



Publications - International

## Religious Diversity in America: The Emergence of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Others

### Tom W. Smith

Dr. Tom W. Smith is director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. A nationally recognized expert in survey research, Smith has authored over 300 scholarly papers. He has taught at Purdue University and Northwestern University, and in Sociology and Political Science at the University of Chicago.

Smith's publications for the American Jewish Committee include *What Do Americans Think About Jews?* (1991), *Anti-Semitism in Contemporary America* (1994), *Holocaust Denial: What the Survey Data Reveal* (1995), *A Survey of the Religious Right* (1996), *Intergroup Relations in a Diverse America* (2001), and *Estimating the Muslim Population in the United States* (2001).

### Introduction

The Reverend J. Gordon Melton, the country's foremost church counter, once remarked that American society has the "most diversely religious people on earth." Our tradition of religious pluralism goes far back into our Colonial history. Edwin S. Gaustad noted that even in the early seventeenth century one found "Huguenots in Charleston, Anglicans in Tidewater, Virginia, Catholics in St. Mary's City, Swedish Lutherans along the Delaware, Quakers and Presbyterians further up the river, Dutch Reform in Manhattan, Puritans in New England, Baptists, and Heaven-knows-what-else in Rhode Island." Early in the history of the American republic, the French aristocrat Talleyrand is reported to have derisively observed that the United States had 32 religions, but only one sauce (Smith, 1990).

Since then, America has continued both to import foreign religions and to spawn indigenous ones. In recent decades religious diversity surged after the 1965 changes in immigrant laws increased the flow of adherents from all the world's faiths, while new religions continually formed (Numrich, 2000 and 2001; Sherkat, 1999 and 2001; Smith, 1991; Warner 1998a and 1998b).

This report studies the changing religious composition of United States over the last generation. Special attention is given to religions that until recently had not been a prominent part of America's religious heritage. In particular, the positions of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are examined.

### Trends

Religions outside of Judaism and Christianity make up a small but growing share of America's religious mosaic. In 1973-80 the General Social Surveys (GSS) indicated that they accounted for 0.8 percent of the adult population. This grew to 1.3 percent in 1981-90, and to 2.6 percent in 1990-2000.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the American Religious Identity Surveys (ARIS) put these religions at 1.5 percent in 1990 and 2.4 percent in 2001 (Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Three faiths-Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam-account for about half of those following other religions. According to the GSS, they totaled 0.4 percent in 1973-80, 0.7 percent in 1981-90, and 1.1 percent in 1991-2000. The ARIS found that the three religions were 0.7 percent in 1990 and 1.4 percent in 2001. Likewise, Barna Research placed their share at about 1 percent in 2001 (Barna, 2001).

The remaining nontraditional religions consist of a wide mix of faiths, all so small that detailed delineation is not practical. On the 1991-2000 GSSs the leading other religions were non/interdenominational believers with 0.45 percent and other Eastern religions (e.g., Jainism, Sikhism, and Taoism), Native American religions, pagans and witches/Wiccans, and followers of "personal" religions-all about 0.1 percent. The 2001 ARIS lists the top remaining faiths as pagan, Wiccan, Spiritualist, and Native American.

Of the three major faiths outside of Judaism and Christianity, the GSS finds Muslims growing from 0.2 percent in 1973-80 to 0.3 percent in 1981-90, to 0.45 percent in 1991-2000 (Table 1). Unadjusted figures from the ARIS place Muslims at 0.3 percent in 1990 and 0.5 percent in 2001. Among the two student samples, the high school seniors in Monitoring the Future (MTF) show no clear trend during the 1990s, but first-year college students in American Freshmen (AF) do indicate a ninefold rise in the proportion of Muslims among the total population from 0.1 percent in the late 1960s to 0.9 percent in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

The GSS estimates that Buddhists increased from 0.1 percent of the adult population in 1973-80 to 0.3 percent in 1981-90 to 0.4 percent in 1991-2000 (Table 2). The ARIS finds Buddhists growing from 0.2 percent in 1990 to 0.5 percent in 2001. AF finds that Buddhists grew from 0.2 percent of first-year college students in 1982 to 1.0 percent in 2000.<sup>4</sup> On MTF Buddhists also appear to make up a growing share of high school seniors, but this trend is somewhat obscured by the dropping of California from the coverage starting in 1997.<sup>5</sup>

For Hindus the GSS indicates a rise from 0.1 percent of adults in 1973-80 to 0.1 percent in 1981-90 to 0.2 percent in 1991-2000 (Table 3). The ARIS shows a gain from 0.1 percent in 1990 to 0.4 percent in 2001.<sup>6</sup>

### **Current Size of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism**

Smith (2001) finds that the best estimate of the contemporary Muslim population, with adjustments for non-English speakers, is about 0.67 percent. This comes to about 1.4 million adults or a total population of about 1.9 million.<sup>7</sup>

There is no consensus on the number of Buddhists in America. As Table 4 indicates, recent estimates range from under 500,000 to over 5 million. Estimates are about equally common from a half-million to a million all the way to over 4 million. The average estimate is about 2.3 million.

Contemporary estimates based on surveys of the Buddhist share of the adult population range from 0.2-0.6 percent (Table 5). Estimates of the total population from the GSS fall in the same range, 0.2-0.6 percent.<sup>8</sup> However, the samples of high school seniors and first-year college student both find a higher proportion Buddhist, 1.0 percent. This may reflect the fact that immigrant populations tend to be younger than the general population. It could also indicate that Buddhism is more popular among the young than among adults of all ages, but that appears unlikely, since the parents of first-year college students are more frequently Buddhist than the students themselves. Taking the range of estimates of 0.5-1.0 percent would mean that Buddhists would account for 1.0-2.1 million adults, and 1.4-2.8 million in the total population. Given that several general population surveys point toward the lower end of this range and only the student samples incline toward the higher end, it is likely that the total number of Buddhists is closer to 1.4 million than 2.8 million.

In contrast to the Buddhist figures, there is great consensus that the Hindu population is a little over 1 million (Table 4). No estimates are below 500,000 or above 2 million and 74 percent are in the 1-1.5 million range.

Surveys estimate the Hindu adult population at between 0.1 percent and 0.4 percent (see Table 5). The GSS estimates of the Hindu share of the total population are between 0.2-0.3 percent. (No figures are available from either Monitoring the Future or American Freshmen studies.) At 0.3-0.4 percent, Hindus would make up from 627,000 to 837,000 adults and from 844,000 to 1,126,000 in the total population.

The 2000 Census reports 1,718,778 persons identifying their race as Asian Indian. Two estimates of the Hindu share among immigrants from India are 45 percent (Hofrenning and Chiswick, 1999) and 65 percent (Kurien, 2001). Using these rates would put the number of Asian Indian Hindus in the total population between 773,000 and 1,117,000. It is generally believed that the vast majority of Hindus in the United States are immigrants from India, rather than converts or immigrants from other countries (see footnote 6), but no numerical estimates appear available. 9 Unless the number of non-Asian Indian Hindus is much greater than commonly assumed, the survey estimates of 0.8-1.1 million are very consistent with the Census-adjusted figures of 0.8-1.1 million.

## Discussion

The recent and projected growth of religions outside of Judaism and Christianity, and their current prominence, have been described as revolutionary, as having transformed American society. Eck (2001) writes of "a new multireligious America" in which "the religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past 30 years." *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (Linder, 1998) in 1998 changed its basis for estimating alternative religions and showed one-year gains of sixfold to 72-fold for Muslims, Hindus, New Religionists, and Sikhs; it described these totally artifactual gains as "a vivid example of that accelerating rate of change" in America's religious profile. The Muslim population is commonly overestimated by a factor of 3 to 4, and there are assertions that Muslims outnumber the third largest denomination in the United States, the Methodists (Smith, 2001). Impressive as the actual changes in nontraditional religions have been, they cannot match these and many related claims about the growth and size of these religions. 10

Religions outside of Judaism and Christianity are increasing their market share. From the 1970s to the present the proportion in these religions grew about threefold to fourfold. But even given their rapid rate of growth, their absolute size remains small. The 1998-2000 GSSs find that only 2.7 percent of adults are followers of alternative religions (even counting those with mixed faiths, the non/interdenominational, and those with "personal" religions). Likewise, the 2001 ARIS puts other religions at 2.1 percent.

This indicates that non-Judeo-Christian religions are much smaller than the frequently cited high-end estimates of their size and have hardly transformed the religious landscape as much as often portrayed. There are several reasons why the size and prominence of these religions have sometimes been exaggerated. First, as Warner (1998a) has noted, these faiths are not only "increasingly numerous," but also "increasingly visible." 11 New temples, celebrity converts to Buddhism, turbaned Sikhs, and visits by the Dalai Lama have all created an impression of prominence beyond the actual size of these groups.

Second, elements of these emerging religions have attracted the interest of many more Americans than have actually been won over as genuine adherents. Tweed (1999), for example, describes "nightstand Buddhists" who adopt trappings of the faith without becoming adherents or abandoning their existing faith. As Ankerberg and Weldon (1991) have noted about Hinduism:

In all its forms, Hinduism has influenced tens of million of people in America. By itself Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, a form of advaita Vedanta Hinduism, has over three million graduates....The New Age movement, with a collective following in the millions, has been powerfully influenced by Hinduism....In addition, literally tens of millions of Americans have taken up Hindu practices, such as yoga, meditation, developing

altered states of consciousness, seeking Hindu "enlightenment," and various other occultic practices.

America has always been a religiously diverse nation, and recent changes in immigration patterns, as well as indigenous religious developments, have increased that diversity. While Americans still overwhelmingly adhere to their traditional faiths, the United States is home to all of the world's religions, and religions outside of Judaism and Christianity make up a small, but growing, share of America's religious mosaic.

**Table 1-Trends in Muslim Religious Identity: Surveying the Surveys**

Monitoring the Future High School Seniors		General Social Surveys	
Year	Percentage	Year	Percentage
1991	0.5	1973-1980	0.2
1992	0.5	1981-1990	0.3
1993	0.8	1991-2000	0.45
1994	0.6		
1995	0.4		
1996	0.8		
1997*	0.7	American Religious Identity Survey	
1998*	0.7	Year	Percentage
1999*	0.6	1990	0.3
2000*	0.5	2001	0.5

\*California omitted starting in 1997

**American Freshman:**

Year	Students	Mothers	Fathers
1969	0.1	--	--
1970	0.1	0.1	--
1973	0.1	--	--
1974	0.2	0.1	0.2
1975	0.2	0.1	0.2
1976	0.2	0.2	0.2
1977	0.2	0.2	0.2
1978	0.2	0.2	0.2
1984	0.2	0.2	0.2
1985	0.2	0.2	0.2
1986	--	--	--
1987	0.2	0.2	0.3
1988	0.3	0.3	0.4
1989	0.4	0.4	0.5
1990	0.3	0.3	0.4
1991	0.3	0.3	0.4
1992	0.4	0.4	0.5
1993	0.5	0.5	0.6
1994	0.4	0.4	0.5
1995	0.5	0.4	0.5
1996	0.5	0.5	0.7

1997	0.6	0.6	0.8
1998	0.5	0.5	0.6
1999	0.6	0.6	0.8
2000	0.9	0.9	1.2

Sources: ISR, 1991-2000; Sax, et al., 2001; Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001.

**Table 2-Trends in Buddhist Religious Identity**

Monitoring the Future:  
High School Seniors

Year	% Buddhist	Year	% Buddhist
1991	0.9	1973-1980	0.1
1992	0.9	1981-1990	0.3
1993	1.1	1991-2000	0.4
1994	0.9		
1995	1.2		
1996	1.3		
1997*	0.9		
1998*	1.0		
1999*	0.7		
2000*	1.0		

\*California omitted starting in 1997

American Freshman:

Year	Students	Mothers	Fathers
1984	0.2	0.3	0.3
1985	0.3	0.4	0.4
1986	--	--	--
1987	0.4	0.5	0.5
1988	0.4	0.6	0.5
1989	0.3	0.5	0.5
1990	0.4	0.6	0.5
1991	0.3	0.6	0.6
1992	0.4	0.7	0.6
1993	0.5	0.8	0.8
1994	0.5	0.9	0.8
1995	0.7	1.0	1.0
1996	0.6	1.0	1.0
1997	0.7	1.1	1.0
1998	0.6	0.9	0.8
1999	0.8	1.1	1.1
2000	1.0	1.5	1.5

American Religious Identification Survey

Year	% Buddhist
1990	0.2
2001	0.5

Sources: Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001; Sax, et al., 2001; ISR, 1991-2000.

**Table 3-Trends in Hindu Religious Identification**

General Social Survey	
Year	% Hindu
1973-1980	0.1
1981-1990	0.1
1991-2000	0.2
American Religious Identity Survey	
Year	% Hindu
1990	0.1
2001	0.4

Source: Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001.

**Table 4-Recent Estimates of the Buddhist and Hindu Population in the U.S.**

<u>Population</u>	<u>Buddhist</u>	<u>Hindu</u>
Less than 500,000	1	0
500,000 - 999,999	3	5
1,000,000-1,499,999	3	17
1,500,000-1,999,999	4	1
2,000,000-2,999,999	4	0
3,000,000-3,999,999	5	0
4,000,000-4,999,999	1	0
5,000,000+	2	0
	23	23
Average	2,300,000	1,110,000

Sources: "95%...", 2001; Ash, 1997; Robinson, 2001a and 2001b, "United States...", 2000; "Hinduism...", 2001; "World Religion...", 2001; Halverson and Bhattacharya, 1999; Arriaga, 1997; "United States Hindus...", 2001; "Hindus...", 2001; Prichard, 2001; "Facts...", 1997; Ostling, 1999; Long, n.d.; Broadwater, 2000; Kurtz, 2001; George, 1995; Engley, 1999; Pluralism, n.d.; World Almanac, 2000; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000; Linden, 1996; Prothero, 2001; Nattier, 1998 and 1999; Woo, 2000; Queen, 1999; Baumann, 1997; Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, 2001; "Non-Christians...", 1998.

**Table 5-Current Survey Estimates of Buddhists and Hindus**

Buddhists Hindus

## General Social Survey

## Adults:

1998	0.3	0.3
2000	0.6	0.4

## Total Population:

1998	0.2	0.2
2000	0.6	0.3

## American Religious Identification Survey

2001	0.5	0.4
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## Gallop

1999	NL	less than 1%
2000	NL	less than 1%
1999-2001	NL	0.1
2000-2001	0.2	NL

## American National Election Studies

1996	0.3-0.5	0.1-0.2a
2000	0.2-0.4	0.1-0.1

American Freshman  
First-Year College Students

2000	1.0	NL
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NL=Not listed

a-The first number is based on all respondents and the second is among those who were asked their religion. Only those who attended services or who said they were members of a church were asked their religion.

Sources: ANES, 1996 and 2000; Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001; Sax et al., 2001; "Latest...", 2000 and 2001; Kosmin and Lachman, 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001.

**Endnotes**

1. On the GSSs, see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2001. Also see Sherkat, 1999, for similar figures.

2. The GSS and ARIS differ in how they define what constitutes alternative religions. For example, ARIS includes Unitarian/Universalist and Spiritualist under this heading, but puts all nondenominational persons in the Christian category. The GSS counts Unitarians/Universalists and Spiritualists as Protestants and puts all those who said they were non/interdenominational, but who did not identify themselves as Catholic, Protestant, or Christian, in the alternative category.

3. The AF figures for 2000 are suspect, however, because they show such a large, one-year increase over 1999. On Muslims in America, see Smith, 2001.

4. The increase among students from 1998-2000 and for parents for 1999-2000 is rather steep and probably exaggerates the rate of short-term change.

5. On Buddhists in America, see Baumann, 1997; Coleman, 2001; Eck, 2001; Miller, 1995; Numrich, 2000; Prebish and Tanka, 1998; and Warner and Wittner, 1998.

6. On Hindus in America, see Ankerberg and Weldon, 1991; Eck, 2001; Kurien, 2001; Miller, 1995; Rajagopal, 2000; and Warner and Wittner, 1998.

7. Smith (2001) discusses estimates of the Muslim population, so they are not covered in detail in this report.

8. GSS estimates for the total population assigns a respondent's religion to all household members.

9. Other countries with majority or near majority Hindu populations are relatively small (Ash, 1997 and Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, 2001). Most contribute a small number of immigrants to the United States (INS, 1999), and their immigrants are not separately distinguished on the Census race item. For 1987-97, immigrants from India constituted 99.2 percent of all immigrants from majority Hindu countries and 76.5 percent of all immigrants from countries that were a third or more Hindu (INS, 1999).

10. Nor is the rise in adherents of alternative religions the largest religious change occurring in America. Changes that are just as important and larger in size include the increase in those without any religious affiliation (Hout and Fischer, 2001) and the rising proportion of Protestants who are Fundamentalists (Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, 2001).

11. On the "visibility" factor, see also Eck, 2001, p. 1.

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