The Life-Cycle of Ethnic Churches

In Sociological Perspective

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Introduction[1]

It is widely recognized that religion and ethnicity are closely related phenomena in North America. In fact, the story of religion in the New World has been largely shaped by patterns of immigration and the establishment of various ethnic traditions (Herberg 1960, p. 10). In spite of the prominence of ethnic churches on the religious landscape of North America, it is a type of religious organization that has been largely ignored by sociologists over the past several decades. Preoccupation with the nature of Protestant sectarianism, new religious movements, and secularization has probably led to this neglect of an area equally important in the sociology of religion. Recent trends in immigration indicate that in the foreseeable future this social form of religion is likely to retain its prominence in both the United States and Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to redirect attention to this often overlooked field of research. After briefly reviewing theoretical perspectives on religion and ethnicity, this paper elaborates an ideal-typical model of ethnic church development. Specifically, the present study outlines the life-cycle stages of ethnic churches, identifies the key organizational dilemmas encountered at each stage, and discusses the central factors which shape the future of ethnic churches as they deal with the problems generated by advanced assimilation.

Religion and Ethnicity: Theoretical Background

Most sociological assessments of the relationship between religion and ethnicity usually follow two general interpretations. One major perspective

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on this relationship emphasizes the conservative role of religion in maintain-
ing ethnic customs, language, and group solidarity. This approach is clearly
reminiscent of Durkheim's (1965) functionalist theory of religion. Religious
beliefs and rituals, he maintained, bind individuals together and provide the
social context necessary for the transmission of traditions and values. A num-
ber of sociologists have recently emphasized the traditional functions and in-
tegrative consequences of religion for ethnic groups in modern pluralistic
societies. Millett, for example, writes:

> One observation occurs repeatedly as one studies various ethnic groups
> in Canada: of all the institutions supporting the survival of distinctive
> cultures, the church is usually the strongest and the most active (1975, p.
> 105).

Similarly, Mol notes that:

> In the countries of immigration, migrant churches have always been the
> most effective bastions of ethnic preservation (1976, p. 174).

The conservative functions of religion in relation to ethnicity have been sum-
marized at greater length by Anderson and Frideres:

> Many of the functions of religion are oriented toward the preservation
> of ethnic identity. As various social scientists have pointed out, religion
> contributes to a sense of identity in an age of depersonalization; it may
> be a nationalistic force and assume the role of the protector of ethnic
> identity; it promotes social integration; it attempts to validate a people's
> customs and values through socialization; it affirms the dignity of ethnic
> group members who might be considered by nonmembers as having low
> status; it tends to be a pillar of conservatism; and it often encourages
> conscious social isolation from outsiders (1981, p. 41).

Few sociologists would deny that religion is often oriented toward the
maintenance of ethnicity. The issue, however, is the long-term effectiveness
of ethnic churches as agents of cultural preservation. In order to determine
their actual role and effectiveness cross-generational studies are necessary. A
review of the literature on religion and ethnicity reveals that progressive as-
similation of successive generations rather than ethnic maintenance is the
most conspicuous pattern to be found in ethnic churches.

A second perspective on religion and ethnicity emphasizes that ethnic
churches are best viewed as adapting organizations. The basic assumption of
this approach is that the assimilation process invariably transforms an ethnic
group over the course of several generations. Organizational survival, there-
fore, will eventually require adapting to the acculturated generations. In *The
Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr provides the classic expression
of this position. Niebuhr's analysis is rooted in the recognition that immigrant
churches tend to be conservative and, during their early stage of develop-
ment, are "primarily conflict societies, intent upon maintaining their distinc-

tion from other groups" (1957, p. 224).[2] Nevertheless, the history of immigrant churches reveals that the tendency toward conformity is ultimately the dominant force shaping their character. The process of assimilation forces the churches to choose between accommodation and extinction.

Contemporary sociologists have also maintained that the survival of ethnic churches requires organizational adaptations. In his study of ethnic groups in Southern Alberta, Palmer (1972, pp. 239–245) discovered a general pattern of accommodation in various immigrant churches in their efforts "to stem the defection of the second and third generations." Similarly, in the United States Steinberg points out that "ethnic subsocieties must adapt to the prevailing culture to curtail the loss of more assimilated members" (1981, pp. 67–68). Fishman also supports this view observing that "the more 'successful' religion becomes, the more de-ethnicized it becomes" (1972, p. 621).

The Life-cycle of Ethnic Churches

The following ideal-typical model of ethnic church development (summarized in Figure 1) is based upon the assumptions of this second perspective (see Sills 1968, pp. 367–371). Each stage of development and the accompanying organizational dilemmas are linked to the nature and extent of the assimilation process. Since Niebuhr's study of the consequences of "homogenization" (or "Americanization") upon immigrant church development, the conceptualization of the assimilation process has undergone considerable refinement. This paper utilizes the framework advanced by Gordon (1964, pp. 70–75).

Ethnic churches are initially established to meet the needs of the immigrant generation. During this **first stage**, the services and activities are naturally dominated by the language and clergy from the old country. The strong leadership of the first generation with their cultural and language differences provides the motivation and resources necessary for ethnic churches to be established. When the existing religious institutions do not provide services in the language of the immigrants, it is only natural that they organize their own. In many cases, discrimination on the part of the host society and exclusion from Anglo-churches make the formation of new ethnic churches the only realistic alternative.

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[2] Because of this preoccupation with the preservation of old world cultures, Niebuhr referred disparagingly to this social form of religion as "racial sectarianism." It should be remembered that as a theologian Niebuhr's central concern was ethical not sociological. For him, sects, denominations, and immigrant churches represented the moral failure of Christianity since they sanctioned divisiveness and a "religion of the caste system" (1957, p. 6). What social form "authentic" Christianity would take is not made entirely clear by Niebuhr (see pp. 281, 284).

Figure 1
Selected Organizational Aspects of
Ethnic Church Evolution

Stages	Character-istics of Membership	Environmental Changes	Adaptation Required	Consequences for Organization
First	Original immigrants; Monolingual			
Second	Original immigrants and Native-Born generation; Bilingual	Cultural Assimilation	Bilingual minister and introduction of English language services	Effective recruitment of acculturated generation
Third	Monolingual	Structural Assimilation; membership leakage through mobility and intermarriage; disappearance of immigrant generation	Goal succession and de-ethnicization	Transformed from ethnic to multiethnic organization

In the course of their development ethnic churches encounter a number of organizational dilemmas. These are related primarily to the tension between old world language and culture of the first generation immigrants, and that of the adopted host society. The transformation of the ethnic group through the process of assimilation generates these critical internal problems. Religious institutions are generally recognized as conservative and notoriously slow in making adaptations to changes in the social environment. The problem of adaptation is accentuated in ethnic churches because of the extraordinary character and degree of the generational changes with which they must cope.

Since ethnic churches are special-purpose organizations established to meet the needs of a particular ethnic group, they are dependent upon ethnic identification and loyalty for their continued existence. Consequently, the assimilation process which transforms the ethnic group over the course of several generations inevitably generates problems which ethnic churches must solve in order to grow and survive. Generational change is at the root of all the organizational problems which confront ethnic churches. "What will give one generation a sense of a unifying tradition," Yinger correctly notes, "may alienate parts of another generation who have been subjected to different social and cultural influences" (1970, p. 112).

Cultural assimilation (Gordon 1964, pp. 70–75) is usually the first type of assimilation to occur and primarily involves change on the part of the minority group to the cultural patterns of the host society. As noted above, ethnic churches in their initial stage of development are naturally oriented to the first generation and dominated by the language of the old country. With the cultural assimilation of the later generations and the inevitable language shift ethnic churches enter their **second stage**, making organizational change necessary in several areas. Bilingual religious leaders must be recruited and additional English language services and church schools for religious socialization must be organized. Also, the materials used in religious services and educational activities must be made available in both languages.

"Organizational rigidity" (Starbuck 1965, p. 471) rather than openness to change is a common characteristic of ethnic churches. Niebuhr pointed out that ethnic churches have a tendency to resist these adaptations due to their desire to preserve the old country language and culture. Even when the "dominant coalition" (Eldridge and Crombie 1974, p. 83) within churches decide that these changes must be made, financial problems and the difficulty of securing a bilingual minister frequently make organizational adaptations impossible. Failure to adapt usually means an end to effective recruiting and a gradual decline in membership as the aging first generation begin to disappear from the scene. Appropriate changes, on the other hand, can mean significant growth as subsequent generations are successfully incorporated

within the church. Zald and Denton have concisely framed the problem of organizational adaptation, which is our primary concern here: "As the environments of organizations change, as the needs or demands of clientele change organizations must, if they are to persist, be able to adapt goals, structure, and services" (1963, p. 214). Meeting the needs and demands of the changing "clientele," in the case of ethnic churches, means providing religious leadership and services in their first language. Successful recruitment of members from among the acculturated generations, therefore, requires increasing "Anglification" (Hofman 1972, p. 621).

Structural assimilation (Gordon 1964, p. 70), which involves large-scale entrance into the cliques, clubs and institutions of the host society, brings ethnic churches to the **third stage** of development. Clearly, the mere existence of these churches is an indication that structural assimilation is far from complete; nevertheless, ethnic churches hardly remain unaffected by this stage of assimilation. As ethnic group members are acculturated and the barriers to full participation in non-ethnic institutions are reduced (i.e., racism and discrimination), the appeal of ethnic churches tends to gradually diminish since social and religious needs can be met equally well within the organizations of the host society.

The pull of structural assimilation makes membership leakage a central problem of ethnic churches during this phase of development. Socialization and education in the institutions of the host society encourages social mobility. Since upward mobility frequently requires geographical mobility, the solidarity of the ethnic community is gradually eroded (Spiro 1955; Montero 1981). The result of this outward movement upon ethnic churches is gradual membership loss. Likewise, structural assimilation leads to increasing intermarriage among subsequent generations, contributing further to the de-ethnicization of these churches.[3] The disappearance of the original immigrant members during this stage also means that ethnic churches are again a monolingual organization, but at this point they are dominated by the language of the host society.

Nisbet has suggested that "no social group will long survive the disappearance of its chief reasons for being" (1953, p. 61). With cultural assimilation, the internal reasons for ethnic church existence are eliminated as their distinct language and culture disappear. As the exclusionary practices of the dominant group decline, permitting structural assimilation to proceed, the external pressure encouraging ethnic church persistence is also

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[3] If a significant number of exogamous marriages are integrated into ethnic churches, the most obvious result will be a diminishing sense of ethnic distinctiveness. It seems more probable, however, that exogamous marriages will tend to discourage affiliation and active participation in an ethnic church. This conjecture is supported by a recent study of the attitudes and behavior of third generation Japanese in the United States. Montero discovered that movement away from the ethnic community is "accelerated among exogamous Sansei (third generation)" (1980, p. 75).

eliminated.

What is the future of ethnic churches once structural assimilation reaches such an advanced stage? From an organizational perspective, our question is: What happens to an ethnic church when its "environment changes in such a way to make its goals irrelevant or unobtainable" (Sills 1968, p. 372)? As noted already, the ostensible purpose of ethnic churches when they are initially organized is to meet the unique religious and social needs of a particular immigrant group. The acculturated generations by and large do not have the unique language and social needs which motivated the first generation to establish an ethnic church. In light of these major changes, if ethnic churches continue to base their relevance upon "ethnic enclosure and support" (Kayal 1973, p. 424), their future is likely to be one of eventual disappearance as structural assimilation continues to take its toll. An alternative to organizational dissolution can be provided by a reorientation and "succession of goals" (Sills 1957, p. 257). In other words, ethnic churches have a "choice between going out of business or developing a new goal" (Hall 1972, p. 92). If ethnic churches de-ethnicize their religious tradition and broaden their base of relevance, organizational survival is a possibility. In order to recruit non-ethnics (as well as acculturated members of the ethnic group), churches must broaden their original goal to include these "outsiders' and create an environment which would be equally attractive to them. It may be that in some cases ethnic churches will not consciously modify their original goals or purpose. Rather, as accommodations are made to English-speaking members and mixed marriages are incorporated within these churches, congregations may slowly make the transition from an "ethnic" to a "multiethnic" organization.

It has recently been emphasized within the sociology of religion that religious organizations need to be analyzed from an open-system or contingency perspective. This approach, according to Scherer, views organizations as a "negotiated order" and stresses the "importance of human actors as decision makers and creators of policy" (1980, p. 10). This is clearly a key component of ethnic churches as they respond to the more advanced stage of assimilation. The attitudes of members and leaders circumscribe the degree of accommodation and adaptation. Those shaping the policy of ethnic churches must answer a critical question: Are the religious goals, activities, and values of this organization worth perpetuating even if it requires the loss or abandonment of its original goal and identity? The decisions made by church members, along with the availability of the religious professionals needed to serve a "de-ethnicized" organization, will together determine the next stage of their life-cycle.

The scenario of "organizational dissolution" or "goal succession" could be altered by changes in two social conditions. First, the arrival of a

significant number of new immigrants could provide a new pool of potential recruits for ethnic religious services. Second, a new wave of racial discrimination and exclusion from non-ethnic institutions could push some members of the acculturated generations back into ethnic churches. Barring such developments, the future of ethnic churches is undoubtedly one of decline and dissolution or transformation into a multiethnic organization.

The history of ethnic churches indicate that adaptation strategies which insure success for the short term are in fact maladaptations when related to the original goals of the organization (Eldridge and Crombie 1974, p. 85). "Decisions made for the purpose of solving immediate problems," Sills points out, "often determine the ultimate character of an organization" (1969, p. 177). In this case, ethnic churches are "de-ethnicized" as leaders decide to adapt to the needs of successive generations. When assimilation reaches a more advanced stage and the original goals of ethnic churches must be displaced in order to survive, the life-cycle of these organizations is nearly complete.[4]

Discussion

The ideal-typical pattern of ethnic church development elaborated above is based upon case-studies conducted by the author (1980–1984) of the Japanese Conference of the United Church of Canada (hereafter the JUCC), with eleven congregations, and the Buddhist Churches of Canada (hereafter the BCC), with eighteen congregations.[5] In this study it was discovered that both ethnic organizations have faced common problems due to the rapid cultural

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[4] The foregoing analysis suggests that ethnic churches are prime examples of what Demerath and Theissen call "precarious" organizations: "The term 'precarious' is appropriate for any organization that confronts the prospect of its own demise. The confrontation need be neither intentional or acknowledged. The only important criterion is a threatened disruption of the organization such that the achievement of its goals and the maintenance of its values are so obstructed as to bring on loss of identity through deathly quiescence, merger, or actual disbandment" (1970, p. 241).

[5] I have presented the findings of these case-studies in detail in *Religious Minorities in Canada: A Sociological Study of the Japanese Experience* (forthcoming from Edwin Mellen Press). In these studies I applied Millett's (1969, p. 113) sub-typology of minority churches. In his analysis of Canadian Census data he observed that approximately 90 percent of the population conformed to "church-like" behavior. Thus, a more adequate analysis of religion in Canada would require that some distinctions be made "within the huge category known as 'churches'" (1969, p. 112). Millett then used the minority church subtype to identify hundreds of ethnic congregations in Canada. The minority status of these churches is related to two issues. First, they operate in a nonofficial language. Second, they are not self-sufficient; that is, they are dependent upon a parent organization for leadership and authority in religious matters. Millett divided these minority churches into two classes: "foreign-oriented" and "native-oriented." Foreign-oriented minority churches are defined as those ethnic organizations which are linked to a mother church in the old country; consequently, their primary reference group is outside Canada. Native-oriented minority churches are those ethnic organizations operating in a nonofficial language which are sponsored by an indigenous Canadian church. It is clear that the nature of the relationship, both ideological and financial, between a particular ethnic church and its sponsoring religious body is a significant factor shaping its life-cycle.

assimilation of Japanese in Canada. Both the BCC and the JUCC have expe-
rienced considerable difficulty in recruiting the appropriate bilingual religious
leaders to provide the services required by the acculturated generations.
Structural assimilation has led to intermarriage rates of over 70 percent
among third generation Japanese related to these churches by virtue of their
parent's membership. Socialization and education in the institutions of the
host society has encouraged social mobility, especially among the third gener-
ation. The geographical mobility accompanying the upward mobility of this
generation is making membership leakage a critical problem for Japanese
churches as they face the future.

   Data on the Japanese churches indicates that most are approaching the
end of the second stage and are beginning to face the organizational prob-
lems generated by advanced assimilation. It appears that the "native-
oriented" JUCC will on the whole be better able to make the difficult transi-
tion from an ethnic church to a multiethnic congregation. As the Japanese-
speaking first generation disappear from the scene, these churches can
recruit Anglo-clergy to serve the acculturated generations; they will also be
more naturally prepared to incorporate other non-Japanese who are inter-
ested in joining an indigenous Canadian church. The "foreign-oriented"
BCC, on the other hand, represents a tradition somewhat alien to Canada.
Furthermore, the Buddhist churches are dependent upon the Mother Temple
(Nishi Hongan-ji) in Kyoto, Japan, for all of their priests, most of whom are
ill-prepared to work in an English environment. Consequently, the Buddhist
churches will have difficulty making organizational adaptations as well as at-
tracting non-Japanese to the Buddhist tradition.[6] Without new immigrants to
replenish the ethnic membership base, therefore, the probable end of most
churches in both the BCC and JUCC appears to be either organizational dis-
solution or transformation into a multiethnic church.

   In closing, it seems worthwhile to relate this ideal-typical model to the
findings of various case-studies of ethnic churches. The following review will
be limited to studies conducted in Canada. If the model fits the data from
Canada, a country popularly viewed as an "ethnic mosaic" where ethnic
groups and their subcultures survive indefinitely, it will probably have some
relevance for the study of ethnic groups south of the border.[7]

   [6] Obviously, the life-cycle of Buddhist churches in areas with a larger Japanese population
will be considerably longer. The Toronto Buddhist Church, for example, with 800 members, can
shrink for many years before disbandment would be necessary. This might give it the extra time
it needs to make the adaptations required for long-term survival. If de-ethnicization occurs, it
may eventually be able to attract a number of other acculturated Asian minorities with a
Buddhist background as well as Caucasians looking for a religious alternative.
   [7] I am fully aware that the popular images of Canada as the "ethnic mosaic" and the
United States as the "melting pot" do not capture the complexity of ethnicity and assimilation
in these countries (Blumstock 1979, pp. 6-7). These contrasting images, or "rhetorical
idealizations" (Simpson 1977, p. 18), imply that the assimilation of immigrants proceeds in dis-
similar patterns in Canada and the United States. Ethnic minorities in the United States are
expected to abandon their distinctive features and conform to "Anglo-Saxon" culture (Herberg

Several sociologists have observed the consequences of cultural assimilation for other ethnic churches in Canada. In a study of Dutch-Canadians in a rural community north of Toronto, Ishwaran discovered that English had replaced Dutch as the primary language used for religious services (1977, p. 177). The Canadian Mennonite Brethren have also been unable to withstand cultural assimilation. In the 1960's, Hamm notes, "most local churches were shifting from a predominantly German service to a bilingual or from a bilingual to English" (1978, pp. 224–225). Similarly, Palmer's study of ethnic groups in southern Alberta showed that accommodation to acculturated generations was the pattern in all of the immigrant churches (1972, pp. 239–245).

Structural assimilation has also had an impact upon other ethnic churches. In his analysis of ethno-religious groups in Saskatchewan, Anderson found that both Norwegian and Swedish Lutheran churches were in a general state of decline (1972, pp. 270–271). Some churches were already closed and others had been forced to merge in order to survive. Anderson's study also reported that Ukranian Catholic parishes were declining with some churches "virtually abandoned." The type of organizational transformation projected for Japanese churches has already occurred in Polish Catholic parishes in western Canada. Radecki observed that between 1950 and 1959 "over 100 parishes and mission parishes of Polish character and with Polish clergy disappeared altogether or were transformed into multiethnic parishes serving the general population of the area" (1979, p. 90). Although additional evidence is certainly needed, these findings alone demonstrate that assimilation takes its toll upon the ethnic churches of other minorities in Canada.

Conclusion

While the assimilation experience of ethnic minorities varies from group to group,[8] there are certain observable regularities upon which this life-cycle

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1960, p. 21), whereas in Canada they are both able and encouraged to maintain their cultural distinctiveness indefinitely. Dahlie and Fernado (1981, p. 1), dissenting from this popular understanding of Canadian society, argue that in spite of the policy of multiculturalism and the existence of two charter groups with distinctive cultures, the pressure towards "Anglo-conformity" is also a dominant social reality of Canada. The inaccuracy of these contrasting images has been helpfully analyzed by Brotz (1980, p. 44).

[8] Comparative sociological studies have shown that the speed of the assimilation process is related to a number of factors, including: the degree of difference between the host and immigrant cultures, the racial difference between the immigrant population and the host society, the degree of geographical concentration or dispersion of the minority group, the comparative size of the groups involved, the degree of institutional completeness, whether the economy is open and expanding, the legal status of the minority group, and the minority group experience of discrimination and prejudice (see Reitz 1980; Anderson and Frideres 1981). Breton has argued that even ethnic groups with a high degree of institutional completeness are eventually faced with "leakage" as members form attachments with individuals in the host society. While assimilation may proceed more slowly for some ethnic groups, Breton maintains that all will go through a life-cycle of formation, growth, decline and disappearance (1964, p. 205).

framework is built. Therefore, it should have some relevance for the study of other ethnic religious organizations. Weber reminds us that ideal-types are not intended to be exact copies of empirical reality; rather they are conceptual instruments useful for generating hypotheses and comparing concrete cases (1949, p. 106). Perhaps the ideal-typical model outlined in this paper will provide an initial frame of reference for those who are interested in the problems and prospects of ethnic religious organizations. Even if the development of other ethnic churches does not conform entirely to the hypothesized pattern, the framework still has an instructive role to play. Divergence from expected patterns will point the sociologist to search for other factors which will explain those cases "that contradict our hypothesized common-sense assumptions" (Wilson 1982, p. 105).

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