> collects sociological work on immigrant religious congregations, as does the related work of Helen Rose Ebaugh and her collaborators at the University of Houston.<sup>8</sup> There are now several studies of various immigrant congregations that track the ways in which religions help these groups "become American".

Warner's chief theoretical contribution to American sociology of religion is the concept of a "new congregationalism".<sup>9</sup> He correctly notes that the recent membership declines of American mainline denominations have not meant a loss of American religiosity. Instead, American religion is changing its form. No longer are national religious organizations the most prominent players; in their place have emerged strong local congregations, plural in type and scope. Such religious communities, Warner says, are the most significant part of the new religious landscape.

There are many reasons for thinking that this may be true, certainly for religion among non-immigrant Americans. While membership in mainline denominations has declined,<sup>10</sup> more and more churchgoers attend independent congregations. Warner is indeed describing one of the key structural transformations of at least the American religious scene and he is

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As Miskito Indian leader Steadman Fagoth noted, "Ethnic groups run restaurants," precisely because they have ceased being "a [separate] people". At least the melting-pot imagery recognized class divisions, for (to quote Vine Deloria, another American Indian leader) "in a true melting pot, the scum rises to the top and the people on the bottom get burned." The creation of supposedly post-ethnic America has not been the panacea that assimilationists often claim. (Both quotations are personal communications.)

<sup>4</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Meridian, 1929).

<sup>5</sup> Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960).

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "When Patriotism Wasn't Religious", New York Times, 2 July, 2002. Accessed from <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/patriotism.htm> on 7 March, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, eds., Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz, eds., Religion and the New Immigrants (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in American Congregations, ed. J.P. Wind and J.W. Lewis (1994), vol 2: 54-99.

<sup>10</sup> Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

describing it better than did the old secularization paradigm.<sup>11</sup> Warner's recent empirical work, however, has focused on immigration, and he treats immigrants' congregations as the paths by which their members can become just like their neighbors.

Warner does not claim that the multi-racial immigrants of today are exactly like European immigrants of a century ago. Nor does he claim that these immigrants will inevitably "melt" into the White majority, as (supposedly) did their predecessors. He points out, however, that immigrant religions seem to take on a peculiarly American cast in their new surroundings. That is, their religions become congregationalized – and this congregationalization helps immigrants become Americans in other ways. Thus East Indian temple worship in the "old country" becomes Hindu congregationalism in the new.<sup>12</sup> Jamaican Rastafari organize congregation-like "mansions" in New York.<sup>13</sup> Japanese Buddhists hold Sunday worship services. Warner emphasizes such structural shifts, but the story of a gradual erasing of ethnic boundaries, in favor of tolerantly held religious boundaries, is in the Niebuhrian and Herbergian tradition.

The question, however, is how much this view suppresses. Is the congregationalization of immigrant religion the whole story? To what degree does contemporary transnational migration differ from American immigration of a century ago? Do these differences have social consequences, both for religions and for the diasporas in which they set? Rather than approach such questions abstractly, I wish to point to some facets of contemporary immigrant religion in the United States that throw doubt on this thesis of congregationalizing assimilationism. Though Warner acknowledges these trends,<sup>14</sup> I believe that he undervalues them.

### Transnational Networks

The first important feature of contemporary immigration is its transnational character. While it is true that late-19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants frequently com-

municated with family in "the old country", the communications and transportation revolutions of the last fifty years have made such contacts more frequent. Non-refugees often expect to spend only part of their lives in their new countries; refugees and non-refugees alike expect their children to "go back home" for part of their schooling, to work, or – in the case of single men – to obtain brides.<sup>15</sup> None of these processes is new, but all are much easier than they were a century ago, and are thus more common. They reduce pressure on immigrants to use religion as a means of assimilation.

But there are more interesting aspects to such transnationalism. Peggy Levitt's recent book, Transnational Villagers, explores the networks by which religion not only provides immigrants with an American identity but also facilitates continued commerce between their new residence and home.<sup>16</sup> Dominican migrants to Jamaica Plain, a Boston neighborhood, continue their involvement with their home parishes in Miraflores, a small village in the Dominican Republic. Frequent travel, cheap electronic communications, and so on, make what is happening in one place seem just around the corner to residents of the other. Weddings, family feuds, parish politics, questions of religious practice, and the like span national boundaries to such an extent that these immigrants' social landscape can only be described by treating both locations in tandem. They are inseparable in a way that was not the case with the European immigration to America in the early 1900s.

Levitt is currently exploring whether this closeness continues to a second generation.<sup>17</sup> Past experience suggests that it will not, though a combination of easy transnational communication and American race consciousness may keep it alive longer than did the rudimentary old-country connections of the early 1900s immigration. This is the situation with many Mexican migrant workers in the American southwest. For example, the American town of Watsonville in California and the Mexican village of Gomez-Faríá in Michoacan have a similarly paired relationship; their ties are less oriented around churches than around schools, however.<sup>18</sup> As with Levitt's example, such transnational villagers manage to accomplish assimi-

<sup>11</sup> R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," American Journal of Sociology 98 (1993): 1044-93.

<sup>12</sup> John Y. Fenton, Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America (New York: Praeger, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Randal L. Hepner, "The House That Rasta Built: Church-Building and Fundamentalism Among New York Rastafarians," in Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 197-234.

<sup>14</sup> Warner, "Immigration and Religious Communities," 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Mira Nair's film Monsoon Wedding (2002) portrays such transnational movements in the life of an Indian family.

<sup>16</sup> Peggy Levitt, The Transnational Villagers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Peggy Levitt and Mary C. Waters, eds., The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Sanno Keeler, personal communication.

lation and transnationalism simultaneously, but the process is not as one-way as the assimilationist model contends.

A different kind of religious transnationalism occurs between Pentecostals of West Africa, Brazil, and the United States. A recent book edited by André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani notes that for many West Africans, the old sources of community – and especially the nation-state – have become unreliable.<sup>19</sup> Pentecostalism substitutes, they say, in part because it matches West African prosperity theology, in part because of its emotional appeal, and in part because of its dual transnational and congregational focus. Nigerian Pentecostals carry on a lively trade with Brazil<sup>20</sup>, both in resources and personnel, which gives the born-again in each locale a sense of wider support. Both also take from the U.S., though not in the missionary position. The mix is eclectic. In the words of David Martin,

Born-again Christianity [in West Africa] opens on to the modern world, equipped with synthesizers and contemporary music, screens and videos, radio and television ministries, open-air preachments and large-scale rallies. It wears suits and ties...<sup>21</sup>

Some missionizing still occurs, but not in the traditional North-to-South direction. Brazilian Pentecostals have set up missions in Mozambique and in Portugal,<sup>22</sup> and Ghanaian Pentecostals have set up missions in northern Europe.<sup>23</sup> The latter are as much social as religious, however. According to Rijk van Dijk, the European churches of the Ghanaian Pentecostal diaspora emphasize ties to the homeland more than saving new souls.

A third form of international network typifies a group among whose members I have done fieldwork, the Japanese new religion *Sekai Kyusei-*

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<sup>19</sup> André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani, eds, Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in West Africa and Latin America (London: C. Hurst & Co, Ltd., 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Freston, "The Transnationalisation of Brazilian Pentecostalism," in Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America, ed. André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (London: C. Hurst & Co, Ltd., 2001); Ari Pedro Oro and Pablo Séman, "Brazilian Pentecostalism Crosses National Borders," in Between Babel and Pentecost, ed. Corten and Marshall-Fratani.

<sup>21</sup> David A. Martin, "Africa: A Mission Accomplished?" Christianity Today, November/December 2002, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Freston, "The Transnationalisation of Brazilian Pentecostalism."

<sup>23</sup> Rijk van Dijk, "Time and Transcultural Technologies of the Self in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora," in Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America, ed. André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (London: C. Hurst & Co, Ltd., 2001).

*kyo*.<sup>24</sup> One of the 700-plus religions founded in Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>25</sup> this group originally spread from Japan to Japanese immigrants in Hawaii, the U.S. mainland, Thailand, and Brazil. For a time, it remained a reminder of home, but not one that sought to recreate a miniature Japan in new surroundings. Instead, it deliberately attracted those who saw themselves as bicultural – as uniting East and West. The church's founder had taught that such a unity would be needed to bring about the millennium, which he described as "The Age of Fire". Second-generation Japanese Americans, among others, were attracted to the group at least partly because it honored their sense of themselves as a bridge between the old country and the new. Still, the church did not avoid tension. On the one side, Japanese church officials sought to maintain their institutional control in the colonies. On the other side, North Americans sought to live out what they saw as the founder's idealism. The struggle came to a head in the late 1980s, when American church leaders formally separated from Japan and declared their institutional independence. Lacking enough of their own ministers, however, the Americans invited a group of Brazilian ministers to come to the U.S. to help manage the transition. This combine split again in the late 1990s, as the Brazilians left to found their own association – largely over the issue of how to relate to Japan and how best to missionize the U.S. Ironically, Brazilian ministers found their best market among Brazilian immigrants, creating for some a familiar Japan-in-Brazil and for others a religious postmodernism that reflects the cultural jumble of glocalized lives.<sup>26</sup>

American church leaders, many of whom are ethnically Japanese but culturally New Age, are now considering transforming their religion into a medical practice, in an attempt to highlight the group's chief asset, its healing

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<sup>24</sup> James V. Spickard, "Spiritual Healing Among the American Followers of a Japanese New Religion: Experience as a Factor in Religious Motivation," Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion 3 (1991): 135-56; James V. Spickard, "Body, Nature, and Culture in Spiritual Healing," in Studies of Alternative Therapy 2: Bodies and Nature, ed. Helle Johannessen and et al (Copenhagen: INRAT/Odense University Press, 1995), 65-81; James V. Spickard, "Organizational transformation in global religions: rethinking the relationship between organization, culture, and market," RENNEN Conference on New Religions and Globalization (Aarhus, Denmark, April, 2002). My latest research on this group was funded by the Fielding Graduate Institute.

<sup>25</sup> H. Neill McFarland, The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan (New York: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> See Peter Beyer, Religion and Globalization (London: Sage Publications, 1994).

ritual called *johrei*. They explicitly reject the notion that their church should be a bridge between Japan and the West, certainly not one that facilitates the Americanization of its parishioners. Instead, they see themselves as the carrying out the founder's intention by forming a multinational network of people devoted to midwifing a new world. They would like to see themselves as a social movement. It is more accurate, however, to see them as a transnational social network, sharing general aims and connections, but not sharing organizations.

In neither case does *Sekai Kyusei-kyo* center itself on congregations, nor does it promote cultural Americanization. It is a network phenomenon, trying desperately to learn how coordinate activities across national and cultural boundaries. Issues of dominance, autonomy, and culture have divided the church, even while personal contacts continue to connect it.<sup>27</sup> Such complexities seem to be becoming ever more common. They tell us that the assimilationist model is at best a partial view, which often obscures as much as it illuminates. Modern immigration is multi- rather than bi-polar, and immigrant religious networks are as much the rule as the exception. Focusing only on congregational life hides this fact.

### Unchurched Religion

Let us take another phenomenon: the growth of private religion. I refer here not to Robert Bellah's famous "Sheila-ism" – a radical individualism that centers one's religious life on the self.<sup>28</sup> I refer instead to the fact that much religion – including immigrant religion – takes place not in congregations but homes. This, too, is an aspect of religious life that the current "new immigrant congregationalism" misses.

Take Mexican-American religions, for example.<sup>29</sup> Mexico is historically both Catholic and anti-clerical; the separation of church and state requires priests to wear civilian clothes in public and forbids the kind of participation in civic life that American and European churches enjoy. Yet many Mexicans, even non-church-goers, are profoundly religious, a trait that residents of "Mexico-del-Norte" often share. The American Catholic church

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<sup>27</sup> My "Organizational Transformation in Global Religions", cited above, explores these aspects.

<sup>28</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221, 232-35.

<sup>29</sup> For a fascinating, yet often overlooked, approach to Mexican-American religion, see Virgilio P. Elizondo, The Future is Mestizo: Where Life and Culture Meet. Revised edition. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002.

has a special Apostolate for Mexican immigrants, in the hopes of tapping this religiosity. These immigrants, however, do not attend church with the same frequency found among Italian, Polish, and Croatian immigrants of the past. As Milagros Peña and Lisa Frehill note, Mexican-American women, along with Latina women generally, do not gauge religiosity by church attendance.<sup>30</sup> Whether through private devotions at home altars, participation in *pastorelas*, or a community role as a *curandera* or *santera*, Mexican-American women have many non-church avenues for connecting with the sacred. In fact, Catholic Latinas are much more likely than Protestant Latinas to center their religiosity in or around the home.<sup>31</sup>

Richard Flores describes how this works in the performances of *Los Pastores* – a folk play that take place each Christmastime on the west side of San Antonio, Texas.<sup>32</sup> This drama gives *barrio* families a chance to express their devotion to *El Niño Dios*, while simultaneously reinforcing the role of the family as the center of the religious universe. Taking place in family front yards, the women of the family prepare for the play by building an altar with flowers, candles, religious statues and other holy paraphernalia. A family member recounts to the audience – usually friends and neighbors – the reason for the celebration, which is often to fulfill a promise given to one or another saint in return for good health, success, and so on. The play occurs, then the women serve food to all comers. As Flores puts it, "the meal complements the work of the home altar – one being a shrine to the saints, the other [a shrine] to those who attend."<sup>33</sup>

A similar home-centered religiosity can be found among Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the United States. Practitioners of Vodou and Santeria do not typically form congregations, nor do their religions provide easy paths into the American mainstream. Their religions are not any the less important, however, either for the understanding of immigrant religion nor for their

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<sup>30</sup> Milagros Peña and Lisa M. Frehill, "Latina Religious Practice: Analyzing Cultural Dimensions in Measures of Religiosity," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 38, no. 4 (1998): 620-35.

<sup>31</sup> Peña and Frehill, "Latina Religious Practice," 631.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Flores, "Para el Niño Dios: Sociability and Commemorative Sentiment in Popular Religious Practice," in An Enduring Flame: Studies on Latino Popular Religiosity, ed. Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Ana María Díaz-Stevens (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemispheric Studies, 1994), 171-90.

<sup>33</sup> Flores, "Para el Niño Dios," 175.

participants. I shall concentrate on Vodou because it has received more scholarly attention.<sup>34</sup>

The best recent study of immigrant Vodou is Mama Lola, by Karen McCarthy Brown.<sup>35</sup> This detailed look at the life of a Vodou priestess – a healer who works out of her New York home, ministering to poor Haitians – shows how a congregation-centered sociology misses much of the immigrant religious scene. Though there are Vodou priests who lead congregation-like entities, Mama Lola works with one or two clients at a time. She also sponsors 3-4 feast days per year, each of which draws perhaps 30 people. But her religion centers on her own devotion to the spirits and her own empathy for others who need the spirits' help.

Brown's biography of Mama Lola shows us a religion that emphasizes personal relationships with the spirit world, mediated by religious virtuosi rather than by social groups. There are common practices, but each participant must learn which spirits make a difference to her or his own life. Some will follow one of the Ezili, while others follow Kouzinn or Azaka. Mama Lola herself follows Ogou.

As Elizabeth McAlister makes clear in a parallel study of New York Vodou, this matter of following one or another of the spirits is a bit different from Roman Catholic reverence for the saints.

For Catholics, the Virgin Mary and the saints are intercessors; they carry our prayers to God. If they grace us with our wish, we are blessed, but if they do not, we must accept things as they are as God's will. For Vodouist[s] ..., if one saint does not give us what we want, we may berate it, argue with it, and ultimately turn to a different saint with the same wish.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On Santería and the related Puerto Rican *spiritismo*, see Migene González-Wippler, "Santería: Its Dynamics and Multiple Roots," in Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples' Religions Among Latinos, ed. Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Andres I. Pérez y Mena (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies/ PARAL, 1995), 99-111; Andres I. Pérez y Mena, "Puerto Rican Spiritism as a Transfeature of Afro-Latin Religion," in Enigmatic Powers, ed. Stevens-Arroyo and Pérez y Mena, 137-55.

<sup>35</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, "The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism," in Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittmer (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 138-39.

Most interestingly, Catholics and Vodouists often occupy the same social space, without the Catholics being any the wiser. McAlister's study of the changing festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in New York shows how events that seem Catholic on the surface can mean something quite different to the Vodouists undertaking them. Still sponsored by the Italian Catholics who founded the parish (but who no longer live nearby), the festival is now largely attended by Haitians, who travel quite some distance to attend. What appears to the priests and authorities as homely folk customs take on new significance when one knows that the Virgin Mary is also Ezili Dantó (one of the chief Vodou spirits) in disguise, or that the light-headedness with which some girls approach their first communion is a sign that the spirits have picked out someone to "ride".

The spiritual works of Vodouist Catholics are achieved in a process of religious code-switching through the subtle use of language, the nuanced use of color, and discreet offerings of spiritual significance. It is possible, then, to communicate with Ezili Dantó through Mount Carmel on the public stage without detection, even by fellow community-members standing at one's side. Devotions to Our Lady that are also spiritual work for Ezili Dantó are masked with a discretion that has come from generations of experience with colonial and post-colonial repression.<sup>37</sup>

As McAlister also shows, this Vodou is both home-centered and transnational. Contemporary immigrants, especially from other parts of the Americas, no longer throw off their old lives and exchange them for new ones. As with Levitt's Dominicans, Vodouists are often as involved in the religious life of their home villages as they are in their new religious setting. The proper unit of analysis is thus not the parish or congregation, but a Vodouist network that reaches from private healing ceremonies in the boroughs of New York to Italian-run festivals in East Harlem to the shrine of Notre Dame de Mont Carmel in Sodo, Haiti.

### The Problem of Race

In these cases and others like them, the assimilationist assumptions of the "new congregationalism" fail to capture some central aspects of immigrant religion. Part of the problem, as I have indicated, is an overemphasis on the congregation as an important form of religious organization. Warner and his colleagues have, to use sociological language, been "sampling on the dependent variable". They find congregations important because they have looked for them, and looking for them emphasizes those elements of immi-

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<sup>37</sup> McAlister, "Madonna Revisited," 139.

grant religion that are most assimilationist. Emphasizing transnational networks or family religion would produce a different emphasis, I believe.

Still, Warner recognizes that "if there was ever a linear process by which immigrants assimilated to American culture, it no longer exists."<sup>38</sup> Assimilation has become "segmented", so that there is no longer just one American target but several targets toward which newcomers are steered.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the Italian immigrants of a century ago, contemporary Chinese immigrants will not likely become "White". They may, however, become "Asian-Americans" – a conceptual category that did not exist fifty years ago. Persons who came (or whose ancestors came) from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, and so on currently argue about whether they should be labeled "Latinos", which would emphasize their similarities, or "Puerto Riquenos", "Cubanos", and so on, which would emphasize their differences. African American activists point out that many, but not all, Latinos have the opportunity to be treated as "White", a privilege long denied to Black Americans. Some activists prefer the term "people of color" to cover everyone who is not White. My point is that race and racism are alive and well in the United States – and they structure the religious situation into which immigrants come.<sup>40</sup>

I do not have space to describe all the implications of this fact, but one instance stands out that is worth mentioning. Immigrants from Haiti find themselves in the odd position of being categorized as Blacks, and thus are assumed to be the descendants of slaves. Indeed, they are such descendants, but their ancestors rose in revolt in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and won their independence – a point of Haitian national pride. Haitian immigrants do not wish to become assimilated to America's most rejected group. They also do not see themselves as transplants, but as living in diaspora – from Haiti, but also from Africa. They thus emphatically speak French and French Creole, organize independent institutions, and mark themselves as different from the Black population to which America seeks to assign them.<sup>41</sup> As McAlister notes, this has led the Italian-American sponsors of the Mount Carmel festival to treat Haitians with more respect than was accorded the Puerto Rican immigrants who came a generation earlier. Disguised as (while also being)

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<sup>38</sup> Warner, "Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States."

<sup>39</sup> Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, Immigrant American: A Portrait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> For a good summary of these issues, see Paul R. Spickard, "Race And The Immigrant Assimilation Model," unpublished paper available from the author, Department of History, University of California at Santa Barbara.

<sup>41</sup> See Teklé Mariam Woldemikael, Becoming Black Americans: Haitians and American Institutions in Evanston, Illinois (New York: AMS Press, 1989); McAlister, "Madonna Revisited."

Catholics, Haitian Vodouists use religion to carve for themselves a transnational identity – one that resists both assimilation and the African American identity to which they would be assigned.

In Cornel West's phrase, "race matters" in America.<sup>42</sup> It is impossible to imagine that race does not matter to African immigrants to Europe. I cannot comment on exactly how it matters there, as I lack a detailed knowledge of race and racial constructions in the various European countries. But racial attitudes in a host society invariably shape migrants' responses, along with their need for social support, nostalgia, and companionship.

Warner's "new congregationalism" under-emphasizes this by focusing too much on the one aspect of immigrant religious life that seems to confirm assimilationist predictions. While not wrong, this "new congregationalism" needs to be balanced with other views. It would be worth the effort of European scholars to search the American sociology of religion, seeking clues and concepts to apply at home. A word of caution is needed, however: much of that sociology is built on assimilationist assumptions that do not hold true for contemporary transnational migration, either in America or elsewhere. European scholars should examine these assumptions before importing American ideas wholesale.

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<sup>42</sup> Cornel West, Race Matters (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).