

“Beyond Orientalism and Assimilation: The Asian American as Historical Subject” in *Realizing the America of our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans* edited by Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (Chalice Press, 2003): 55-72.

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I. The Color-line in American Religious Historiography

*On the contrary, I am not asking for trouble. I am troubled. I am disturbed about the slow response of the guild of religious historians to the intellectual and moral implications of not having far more religious historians who are deeply conscious and knowledgeable about the history of pseudospeciation. — James M. Washington (1996)*¹

Historian David Wills has observed that American Religious historiography has centered on two themes: (1) pluralism and toleration and (2) Puritanism and collective purpose. Many historical narratives accentuate the “triumph of democratic pluralism” in American religion and claim that “the problem of religious diversity” has been successfully solved. The U.S. Constitution and the First Amendment is viewed as the “crucial landmark in the emergence of a normative religious pluralism in America.” The separation of church and state was an initial step on the way to the age of religious pluralism that was somewhat realized in the middle of the 20th century. These narratives have located the origins of American religious liberty in the stories of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson and the histories of Rhode Island and the Mid-Atlantic colonies.

Other narratives have bemoaned the loss of the Puritan sense of collective purpose. However oppressive they may have been towards religious dissenters, Puritans are to be admired for their sense of common purpose that stood apart from “the prevailing privatism and individualism of much of our subsequent history – including our religious history.” These narratives have focused on New England Puritanism as the primary site for the origin of American religion.

Wills then suggests that a missing theme in American religious historiography is the Southern experience. Advocates of the aforementioned themes have attempted to assimilate the Southern story but may have missed the latter’s central defining focus, namely, “the problematic encounter of black and white.” This theme “tests the limits of all our views of pluralism and undermines every attempt to formulate a sense of collective purpose.” Wills then shows how the gap between black and white shrank and expanded throughout periods of evangelical and ecumenical preeminence in the United States. He concludes:

Since the late 1960s, there has been a clear retreat from a direct facing of the gap between black and white as it was then so strikingly revealed. Laments for the loss of community in American and calls for a renewal of collective purpose are once more issued and debated with little or no mention of the realities of race. Religious pluralism in the United States is analyzed and celebrated with little acknowledgment that the polarities of race in our history are not quite the same thing as the varieties of our religion. Acknowledged or not, however, the gap

¹ James Melvin Washington, “Craven Images: The Eiconics of Race in the Crisis of American Church Historiography,” in *The Agitated Mind of God: The Theology of Kosuke Koyama*, edited by Dale T. Irvin and Akintunde E. Akinade (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 131.

between the races – a gap involving both the interpretation of American experience and the degree of empowerment within it – remains one of the foundational realities of our national life. And however much members of both races might sometimes wish it were otherwise, the painful encounter of black and white is likely to remain in the future what it has been in the past – one of the crucial, central themes in the religious history of the United States.²

Wills' analysis goes beyond simply adding the history of African American religion to the existing American Religious historiography. He is suggesting that W.E.B. DuBois' idea of the “color-line” is central to how the story of American religion is told. With this important statement about how historians interpret the past, he affirms the late James M. Washington's observation that “the intellectual challenge posed by the problem of expanding the historian's field of vision is more than a methodological difficulty for church historians. It is an epistemological and cosmological problem as well.” Washington calls for a “new aesthetics” that would allow church historians to “value and see more of the grand panorama they are so privileged to survey.”³

Developing a “new aesthetics” is critical for historians of American religion because it has implications for how the stories of various communities, especially those marginalized from the grand narratives, are interpreted. Both Wills and Washington call for greater attention to race and racial encounter in the interpretation of American religious history and not only for more research of racialized religious communities. Indeed, like other scholars, historians of racialized communities enter the “field” with preconceived interpretive theories that often determine how the histories of these communities are told. These preconceived and often not clearly developed theories are invariably linked to a historiography shaped and developed largely from the perspectives of white American historians.

Wills' analysis of the themes of American religious historiography, however, is limited to a “black-white” paradigm. Without denying the significance of the encounter between black and white, bi-racialism runs the risk of either excluding other racialized communities or assimilating their distinct encounters with whites into the “black-white” paradigm. While there are great similarities between Asian and Black encounters with whites, the Asian-white encounter has a distinct history and character. The same can be said about European and white American perceptions of Asians.

II. “Color-Blinded by the Light: Asian Americans and American Religious History”

Among America's half-million Japanese as among its quarter-million Chinese, the tendency to Christian affiliation has been very strong. Especially since 1945 ethnic religious commitments have not figured prominently in their self-consciousness as

² David W. Wills, “The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White,” in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* edited by Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Rabateau (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), pp. 9-20.

³ James Melvin Washington, “Craven Images: The Eiconics of Race in the Crisis of American Church Historiography,” op cit, p. 136.

peoples. White anti-Oriental hostility has also markedly waned. — Sydney Ahlstrom (1972)⁴

The interpretation of Asian Americans by historians of American religion has been dominated by a particular view that, for our purposes, can be labeled “Orientalist.” Since Edward Said’s ground-breaking study of European social scientific and other literature pertaining to the Islamic world in the 19th and 20th centuries, Asian American scholars have applied his central ideas to analyze the encounters between Asians and white Americans.⁵ Said asserts that the “Orient” is a Western construct and “a system of ideological fictions.” The purpose of this representation is to justify Western colonial domination over the “Orient” and to establish Western supremacy.⁶ While Said’s very somber view focuses on the Middle East and Islam, other scholars have somewhat more positive perspectives with regards to European and American perceptions of South and East Asian societies. J.J. Clarke, for instance, argues that the Asian Orient was often romanticized and constructed as a means of critiquing the foibles of Western culture. Nevertheless, even in its critique of the West, this gentler form of orientalism continues to serve the purposes of “the West” and reveals more about the West than about the so-called “Orient.”⁷ Americans in the mid-19th century, for instance, held a sympathetic view of Asians that coexisted with absolute confidence in Western supremacy. T. Christopher Jespersen notes how missionaries, Henry R. Luce’s *Time* magazine, United China Relief, and other China lobbyists projected a favorable image of China that also reflected a glowing American self-image in the early 20th century. Luce believed that under the guidance of well-intentioned Americans, China would develop into a Christian democracy.⁸ Though sympathetic, this type of Orientalist representation of Asia does not reflect the views of Asians themselves. Thus, Said’s central point linking American Orientalism with racialized power and privilege remains a crucial thesis.⁹

To assert that American religious historiography has viewed Asian Americans through Orientalist lenses is to suggest that Asian Americans have been perceived as innately foreign or completely assimilated. This is no less true for American historiography in general and popular perceptions as well. Historian Gary Okihiro

⁴ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 1051.

⁵ Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁶ Edward A. Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

⁷ J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 8-11; Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

⁸ T. Christopher Jerspersen, *American Images of China: 1931-1949* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1999). In the case of Japan, Francis Hall’s journals and the YMCA in Japan are good examples of this form of Orientalism. Francis Hall. *Japan Through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, 1859-1866* Edited and abridged by Francis G Notehelfer. (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 2001) and

⁹ See, for instance, Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1987); Alexander Deconde, *Ethnicity, Race and American Foreign Policy: A History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); Victor Kierman, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age* (London: Serif, 1995 [1969]).

contends that the images of the “yellow peril” and the “model minority” are “flip sides of the same coin” of the American racial construction of Asian Americans.¹⁰ In other words, whatever it is that makes Asians different from what is considered American is construed as something that permanent or something to be erased. The few contemporary American religious historians who give attention to Asian Americans gravitate towards either an assimilationist reading of Asian American Christianity or a sentimentalized and disembodied Orientalist reading of non-Christian Asian religious communities. Asian cultural difference is either erased beneath the canopy of white Christianity or constructed as the “other” (especially for the sake of religious toleration). Furthermore, both the traditional study of Christian history and the comparative religious studies approach to American religious history have been “color-blind” to the racialized aspects of the Asian American experience. In part, this “color-blindness” has been created by and continues to perpetuate Orientalism in American religious historiography.

Influenced by the social history and comparative religious studies, some recent American religious histories have given greater attention to the growing presence of Eastern religious beliefs and practices in the United States. One particular text broke new ground on the traditional Protestant-centered and intellectual-history oriented study of American religious history. In 1981, Catherine L. Albanese’s *America: Religions and Religion* opened the doors to viewing American religious history from the perspective of a religious pluralism that went beyond (while acknowledging) Protestantism’s centrality in shaping American religion. Now in its third edition, *Religions and Religion* devotes an entire chapter to Eastern religions in the United States.¹¹ However, the book reproduces an Orientalist framework by lumping Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism together into one chapter.

As significant as Albanese’s text has been in the study of American religious history, the tendency of this approach has been to utilize a comparative religious studies approach in their narratives about Asian Americans. This has often led to the exclusive identification of Asian Americans with Eastern religions. For instance, in Amanda Porterfield’s recent study of late-twentieth century America, she asserts:

After severe restrictions on Asian Immigration were lifted in 1965, Asians became the largest immigrant group in the United States. Buddhists from Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand established new temples and religious centers in the United States making this country home to more cradle Buddhists than ever before, as well as to more different forms of Buddhism than any other country in the world.¹²

Latino and Hispanic people might dispute the claim that Asians are the largest immigrant group in the United States, but it is clear that Porterfield strongly identifies Asian

¹⁰ Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

¹¹ Catherine L. Albanese, *America, Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1998 [1981]); another significant work has been Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989). Williams examines religious practices outside institutionalized religions.

¹² Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 134.

Americans with Buddhism. She also connects Asian Indians with Hinduism and discusses Islam; and there is virtually no reference to Asian Christianity or popular religion.

Another example can be found in Jacob Neusner's textbook for introductory courses on American religion, *World Religions in America*. This textbook recognizes the significance of racialized religious communities and gender by devoting chapters to African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women. But the chapters about Asian religions do not address the history and experiences of Asian Americans themselves.¹³ Thomas Tweed and Prothero's *Asian American Religions in America: A Documentary History* does a more satisfactory job of including texts written by Asian Americans who practice East Asian religions. Unlike the aforementioned texts, *Asian American Religions* is able to bring together race and East Asian Religions. It includes bell hooks' reflections on the racial divide within American Buddhism and is periodized around the history of Asian immigration.¹⁴

These studies are important because they broaden our understanding of the growing religious diversity in the United States. They are calls to respect difference and embrace inclusivity. As such, they can be said to reflect David Will's "pluralist" narrative typology. There is an implicit vision the United States as a cosmopolitan "city on a hill" from which the light of liberty emanates to the world. In their descriptions of non-Christian religions in America, these texts can be seen as efforts to critique the hegemony of European religion, society and culture.¹⁵ Their tendency to exclude Asian American Christian narratives, however, reveals an excessive dependency on phenomenology or comparative studies of religion to interpret "Eastern" religions. Consequently, even though they question the dominance of Christianity in "Western" societies, they reproduce the Orientalist tendency to reify difference between East and West. Narratives of white American appropriation of "Eastern" religions may challenge the assumption of Christian hegemony in Europe and the Americas, but they do not critique Orientalist interpretations of Asians. Religious Asians, therefore, are required to be viewed through the lenses of "Eastern" religions.

At the heart of the matter are the problematic assumptions of religious studies itself. According to Timothy Fitzgerald, the discourses of liberal ecumenical theology, comparative religion, and the phenomenology of religion are all framed within a Western understanding of "religion." These assumed universal categories are then imposed upon non-Western cultures and do not adequately represent Asians within their own historical and social contexts.¹⁶ Whether or not one agrees with Fitzgerald's scathing critique of religious studies, by describing Asian culture and religions ahistorically, much of Euro-American based religious studies have interpreted Asians and Asian Americans through the lens of Orientalism.

¹³ Jacob Neuser, ed., *World Religion and American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Thomas A. Tweed, and Stephen Prothero, eds., *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). bell hooks' article, "Waking Up to Racism" was originally published in *Tricycle* (Fall 1994): 42-45.

¹⁵ For example, Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian country" has now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

¹⁶ Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

It is important to note that that the comparativist religious and phenomenological approaches have not been the only challenge to “traditional” (i.e. Protestant-centered) American religious historiography. In recent years, the introduction of social scientific disciplines such as anthropology and post-modern sociology have greatly broadened the historical field. David Lotz notes that since 1965 the “new social histories” have dramatically transformed American *church* history into American *religious* history. The change in location of religious historians from the seminary to university settings, the “decline of Protestant Christendom” in the United States and Canada, and the “growth of a radical religious pluralism” have all contributed to this shift from a theologically oriented intellectual history to a secularized social historical approach. The impact of the new social history upon American religious history became the subject of a historians’ conference at Racine, Wisconsin in 1993. Participants were asked to bring the “old ‘Church History’ – Protestant centered and intellectually based – into dialogue with the new, non-mainline-centered and socially based ‘religious history.’”¹⁷ Out of this conference came a significant text named after the conference itself, *New Directions in American Religious History* (1997). Most of the essays reflected substantial re-thinking of the more traditional Protestant-oriented historiography and a few addressed the impact of studies of gender, ethnicity, and race upon the field.¹⁸ In the same year that *New Directions* appeared, another edited re-assessment of American religious history, *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, was published. This text, more explicitly than *New Directions*, suggested new approaches to interpreting American religious history. It even included essays that sought to view American religious history from the perspective of the Pacific Rim and Native Americans.¹⁹

Despite these changes, Asian Americans have still not received much attention by American religious historians. As early as 1993, in an essay reviewing the scholarship in American Religious history in the 1980s, Martin E. Marty bemoaned the absence of research in Asian American religious history.²⁰ In his own recent project on Modern American religion, Marty gives significant attention to the history of Asians in the United States as victims of discrimination, conveyors of Eastern Religion. He also briefly discusses Asian American Christianity. Overall, his treatment of the Asian American religious experience is still limited secondary sources.²¹ This is understandable since so few scholars are examining Asian American religious history. Less clear is why ten years after Marty’s *Church History* article first appeared, there is still only a handful of scholars are examining Asian American religious history.

¹⁷ David W. Lotz, “A Changing Historiography: From Church History to Religious History” in *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America, 1935-1985* edited by David W. Lotz. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 312-339; Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Thomas A. Tweed, ed., *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1997). See essays by Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp (“Eastward ho! American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim”) and Joel W. Martin (“Indians, Contact, and Colonialism in the Deep South: Themes for a Postcolonial History of American Religion”).

¹⁹ Martin E. Marty, “American Religious History in the Eighties: A Decade of Achievement,” *Church History* 62:3 (Sept., 1993): 335-377.

²⁰ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion. Vol. 1: The Irony of It All, 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986); *Modern American Religion. Vol. 2: The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991)

There is another reason for Asian American invisibility in recent American religious historiography. Though the “traditional” Protestant-centered narratives have broadened in recent years, its disciplinary assumptions remain rooted in an assimilationist or “color-blind” framework. This framework prevents American historians of religion from seeing the Asian American religious people as historical subjects.²¹

Unlike the pluralist histories that interpret Asian Americans through the lens of religious difference, these historians view Asian Americans experience as one of inevitable cultural assimilation. Thus, Sidney Ahlstrom was able to claim in 1972 – without citation of sources – that among Chinese and Japanese Americans “ethnic religious commitments have not figured prominently in their self-consciousness as peoples.”²²

I argue that the religious historian’s journey to an assimilationist interpretation of the Asian American experience begins with discomfort with racial or ethnic difference. There is more comfort with religious diversity, though ecumenical unity is often favored over schism and separatism. Edwin Gaustad, one of the most respected “traditional” American religious historians, illustrates this point of view in his popular survey textbook. He associates Asians immigrants with Asian religions:

Similarly (as in the case of Chinese immigrants), the influx of Japanese along the West Coast, even more in Hawaii, led to sharp restrictions of those who would introduce Buddhism and Shinto, even as the Chinese had brought with them Confucianism and Taoism. Nonetheless, despite unmistakable anti-Oriental prejudices and actions, Asian religions established their beach heads all along the Pacific shores, never to be successfully dislodged therefrom.²³

Gaustad values the religious diversity created by Asian immigrants, but is less sanguine about racial diversity. Racial segregation is considered a failure on the part of American religion. “The nation’s religious forces were no more effective in promoting a blindness to race with respect to the Oriental than they had been with respect to the black,” he acknowledges. The inability of early missionaries and schools to Christianize and Americanize “these distinctive immigrants” created “ethnically restricted churches” such as “the Korean Baptist Church, the Chinese Methodist Church, [and] the Japanese Presbyterian Church.” For Gaustad, ethnic-specific congregations do not have innate value since their existence is primarily a reflection of white American racial consciousness. The Japanese American internment camp experience during World War II occurred because Americans “continued to see so much through race-colored glasses.”

But the physical presence of Asians on American soil also fueled racist policies. “The large Oriental presence,” Gaustad asserts, “was a major factor in making the nation’s immigration policy far more restrictive in the early decades of the twentieth

²¹ The exception may be the study of African American religious history in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. American religious histories now recognize race as a strictly Black and White affair. For example, Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout’s 1998 collection of essays limits discussion about race to Black and White relations. Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout (eds.), *Religion in American History: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²² Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, op. cit., p. 1051.

²³ Edwin Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 162-163.

century.” He concludes that though ethnicity could be “sometimes seen as enriching and brightening the whole fabric of American society, it could also be regarded as detrimental to social cohesion and religious destiny.”²⁴ When Asian presence and white prejudice are paired in this manner, the implicit resolution is the erasure of Asian difference in the American mind.

There is no doubt that the recognition of racial differences has led to racism and social strife. But non-recognition or erasure of racial difference has not proven to be a solution either. Racial tensions that develop in contexts of both enforced assimilation and segregation suggest social dynamics that are much more complex than the mere presence of racial difference. Indeed, power dynamics, patterns of privilege, and the ideology of race that lie beneath the surface of racial difference needs to be examined more carefully by American religious historians. Until that day arrives, the current default historical interpretation of Asian Americans by American religious historians remains viewing Asian Americans as the religious “other” or the racially assimilated.

III. The Historical Construction of Assimilation

From a more sober standpoint, church historians must not only come to grips with the exclusion of minority people from their histories of the church, but they must also try to determine why they overlooked them in the first place. J. M. Washington, 144.

What accounts for an “assimilationist” reading of Asian American religious history (and of Asian American Protestantism in particular)? American religious historians have depended greatly upon the influential sociological theories that emerged from the University of Chicago between the two World Wars. Such theories assumed a uni-directional embrace of modern, democratic, and cosmopolitan values on the part of the descendants of immigrants. The research from which these theories were derived mostly centered on experiences of European immigrants. Yet sociologists like Robert Park were confident that they could be applied to Blacks and Asians as well. The assimilation of difference, as evidenced by fully acculturated (so it seemed) Asian Americans like Flora Belle Jan, a flapper in the 1920s, would undermine the credibility of linking perceived intellectual capability and cultural value to biological definitions of race.

The Chicago sociologists were instrumental in tearing down the intellectual foundations of segregationist public policies. But as historian Henry Yu has noted, these sociologists, who valued detached objectivity, were unable to see the racial undertones of assimilation. Their vision of a modern, democratic, and cosmopolitan society that embraces all peoples was itself rooted in the racialized perspectives of particular white sociologists. Consequently though they contributed to mid-century movements towards racial integration, they could not value racial diversity or cultural preservation.²⁵

One of the consequences of over dependency upon these social theories was Mainline Protestant retreat from missionary work among Asian Americans after World

²⁴ Ibid, 187-188, 285. Mark Noll follows a similar pattern of thinking, “Most believers in the United States and Canada maintained a shameful silence when ethnic Japanese, many of them Christian, were interned for much of the war.” Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1992), 437.

²⁵ Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, op. cit.

War II. Mainline Protestants assumed that Asian Americans (as well as all immigrants) would inevitably assimilate into the mainstream and therefore did not require any special attention. Though many Asian Americans in these denominations have worked tirelessly to rectify this benign neglect through the caucus movements in the 1970s, mainline Protestants have not had a good record of incorporating the large numbers of Asian American immigrants since 1965.

A consequence of the historian's dependency upon sociological theories of assimilation has been a tendency to subsume Asian Americans within the narrative of immigration historiography. Singled out as an undesirable and unassimilable race, Asian Americans experienced greater discrimination than most European immigrants between the Civil War and the Second World War. But historians and social scientists after World War II have usually assumed that Asian Americans overcame these initial antagonisms by integrating into the American mainstream. The negative images of the "Oriental heathen" in the latter half of the nineteenth century appeared to have vanished by the middle of the twentieth century. But upon closer inspection, the journey from the "exotic Oriental" to the racially inferior "Asiatic" and, finally, to the nicely assimilated "model minority" was neither historically plausible nor sociologically demonstrable. The transition to "model minority" was especially problematic for it assumed that assimilation was a natural process for Asian Americans. Ignoring their struggles to overcome anti-Asian racism many historians have implied that Asian Americans, like European immigrants, have moved beyond the "race relations" problems. This is true despite the recent modification and/or repudiation of Robert E. Park's theories of assimilation.²⁶

It would be far too simplistic to conclude that the inability of mainline Protestant denominational leaders and American religious historians to understand Asian Americans was a result of their dependency upon sociology. To a very large extent, these social theories themselves reflected the hopes and aspirations of American Protestants at the turn of the 20th century. I suggest that an assimilationist discourse was largely an American Protestant construct that emerged out of their missionary encounters with Asian Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is true that most historical studies acknowledge the presence of Protestants in the history of Asian Americans or sociology. For instance, Henry Yu begins his study with American missionaries who helped underwrite Robert Park's study of Asian Americans in the 1920s. Izumi Hirobe's study of efforts to modify the anti-Asian exclusion clause in the 1924 Immigration Act demonstrates how significant American Protestant missionaries were in seeking to give Japanese Americans a more equitable immigration quota.²⁷ With the exception of Hirobe's work, most of these studies offer rather shallow readings of the history of American Protestantism and their influence on the development of sociology. In the following I hope to show how white American Protestants constructed the idea of Asian assimilability in the face of strong anti-Asian sentiment.

²⁶ Recent ethnic studies have qualified this approach to immigration history. The flurry of Asian American research in recent years is an instance of the challenge to the assimilationist paradigm. Ewa Morawska, "The Sociology and Historiography of Immigration," in *Immigration Reconsidered. History: Sociology, and Politics*, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, ed. (New York: Oxford, 1990): 187-238.

²⁷ Izumi Hirobe, *Japanese Pride, American Prejudice: Modifying the Exclusion Clause of the 1924 Immigration Act* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

In the second half of the 19th century, most white Americans believed that the waves of immigrants from both shores had furnished the “brawn” for Anglo-Saxon “brains” to modernize the United States. “It is remarkable,” Jay Backus declared before the 1869 annual meeting of the American Baptist Home Mission Society in reference to the transcontinental railroad, “that American brains planned it, but American muscle did not build it. God sent to us men from Asia — the Chinese — to build the embankments of its western division, and men from Europe — the Irish — to build the embankments of the eastern.”²⁸ This division of labor reflected an emerging confidence in American exceptionalism and Anglo-Saxon superiority.²⁹ Ironically, the changes caused by modern industrialization only aggravated the social dislocation experienced by many Americans at the time. By the turn of the century, the United States had become what the late Robert Wiebe called a “distended society” in a “search for order” in the midst of glowing confidence in American destiny.³⁰

The economic disparity engendered by industrialization and the religious, ethnic, and racial pluralism created by the influx of immigrants eventually challenged faith in Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. As self-appointed guardians of the national covenant, Anglo-Saxon Americans watched with alarm as boatload after boatload of European immigrants landed on American shores, bringing with them diverse customs, religious traditions, and most significantly, the “old world.” The idea of an Anglo-Saxon exceptionalist national covenant, derived from the Puritan vision of community and renewed in nineteenth century evangelical convictions of America as the redeemer nation with a manifest destiny and millennial role for the world, sought to stem the tide of history. The United States was the land of “new creations.” The decay of historic Europe would vanish as immigrants were “born again” into a new American humanity. The autocracies of the “old world” were to yield to the republican institutions and democratic heritage of the “new world.”³¹

But the crisis that became apparent during the Gilded Age issued forth divergent responses. For some, the loss of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant definitions of exceptionalism did not mean the loss of faith in that ideology. Dorothy Ross has noted that American exceptionalism was transformed into liberalism in the hands of Progressives. They tenaciously adhered to a faith in America as the natural “melting pot” of all European nationalities. Nativists, however, sought to rein in *laissez faire* immigration policies. Some abandoned the belief in America as the asylum for the world’s outcasts and “the melting pot.” Inspired by the success of anti-Chinese exclusionary policies since 1882, many nativists now attempted to exclude Eastern and Southern European immigration by portraying them as inferior races. By 1924, the National Origins Act imposed strict

²⁸ *Annual Report of the American Baptist Home Mission Society* 1869 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1869), 20.

²⁹ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Saxton, Alexander *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London & New York: Verso, 1991).

³⁰ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

³¹ Michael Adas recently called American historians to broaden their “exceptionalist” motif. See “From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into the World History,” *American Historical Review* 106:5 (Dec., 2001), 1692-1720.

quotas on immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, which has usually been interpreted as a nativist victory.³²

Within the context of American exceptionalism and its fate in the course of immigration history, Chinese and Japanese were the most visible non-European immigrants to arrive and settle in the United States. Nativist hostility towards European immigrants assumed even greater racial undertones when directed towards Chinese and Japanese immigrants. European immigrants and their descendants could pass as white Americans, but Asian Americans could not do so easily. Hence, while it appeared that European immigrants had a chance of assimilating into American life, Asians were considered unassimilable and rendered ineligible for citizenship and excluded from immigration.

There was a distinct “orientalist color-line” through which Americans represented Asians in the 19th century. According to John Tchen, “the representation of Chinese things, ideas, and people shifted dramatically from 1776 to 1882, in a manner that coincided with shifts in the political, economic, and social institutions of the United States. Moreover, both representations – the positive and the negative – played a role in the formation of a modern “white” identity . . . Orientalism, therefore, became a cultural phenomenon intrinsic to American social, economic, and political life.”³³ Tchen identifies three distinct and overlapping types of American orientalism:

Each form of orientalism operated according to its own internal logic and sense of time. These patterns were animated by the faith in civilization, progress, and destiny that prevailed during this era of U.S. social, economic, and political development. Each formation of orientalism began with some admiration or fascination for the actual Chinese thing, idea, or person, then went through a phase of emulation and mimesis, and ended with European American mastery and dominance.³⁴

Though Chinese immigration started on the Pacific Coast, American orientalist perceptions originated among wealthy mercantile families in New York City. In the early decades of the 19th century there appeared a form of what Tchen calls “patrician orientalism” that was largely derived from British and continental sources in China and primarily of interest to New York City elites who craved for expensive goods from China and exotic Chinese ideas. By mid-century, Tchen identifies the emergence of a “commercial orientalism,” a response to a rapidly expanding populist marketplace economics in the middle of the 19th century. Representations of Chinese people, things, and ideas were now being generated for popular consumption even as real Chinese people became a presence in New York City. “This pastiche of commercial orientalism was subject to a marketplace that catered to consumers who would buy only certain

³² Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1956); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. 2d ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

³³ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), xv, xvi; see also Robert Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

³⁴ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*. Op. cit. xx.

products and representations about Chinese things, people and ideas,” Tchen asserts. “Actual Chinese and European Americans in yellowface performing on New York stages and in museums were presented in ways that further elaborated and reinforced attitudes transplanted from England, among other European influences, but also invoked new competing views in response to reading and viewing publics.”³⁵

By the 1880s, a new orientalist formation emerged. “This political orientalism recast desire-imbued and ambiguous representations into an exclusionary and segregationist discourse.”³⁶ Consequently, anti-Chinese sentiment became engrained in American politics and resulted in immigration exclusion. It was to “political orientalism” that aroused the American Protestant missionary quest for an alternative discourse with regards to Asian Americans. Though missionaries also relished opportunities to exoticize Chinese and Japanese people, things, and ideas, thereby contributing to the “commercial orientalism,” they rejected the “political orientalism.”

Essentially, white Protestants attempted to construct an ideological alternative to the exclusivist and nativist anti-Asian discourse that dominated American public opinion at the end of the 19th century. Protestant faith in Asian assimilation was both a humanitarian response to the victims of American racism and a hope that the failure to fully “Christianize” the “Oriental in America” would find eventual success in their gradual and natural assimilation into American society.

During the early Protestant encounters with the Chinese in the 1850s, missions and evangelism were promoted as the primary vehicles for the incorporation of the Asian into American society. It is important to note that prior to Protestant cognizance of the tremendous industrial-labor problems emerging in American society, much of the mission efforts were enmeshed in a milieu of smoldering anti-slavery and revivalist sentiment. Soul winning was often accompanied by an abolitionist desire to “uplift” racialized peoples and incorporate them into American society. Shortly after the Civil War, Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists leapt into the fray of Chinese mission work in San Francisco. As the Chinese (and later Japanese) population grew and shifted into urban centers, several mission centers were established in these locations.

Protestant hope for the Chinese and Japanese to assimilate into American life through Christian conversion was severely tested. Anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese discrimination on the Pacific slope and in national politics were severe obstacles. Though Protestants were among the very few who advocated on behalf of Asians and protested the discriminatory treatment of Chinese and Japanese and lobbied against immigration legislature that excluded Asians, their efforts ultimately failed in the face of an American society that had become increasingly hostile towards Asian immigrants. Furthermore, Chinese and Japanese transience and reluctance to embrace Christianity discouraged Protestants and contributed to the loss of confidence in Christian conversion as a means of assimilation. By the end of World War I, many Protestant mission boards felt that they had over-committed their ministry resources among Asian Americans.

But the failure to Christianize the Asian American and the Asian American Christian failure to assimilate into or be accepted by American society during the

³⁵ Ibid., xxii.

³⁶ Ibid., xxiii.

Progressive years left Protestants to ponder the future of the Asian in America. Efforts to consolidate and make more efficient the social impact of Asian American missions yielded ambivalent results, at best. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of assimilation was renewed in the early decades of the 20th century. As the presence of women missionaries became more pronounced at the turn of the century, greater attention was given to the wives and children of Chinese and Japanese immigrant men. Many women missionaries began to articulate the hope that Christianized Asian wives and children would uplift their people and thus qualify them for either mission work in Asian or citizenship in the United States. Furthermore, the national awakening and modernization of China and Japan during this time gave the impression (both admired and feared) that these Asian nations had the potential to join the family of civilized and modern nation states. This was accompanied by signs of Chinese and Japanese Protestant growth in Asian and in the United States. There appeared to be evidence that the “heathen” Asian might be assimilable after all.

Throughout this period, Protestants publicly protested the discriminatory treatment of Asian Americans in exclusion and naturalization legislation. Whether their protests were motivated by a concern for the civil rights of Asian Americans or a desire to secure international peace and goodwill (or both), Protestants continued to refute anti-Oriental advocates who claimed that Asian Americans were unassimilable. While exclusionists were often vague in their definitions of assimilation, Protestants consistently made a distinction between biological amalgamation and cultural-social assimilation. The former was unnecessary for the latter to occur, Protestants argued, as they held tenaciously to the view that Americanization was a “spiritual” process.

Consequently, Protestant advocates of “Oriental” missions turned to sociological analysis in the 1920s in hope of securing their faith in the assimilability of Asian Americans. Employing Robert Park and his race relations cycle American Protestants entrusted their mission work to an ideology of “natural” assimilationist for Asian Americans. Asian Americans, like other immigrants would undergo a natural, inevitable, and progressive process of assimilation into modern America. This ideology justified the Protestant transference of the Asian American missions to local religious jurisdiction and “secular agencies” in the 1930s. It became the intellectual foundation in opposition to policies segregation and exclusion that assumed that Asian Americans were innately and obstinately foreign.

The search for the assimilation of Asian Americans was one aspect of the Protestant effort to secure their vision for a Christian American commonwealth in the face of dramatic social changes in the United States between the Civil War and World War II. Towards the end of this period, most leaders in the mainline American Protestant denominations became more tolerant of racial and religious pluralism, but maintained their faith in a “secularized” liberal national covenant. Thus, assimilation and its younger cousin “integration” remained the Protestant watchwords throughout the 1950s and 1960s. By this time, Asian Americans had been subsumed under the assimilationist narrative of European immigration history. Historians and church leaders in the mid-twentieth century erased this “color-line” by dissolving Asian Americans into the European immigrant narrative and reducing Asian American difference to ethnicity.

Asian Americans, at it turned out, represented one of the great challenges to 19th and early 20th century Protestants in their efforts to impose their Anglo-Saxon Christian vision upon American society. Some Protestants, through their encounters with other

races and nationalities, learned that their claims to a universal religion could be legitimated only as long as their faith was not too closely associated with Euro-American racialist culture. But for the most part, Protestants retreated to a more comfortable view that the assimilation (and eventual Christianization) of Asian Americans was a natural and gradual process. By helping to shape the ideology of assimilation, Protestants inadvertently contributed to the merging of the Asian American experience with the European immigration narrative and the development of the Asian American “model minority” thesis. Hence, insofar as the American religious historiography remains influenced by its Protestant roots, it continues to interpret the Asian American experience through the lens of assimilation.

IV. Retrieving the Asian American subject in historical interpretation of Asian American religions.

“...I believe the history of the victims of Christian history, as well as the history of downtrodden Christians, is so vital. We need their views not simply to critique our own elitist views but because we need to discover when, where, and how we failed to love them as the Lord commanded us to do. Church history at its best must become concerned and interested in the oppressed. Otherwise it runs the risk of betraying the Gospel’s allegiance to the downtrodden. It would remain, as it often is, the history of pious elites written by sometimes pious, sometimes irreverent elites.” – J. M. Washington, 136.

This chapter attempted to explicate how orientalism has limited the interpretive options of religious historians who seek to study Asian American religion. In particular, it centered on how white Protestant roots of the assimilationist paradigm became so pervasive in the interpretation of Asian Americans today. The interpretive lenses which represent Asian Americans as exotic religious other or as “model minority” Christians have given little room for alternative perspectives. By not giving enough attention to the social and historical experiences of religious Asian Americans, they risk essentializing Asian American subjects or rendering them invisible. In this conclusion, I will suggest three possible directions that historians may wish to go in order to interpret the Asian American religious experience beyond orientalism and assimilation. Hopefully, these approaches will more effectively retrieve the Asian American subject in American religious history.

First, the retrieval of religious Asian American subject will require engagement with current Asian American and racialization theorists. Researchers need to bring these perspectives with them as they engage Asian American communities. Mia Tuan’s study of second to fifth generation middle class Asian Americans in California is a good example of a sociologist’s effort to get past the “Foreigner-Model Minority” paradigm. Her study does not entirely reject the sociological categories of assimilation, but also includes racialization as part of the Asian American experience. Historians and theologians need to do likewise and also engage recent studies of American orientalism.³⁷

³⁷ Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

A second approach views Asian American religious communities and individuals as creative sites and agents of cultural synthesis. The debate over African retentions and Black assimilation in African American religious communities can provide some conceptual help. In discussing the phenomena of African American Christianity, for instance, Charles Joyner notes, “The slaves did not simply adopt the God and the faith of the white missionaries. In establishing a spiritual life for themselves, they reinterpreted the elements of Christianity in terms of deep-rooted African religious concerns.” Thus, he concludes, “The originality of African-American Christianity, then, lies neither in its African elements nor in its Christian elements, but in its unique and creative synthesis of both.³⁸ So rather than interpreting them as bearers of Asian religion or assimilated Christians, religious Asian Americans (including Asian American Christians) can be viewed as agents who construct and express their religion in unique and creative ways.

Finally, American religious historians need to incorporate themes of transnationalism and diaspora in their study of Asian American religious communities.³⁹ Even in the case of Chinese American Protestantism, historical developments in China and the Chinese diaspora have had significant impact on the shape and character of Chinese Protestants in North America.⁴⁰ This approach reveals the impact of Asian nationalisms upon Asian American religions (including Christianity) and can provide a rich repository for an interpretation of the Asian American religious experience that is not so United States centered.

The hermeneutical labor of the historian of Asian American religion is a daunting challenge because of the pervasive presence of orientalist and assimilationist assumptions in American society today and the paucity of Asian American religious historians. Yet, Asian American theologians and religious leaders require a historical framework that more accurately reflects the Asian American experience. Furthermore, American religious historiography can benefit not only from the history of religious Asians in America, but also from the history of orientalism among historians. The latter does not only interpret the Asian American experience, but also sets forth a new center for viewing American religious history. David Wills rightly argued for a Southern hermeneutical starting point. I argue for a Trans-Pacific starting point.

Though the challenge is great, the prospects are also very exciting because the field of American religious history (despite this chapter’s critique) is gradually opening its doors to alternative perspectives. Perhaps this chapter will help widen the hermeneutical options for the study of Asian American religious history.

³⁸ Charles Joyner, “‘Believer I Know’ The Emergence of African-American Christianity,” in *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, Paul E. Johnson, ed., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 37. Like Albert Raboteau, Joyner attempts to get past the class Frazier-Herskovits impasse by stressing the creative agency of African American Christians. Ref. J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

³⁹ A good recent study which does not analyze religion very closely but utilizes a transnational theme is Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ Timothy Tseng, “Trans-Pacific Transpositions: Continuities and discontinuities in Chinese North American Protestantism,” *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* edited by Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2002).

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