

The Influence of Immigration and Generation Change on America Religion

Sihan Zhou^{1, a}

¹Dalton Academy, The Affiliated High School of Peking University, Beijing, China

^azhousihan2023@i.pkuschool.edu.cn

Abstract: The U.S. continues to be a major player on the world stage. It is also a country whose religion continues to play a role in both politics and society. Because of this, it is important to understand the trends and changes going on with American religion in order to better understand the changes a major world player is experiencing. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the number and categories of immigrants changed enormously. Based on the data of immigrants, I analyzed their nationality and numbers and found that Christianity believers decreased, the religiously unaffiliated people increased and the new religions' believers, Islam, Hinduism etc., continually increased. I also found that the number and the characteristics of Christianity changed simultaneously in US. Finally, I used the generation change in American itself to explain why the number of religiously unaffiliated people increased so quickly.

Keywords: Immigration, Religion, Influence, Generation change, U.S.

1. Introduction

Religion is important in countries around the world. But with the development of technology, the importance of religion seems to have decreased. The U.S., as both a world leading country and a religious country, has shown this phenomenon typically. Many scholars have already tried to find the reasons behind this phenomenon. These scholars include R. Stephen Warner, Rah, Soong-Chan and Becky Garrison. They choose immigration, political change, generation change, and changes within religions to explain why this happened. Similar to earlier research, I also have noticed that immigration has affected religious believers since The 1965 Immigration Act was issued. With more and more religions introduced into the United States by the various immigration groups, people inside the U.S. began to have more variety of choices.

More choices definitely influenced the original religions, like Christianity and Islam. While on the other side, more choices took more religious unaffiliated people from the old religions. Some researchers suggested that this seems to be connected with the generational change in Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Therefore, this paper is concerned with how immigration changed the religions and whether generational change led to the increase of the religiously unaffiliated in the U.S.

2. Literature Review

Religious changes occur because of many factors. In America, two of the biggest factors for this change were the continuous influx of immigrants from around the world and

the generational change inside American society itself. As an immigrant constituted country, the immigrant categories have changed enormously since the 1965 Immigration Act. With immigrants moving into the country, the religious parts have also changed continuously. With great differences between the situation before the Act and after the Act, the ways in which the religious picture of America has changed is an interesting question. Besides, generational change from Boomers to Generation X and then to millennials also played an important role in religious change. This generational change was the most important factor that led to the increase of religiously unaffiliated people. Researchers have used data, field research, and models to give several ideas and debates about immigration and religion in America. Scholars have pointed out mainly four major religious changes in America. These were the 1) de-Europeanization of American Christianity, 2) the spread of more religions than just Christianity, 3) generational change, and 4) the commercialization of religion. This literature review will analyze what has been said about these four aspects of change and the changes in American religions more generally.

Immigration caused both the de-Europeanization of Christianity and a more diverse Christianity. According to Warner, more and more immigrants came to America from Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa after the Immigration Act of 1965. A much smaller percentage of immigrants came from Europe and the Americas.¹ Besides, Cook pointed out that most of the immigrants were all Christians.² It's interesting, but the reason for it seems unclear. LIPKA mentioned that there were many Christian immigrants coming from countries such as Mexico and Korea rather than from Europe.³ Min and Kim pointed out that most

1 R. Stephen Warner, "Immigrants and the Faith They Bring," Religion Online, February 10, 2004, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/immigrants-and-the-faith-they-bring/>.

2 Keelan Cook, "The De-Europeanization of American Christianity," Send Institute, April 3, 2018, <https://www.sendinstitute.org/de-europeanization-american->

christianity/#:~:text=.

3 Michael Lipka, "Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones'," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.

of the Korean immigrants are Protestants.⁴ In a word, based on these trends, it led to the de-Europeanization of American Christianity and formed a more diverse Christianity.

Immigration reshaped the landscape of American religion. Immigrants brought various religions into America. Granquist thought that, because of the different culture and religious styles immigrants had from Americans, immigrants always preferred to set up their own ethnic congregations and dominations.⁵ But this seems debatable. If a person doesn't know anything in a new place, why would he/she not integrate into the local religious groups to adapt their life first? However, based on Granquist's idea, it forced many people to spread their own religious belief.⁶ According to this, Harvard professor Diana Eck said that "the U.S. has become 'the world's most religiously diverse nation'".⁷ Besides, Daniel Cox and Jones, Robert P. held the idea that the growing religious diversity in the US was significantly affecting American culture and religious life.⁸ They seemed to connect immigration and generation change but didn't go deeper. The Pew Center has also given out data to show this trend: the believers of most external religious groups showed a trend of increasing. Only Christianity, as a native religion, showed a decreasing trend. What's more, the number of religiously unaffiliated people also showed an increasing trend. Twenge et al. used data to find that more and more people begin to think them as a religiously unaffiliated person.⁹

When I began to focus on the increase of religiously unaffiliated people, I found that generational change seemed to play a more important role this growth than immigration. Researchers demonstrate that the increasing number of religiously unaffiliated people was an important trend that appeared in the late 20th century, caused mainly by generational change. Murphy pointed out that more and more Americans thought they are religiously unaffiliated.¹⁰ Moreover, LIPKA found that 35% of millennials identified themselves as "nones" when compared to Baby Boomers

(17%).¹¹ This meant that the number of people who wrote "none" when identifying their religious has doubled. From Boomer to Generation X to millennial, American lifestyle has changed. Costanza and et al. demonstrated that there were huge differences between generation and generation.¹² Besides, LIPKA mentioned that after Generation X, if the family was religiously unaffiliated, most future generations were also religiously unaffiliated.¹³ More and more Americans have begun to believe in no religion.

The final change mentioned in the literature was the turning of religion into a commercial place. This may be an effect brought by immigrants which has reduced religious loyalty. Lugo gave out the idea "there's an unbelievable rate of change going on out there – people moving around, not much brand loyalty – in today's religious 'marketplace'".¹⁴ The reason for it needs to be talked more. Is it because there were too many kinds of religions brought into America by immigrants coming from all around the world and it caused people to lose their loyalty toward religions? Moreover, whether this is a positive or negative trend is also debatable.

Researchers also gave out some ideas about the predictions for religious trends. Twenge et al. mentioned that they thought people believing in religion would decline. And that's maybe not because they didn't believe in religion, but because they felt secular in religions.¹⁵ After looking at the work done by previous researchers, I have summarized five main trends that researchers have discussed. They are the de-Europeanization of American Christianity and a more diverse Christianity, religious diversity in America, the effect made by generational change which acts on religious change, religious "marketplace" commercialization, and predictions about future trends. Beside the arguments previous researchers made, there were still some gaps that needed to be filled in. As we know, religion plays an important role in not only America, but the whole world. So, factors influencing religion should be pointed out for different fields to research. Also, filling in the gaps here is important. For example, the gaps

4 Pyong Gap Min and Dae Young Kim, "Intergenerational Transmission of Religion and Culture: Korean Protestants in the U.S.," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): p. 263, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4153099>.

5 Mark A. Granquist, "Religion and Immigration, Old and New," *Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary*, 2009, https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/77/.

6 Mark A. Granquist, "Religion and Immigration, Old and New," *Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary*, 2009, https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/77/.

7 R. Stephen Warner, "Immigrants and the Faith They Bring," *Religion Online*, February 10, 2004, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/immigrants-and-the-faith-they-bring/>.

8 Daniel Cox and Jones, Robert P., "America's Changing Religious Identity," *PRRI*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/#:~:text=The%20American%20religious%20landscape%20is%20undergoing%20a%20dramatic,2007%2C%2039%20states%20had%20majority%20white%20Christian%20populations.>

9 Jean M. Twenge et al., "Declines in American Adults' Religious Participation ... - Sage Journals," March 23, 2016, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244016638133>.

10 Murphy Caryle, "Growing Share of U.S. Immigrants Have No Religious Affiliation," *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/19/growing-share-of-u-s-immigrants-have-no-religious-affiliation/>.

11 Michael Lipka, "Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones'," *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.

12 David P. Costanza et al., "Generational Differences in Work-Related Attitudes: A Meta ... - Jstor Home," December 2012, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41682990>.

13 Michael Lipka, "Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones'," *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.

14 Luis Lugo, "A Land of Immigrants, a Shifting Religious Marketplace," *Reflections*, 2020, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/who-my-neighbor-facing-immigration/land-immigrants-shifting-religious-marketplace>.

15 Jean M. Twenge et al., "Declines in American Adults' Religious Participation ... - Sage Journals," March 23, 2016, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244016638133>.

could be what were the essential changes inside the three generations itself which brought the increase of religiously unaffiliated people? What's more, was there a relationship between immigration and generational change? This is a really important question that appears to be unanswered by the literature. In short, based on the gaps and the works pervious scholars have down, I set up three main research questions: 1) Did the coming of immigrants from all around the world have any impacts on the overall structure of American religions? 2) What were the changes caused by the immigrants on religion in the U.S.? and 3) what caused the

huge increase of religiously unaffiliated people?

3. Changes to Immigration after the Immigration and Naturalization Act

After the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the U.S. accepted more and more immigrants from all around the world. From the data of immigrants in both 1960 and 2015, we can see a big differences and changes between the different categories over time (figure 1).

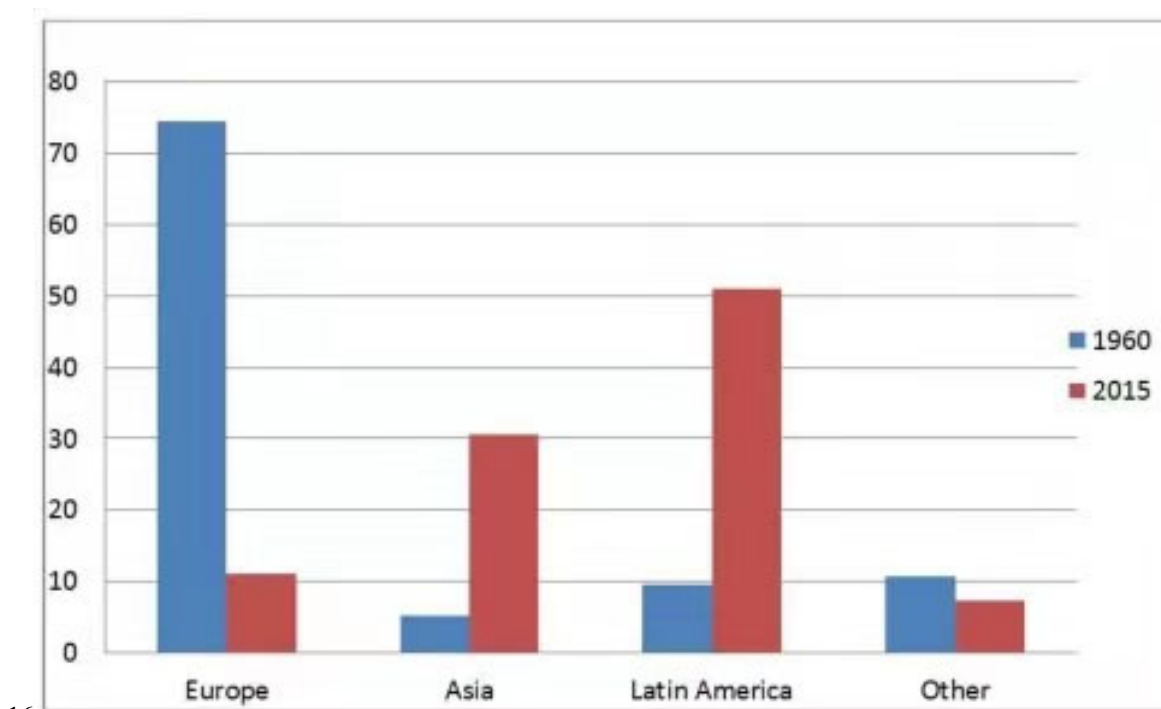


Figure 1. The change of immigrant's categories in 1960 and 2015

From this figure, we can see that the immigrants from Europe decreased sharply. Meanwhile, the immigrants coming from Latin America and Asia increased a lot. This phenomenon was mainly caused by a policy issued in 1965. On October 3rd, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, abolished an earlier quota system based on national origin and established a new immigration policy. This policy was had the goal of eliminating racial discrimination, reuniting immigrant families, and attracting skilled labor to the United States.¹⁷

This policy was a big push towards opening the country towards more diverse immigrants.

In 1965, eighty-five percent of the population consisted of people of the white/Caucasian race. In the early 1960s, the residents of Ireland, Germany, and the United Kingdom received almost 70 percent of available quota visas.¹⁸ However, change begun quietly after 1965. This change was that instead of immigrants mainly coming from Europe, they began to come from countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America (figure 2).

¹⁶ James F. Hollifield, "American Immigration Politics: An Unending Controversy," *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* (Université de Poitiers, December 1, 2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/remi/8349>.

¹⁷ History.com Editors, "U.S. Immigration since 1965," History.com (A&E Television Networks, March 5, 2010), <https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/us-immigration-since-1965#:~:text=The%20Immigration%20and%20Naturalizatio>

n%20Act%20of%201965%2C%20also,and%20attracting%20skilled%20labor%20to%20the%20United%20States.

¹⁸ "Immigration in the 1960s," Boundless, July 3, 2017, <https://www.boundless.com/blog/60s-immigration/#:~:text=Immigration%20in%20the%201960s%20Jul%203%2C%202017%20During,five%20percent%2C%20according%20to%20the%20U.S.%20Census%20Bureau>.

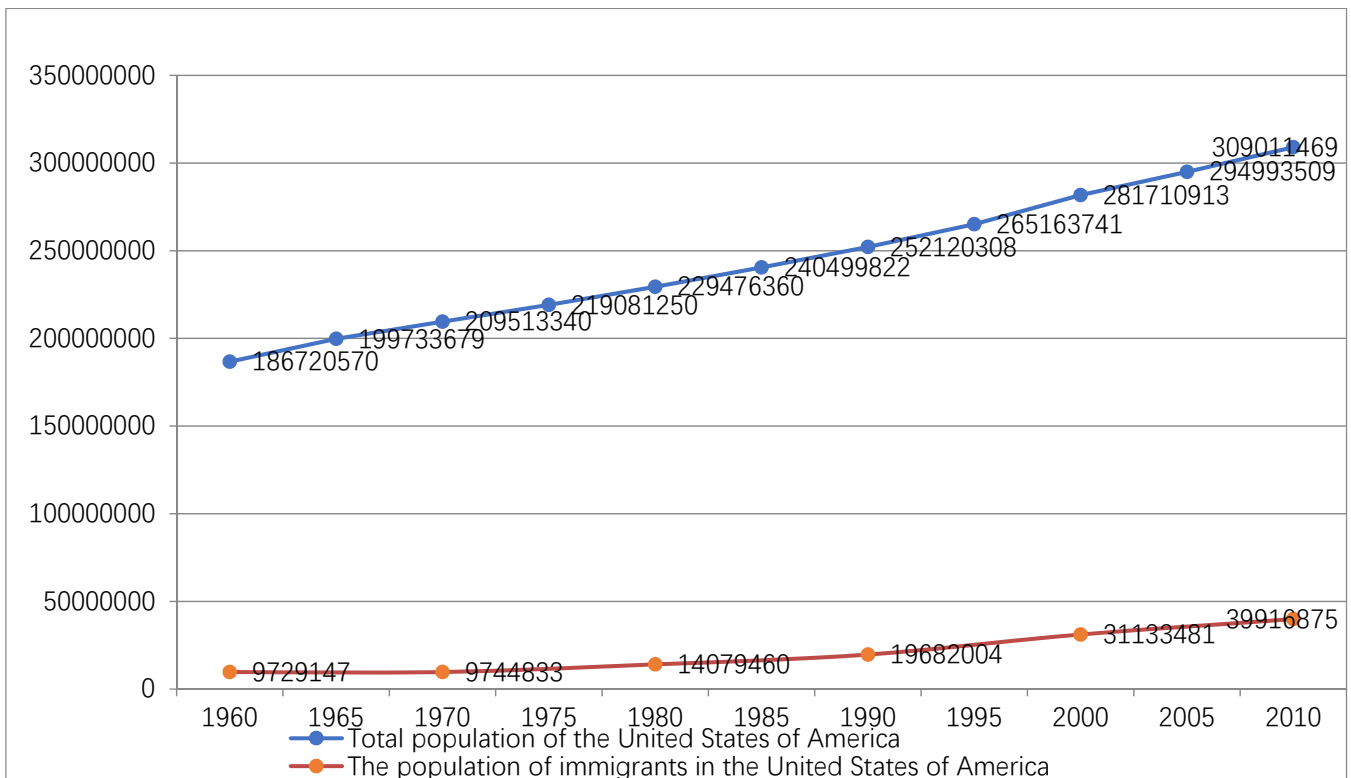


Figure 2. Total population and the immigrants in USA

From this figure, we can see that the total and immigration population continued growing after 1970. The change of immigrant’s nationalities also brought a change of religion categories. Europeans mainly believed in Christianity, similar to the U.S. So, it led to the result that before 1965 the

categories of religions were very simple in US: mainly Christianity. After 1965, with more immigrants of different nationalities joining the country, many different religions spread in America. In order to check the changing status of religion, I compared the data in 1970 and 2010 (Table 1).

Table 1. The categories of religions in 1970 and 2010

| Religion | Followers in 1970 | Followers in 2010 | % of Population | Annual % growth 2000–2010 |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Christians | 190,970,000 | 257,311,000 | 81.8 | 0.85 |
| Independents | 34,702,000 | 72,700,000 | 23.1 | 0.94 |
| Roman Catholics | 48,305,000 | 70,550,000 | 22.4 | 1.52 |
| Protestants | 58,568,000 | 58,000,000 | 18.4 | -0.15 |
| Agnostics | 10,270,000 | 36,738,000 | 11.7 | 2.35 |
| Jews | 6,700,000 | 5,220,000 | 1.7 | -0.31 |
| Muslims | 800,000 | 5,150,000 | 1.6 | 1.90 |
| Buddhists | 200,000 | 3,300,000 | 1.0 | 2.25 |
| New religionists | 560,000 | 1,600,000 | 0.5 | 1.31 |
| Ethnoreligionists | 70,000 | 1,450,000 | 0.5 | 1.30 |
| Hindus | 100,000 | 1,445,000 | 0.5 | 1.57 |
| Atheists | 200,000 | 1,250,000 | 0.4 | 0.31 |
| Baha’is | 138,000 | 500,000 | 0.2 | 2.52 |
| Sikhs | 10,000 | 300,000 | 0.1 | 2.43 |
| Spiritists | 0 | 158,000 | 0.1 | 1.03 |
| Chinese folk | 90,000 | 92,000 | 0.0 | 1.53 |
| Jains | 3,000 | 85,000 | 0.0 | 1.42 |
| Shintoists | 0 | 62,200 | 0.0 | 1.03 |
| Zoroastrians | 0 | 17,500 | 0.0 | 1.03 |
| Daoists | 0 | 12,400 | 0.0 | 1.03 |
| Total population | 210,111,000 | 314,692,000 | 100.0 | 1.03 |

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From this table, we can see that the number of believers in all religions increased after 1970. Although the people believing in Christianity has grown, the rate was lower than

compared to Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Baha’ism, and religiously unaffiliated. Most growth in these “new” (to America) religions was higher than the total population rate. Some new religious categories were introduced successfully

19 Abby Budiman et al., “Facts on U.S. Immigrants, 2018,” Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project (Pew Research Center, March 11, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/20/facts-on-u-s-immigrants-trend-data/>.

20 Greg, “Home,” So What Faith, February 19, 2012, <https://sowhatfaith.com/2012/02/19/american-religion-from-1970-to-2010/>.

into US. From Figure 2, we can see that there were four new religions with many followers. These changes led to the increase of a diverse population, which connected to immigration. From Figure 1, we have the calculation that immigration added 21,369,800 people to the U.S. The total increasing number of populations who believed in religion is 104,581,000. And the increased total population in US is 94,990,343. The total population growth rate was 50.87%; the immigration rate was 219.45% and the total followers of religions' rate was 49.77%. The total population growth rate was basically equal to the total followers of religion's rate.

In a word, I found that immigration influenced America religious life. Although their influence was quiet, the changes were still lasting. From this part, we can clearly see that the most obvious and surface effects caused by immigration were the spread of new religions. As I mentioned above, the number of immigrants increased, the number of new religions increased, the believers of new religions increased. But we still faced a question: whether the religion structure changed because of the above increased.

4. Impact of Immigration on the Structure of American Religions

From the above data, I found immigrants took their ethnic religions to the U.S. when they moved. Compared to Christianity, the dominant American religion since European colonization, Islam was one of the biggest foreign religions in the U.S. I tried to find out the changes in these two religions, and what the effects were on the whole religious structure of the U.S.

4.1. Changes to Christianity

Christianity in America has gone through many different

changes. The most important one has been the de-Europeanization caused by the large number of non-European Christian immigrants. These immigrants shared their own Christian beliefs with each other in U.S, which finally let US form a new, unique Christianity. Besides these important changes, many Catholics have become Protestants and Protestantism has seen new growth compared to Catholicism.

Although new immigrants did bring new religions into US, three-quarters of new immigrants to the United States were Christians.²¹ Based on this, the great number of immigrants coming from countries since 1965 should have a huge influence on Christianity.

There have been many changes in the churches themselves. One case about the churches in Boston is great evidence. This case showed two trends. Firstly, the church numbers increased a lot in 1970—2000. The researchers pointed out that in 1970, Boston had about 200 churches. But in 2000, there were 412 churches.²² Besides, after the 1970s, the categories of language used in churches changed and became more and more diverse. In 1970, there were only a handful of churches that held services in a language other than English. In 2000, more than half of those churches held services in a language other than English. “76 churches reported the language of worship. Of those 76 churches, almost half of them ... [have] non-English or bi-lingual [services], 19 worship in Spanish, 8 in Haitian Creole, and 9 in Portuguese,” writes Rah²³. What’s more language diversity in the United States has been driven primarily by immigration.²⁴ Because of the Immigration Act published in 1965, the percentage of foreign-born rose from 4.7% in 1970 to 12.9% in 2010.²⁵ Of course, this led to the increase of different languages spoken (Table 2).

Table 2. Language use patterns in the United States, 1980 to 2021

Table 1
Language Use Patterns in the United States, 1980 to 2010

| Languages spoken at home | 1980 | | 1990 | | 2000 | | 2010 | | Foreign-born % |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|----------------|
| | N (millions) | % | N (millions) | % | N (millions) | % | N (millions) | % | |
| Total population 5 years or older | 210.2 | 100% | 230.4 | 100% | 262.4 | 100% | 289.2 | 100% | 13.6% |
| Spoke English only | 187.2 | 89.1 | 198.6 | 86.2 | 215.5 | 82.1 | 229.7 | 79.7 | 2.6 |
| Spoke non-English language | 23.1 | 11.0 | 31.8 | 13.8 | 47.0 | 17.9 | 59.5 | 20.3 | 56.7 |
| Spoke Spanish | 11.1 | 5.3 | 17.3 | 7.5 | 28.1 | 10.7 | 37.0 | 12.6 | 49.4 |

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Sources: 1980, 1990 and 2000 U.S. censuses; 2010 American Community Survey.

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From this table we can clearly see the increase in the rate

²¹ Janel Kragt Bakker, “Every Migrant a Missionary-Immigrant Christians in America,” Collegeville Institute, July 8, 2016,

²² Soong-Chan Rah, “The End of Christianity?,” Sojourners, July 14, 2011, <https://sojo.net/articles/end-christianity>.

²³ Soong-Chan Rah, “The End of Christianity?,” Sojourners, July 14, 2011, <https://sojo.net/articles/end-christianity>.

²⁴ Rubén G Rumbaut and Douglas S Massey, “Immigration and Language Diversity in the United States,” Daedalus (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4092008/#:~:text=Most%20of%20the%20increase%20in%20Spanish%20language%20use,nearly%2060%20million%20speakers%20of%20non-English%20languages%20areimmigrants>.

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of foreign-born populations and the population which speaks a non-English language. This means the increase of immigration populations has caused the increase of language diversity.

Beside the specific regions, all kinds of immigrants have their own communities. One example of these communities is Indian communities. One Indian Christian can introduce Christianity to ten Indians. For the same categories of people, to have the same religious belief was important. Shared religious belief is how people often build connections with each other. So, with the passing of time and generations, people tended to combine their community or country's own beliefs and American Christian beliefs together and formed a new kind of belief. This process was just like the spread of foreign religions in U.S. And it finally led to the de-Europeanization of Christianity.

In a word, these changes all showed that Christianity was still developing but Christian immigrants from different part of the world reshaped the internal structure of Christianity. With the passage of time, Christianity has become more diverse in America.

4.2. Changes to Islam

For a foreign religion, the biggest change in Islamic practice in America is the increase in the population of believers. From Table 2, we can see that the total population increased to 192,711,893, or an increased percentage of 122.11%. However, the number of Muslim increased 7,786,811, or an increased percentage of 379.55%. The rate of increase, therefore, in the number of Muslims relative to the total population was triple. The number of Muslims was growing far faster than the total population.

Table 3. Change about Muslim in US from 1950 to 2020

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| United States of American | Population | 157813040 | 186326215 | 209463865 | 229468823 | 254865217 | 287842178 | 317641087 | 350524933 |
| | Muslims% | 0.13 | 0.13 | 0.49 | 1.30 | 1.57 | 1.74 | 2.20 | 2.28 |
| | Muslims | 205157 | 242224 | 1026373 | 2983095 | 4001384 | 5008454 | 6988104 | 7991968 |
| | APGR% | | 1575 | 1177 | 0.916 | 1.055 | 1.224 | 0.990 | |
| | Reference | [KET] | | [KET] | [KET] | | | [US] | |

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It can be noticed that the population base of Muslims was small so the percentage of believers of Islam did not increase a lot. Take the data in 1970 as example, the population of Muslim was 1026373, and the total population is 209463865. The total population is 204 times of Muslim population. So, the development of Islam didn't cause a big influence on the whole American religion. For the same reason, other foreign religions were facing a similar situation.

Although new religions taken by the immigrants didn't bring a big influence on the whole structure of American religion, it did cause some differences. The differences might look more dramatic than it is because the population base was so small to begin with. And whether will Islam or other foreign religions really caused some influence on the whole US religion structure in the future, is still an unknown thing.

In a word, the Immigration Act reshaped American religious life. Immigration caused the de-Europeanization of Christianity and evolved a new and unique Christianity. Besides, although foreign religions like Islam, their increase rate were very big, but their population base is so small which cannot really show sharply. So, for the new religions, they didn't influence the religious population structure apparently.

5. The Generational Change impact on Religion Believers

After discussing the existing Christianity and the newer, foreign religions, I also found that the religiously unaffiliated

people have experienced a huge increase in recent decades. (Table 4)

Table 4. The share comparing between the Christians and religious 'nones'

In General Social Survey, declining share of Christians and growth of religious 'nones'

| | NET Christian | Protestant | Catholic | Orthodox Christian | NET Other religion | No religion | Don't know/ refused |
|-------------|------------------|------------|----------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Early 1970s | 89 | 62 | 27 | n/a | 5 | 6 | <1=100 |
| Late 1970s | 90 | 64 | 26 | n/a | 3 | 7 | <1 |
| Early 1980s | 89 | 62 | 27 | n/a | 4 | 7 | <1 |
| Late 1980s | 88 | 62 | 26 | n/a | 4 | 7 | <1 |
| Early 1990s | 87 | 61 | 26 | n/a | 5 | 8 | <1 |
| Late 1990s | 80 | 55 | 25 | <1 | 6 | 13 | 1 |
| Early 2000s | 80 | 54 | 25 | 1 | 6 | 14 | <1 |
| Late 2000s | 79 | 52 | 27 | <1 | 5 | 16 | 1 |
| Early 2010s | 75 | 49 | 25 | <1 | 5 | 19 | 1 |
| Late 2010s | 71 | 48 | 23 | <1 | 5 | 22 | 1 |

Note: Based on analysis that excludes respondents who were part of oversamples in 1982 and 1987 (SAMPLE=4,5,7). Estimates are weighted using the variables WTSSALL for 1972-2002 and WTSSNR for 2004-2018.

Source: General Social Survey.

"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

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Similar to the analyses above, we can clearly see that the number of religiously unaffiliated people increased very

27 Houssain Kettani, "Muslim Population in the Americas: 1950 – 2020 - IJESD," June 2010, <http://ijesd.org/papers/26-D435.pdf>.

28 "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

rapidly. From the early 1970s to the late 2010s, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated people increased from 6% to 22%. The percentage of followers of Christianity has also decreased rapidly since the 1970s. Besides these two, the total percent of other religions didn't change a lot. In the following part, I used generation change as the factor to find why there are less and less religious believers. These even includes the Baby Boomer, Generation X and Millennial generations. Baby Boomers are the group of people born from 1946 to 1964. Generation X are the group of people born from 1965 to 1980. Millennials are the group of people born from 1981 to 2000.

5.1. Generation X Believes More in Religion

There is a huge difference and change between Generation X and Baby Boomers. Generation X is the group of people who have more religious belief compared to Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers knew that they were less interested in faiths from their youth. But Generation X, scholars believed, are a group of people that believed more, but stayed away from established religion because of their self or the freedom. They had the idea that themselves is bigger than having a religious belief. So, Generation X can be left from their religion belief because of themselves. They felt that they were independent thinkers so that they were willing to take breaks from religion in order to negotiate difficult doctrinal challenges²⁹

While, besides explaining why there were still many religiously unaffiliated people in Generation X, why they were more religious compared to their parents is also very interesting. As I discussed before, the 1965 Immigration Act brought America various new religion categories. This led to a more dynamic and textured American religious scene, which gave Generation X more choices. If they were not happy with a particular religion, they could more easily find a substitute instead of falling away entirely.³⁰ Besides, the bad relationship and huge differences between Generation X and their parents seemed also play an important role. The population based of Generation X was small compared to Boomers. People born in the Boomer Era always had more sisters and brothers. But Generation X's people were often only children, so they had a much different upbringing. Generation X shaped a unique characteristic of independent ideas as only children and the ideas were against Boomers. They showed themselves to be more countercultural and rebellious. However, these little rebellions didn't affect the big environment and trend that more and more Americans become religiously unaffiliated.

5.2. Individualism Led to An Increase of Religiously Unaffiliated

According to the data, more and more Americans became religiously unaffiliated since the Baby Boomers. Because this trend was one of the major changes in America religious life, what caused it is a very important question. For sure,

²⁹ Vern L. Bengtson, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed down across Generations* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁰ "Generation X More Loyal to Religion," *ScienceDaily* (ScienceDaily, August 26, 2010), <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/08/100826083620.htm>.

³¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Lene Arnett Jensen, "A Congregation of One," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 17, no. 5 (2002): pp. 451-467,

immigration brought many new religions into America which enriched people's choices toward religions. But I thought that this was still not the most important reason. Although immigration brought people various choices, this was really just a small part. It cannot influence the big trend.

Deeply, I thought that most important reason that caused the increase of religiously unaffiliated people was the internal cultural change that happened in the U.S.. The generational change between Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennials was the main factor which played an important role in why more and more people became religiously unaffiliated.

The most important change Baby Boomers led was shifting believing in religion to a highly private and individualized action. Believe or not, this was just a personal choice. This approach was called "new voluntarism". It's based on "Sheilaism" and it was the fundamental religious faith structure of Baby Boomers, which continued to influence the belief development of Generation X and the Millennials.³¹

It began with the wrong political decisions after the World War II, such as the Watergate incident and the Vietnam War. These decisions made people gradually lose their trust in the government and begin to lose trust toward religion. It is almost like people lost a trust in establishments and institutions, so religious believers decided to practice religion privately instead. Some people completely lost religious belief, others started to regard religion as their personal preference. It can be concluded as a combination of pluralism and individualism which directly impacted the way that Baby Boomers.³² Social scientists referred to this highly private and individualized approach to religious faith as the "new voluntarism".³³

Baby Boomers were the group of people who formed a self-help individualist religious belief system. This mind shift deeply touched the traditional dogmatic belief. This meant that everyone could be his or her own religious authority. People usually believed that the traditional locus of religious authority came from the clergy of religious institutions.³⁴ In a word, whether one believed in religion or not became a decision that was more dependent on the individual's experiences and understanding.

And this thought partly passed on to the next generation—Generation X. But as mentioned before, Generation X seems to have more internal religious belief and had more choices about religious categories. However, because of the huge number of their parents who were part of the people who left established religion, a large part of Generation X grew up with no religious affiliation. These people occupied a big scale on the American population, which means Generation X had the highest number of basic "nones". Both the coming in of new foreign religions and more religious belief did not win victory over self-dominated ideas and the growth environment. So, the big trend—the increasing population of religiously unaffiliated did not change.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558402175002>.

³² Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (Rutgers University Press, 1988).

³³ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (Rutgers University Press, 1988).

³⁴ Jessica Chase, "The Religious Beliefs and Behaviors of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Millennials: Are There Still Gender Differences?," *STARS*, 2016,

Importantly, Millennials were more like Baby Boomers, but unlike Generation X.

It seemed like that the Millennials were on course to be the most educated, individualistic and liberal group yet, and they were no longer willing to simply accept the beliefs passed down through the family grapevine.³⁵ As mentioned, Baby Boomers started to put the idea of the individual in an important place. And Generation X left religions because of themselves. So, based on the ideological progress of the previous two generations, the Millennials could only be more individualistic. This understanding could well explain why more and more people did not believe in religion.

All in all, we can see that the effect across the generations has been cumulative.³⁶ Although there might be an episode inside Generation X and Generation X were different from Baby Boomers and Millennials, they all showed a phenomenon that every generation began to take themselves as the center and consider for themselves, so whether they were religious or not, they all broke away from religion.

6. Conclusion

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 gave an opportunity for people from other countries to get into America and become immigrants. After this Act, immigrants had changed from European countries to other, non-European countries like India, Japan and Korea. With more and more immigrants getting into America, they also took their own ethnic religions with them and created much more religious diversity. Through the research, I found that the Immigrants from all around the world did have some influence toward American religious life, but they were small, it can be seen as negligible. It introduced new religions into U.S., like Islam, Hinduism etc. attracted many believers. While at the same time my research also showed that the increase of the immigrants did bring some difference to American religion, but the difference were small because of their small population base.

I also noticed that the changes of the Christian believers not only shown in the number of believers rate decreased, but also the characteristic of the Christianity and the trend that many Catholics had become Protestants. Because of the de-Europeanization caused by the large number of Christian immigrants, the immigrants shared their own Christian beliefs with each other in US, which finally let US form a new, unique Christianity. All these changes could be found in the churches.

Furthermore, I analyzed the reason why more and more people became religiously unaffiliated. I found out that the internal change of American generations itself were the main reason of why more and more religious unaffiliated people. Although there were differences between Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennials, they all held a clear principle, individuals were important than being a believer of a religion group. So, the trend of more and more people become

religious unaffiliated has been last until now.

Citation

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