

Immigrant Congregational Names in Chicago: Religious and Civic Considerations

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Scholars have overlooked organizational names as a source of knowledge about the religious identities and civic relationships of immigrant congregations. This article draws upon ethnographic research at 16 immigrant congregations and an analysis of 110 Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim immigrant congregations in the Chicago area. Congregational name characteristics include denomination/lineage identity markers, generic religious terminology, national/ethnic identity markers, locational terms, and multiple languages. The article emphasizes the importance of religious identity in naming an immigrant congregation (a non-trivial fact), and discusses commonalities and distinctions among Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim naming patterns. On the whole, immigrant congregations with a preponderance of English and no national/ethnic identity markers in their names are likely to be open to engagement with the larger society.

Language has always been “at the core of the immigrant experience” in America (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Qin-Hilliard 2001, ix). Scholars of both classical (pre-1924) and recent (post-1965) American immigration have examined language dynamics in key immigrant institutions, including local religious associations or “congregations” (e.g., Niebuhr 1957, 200-235; Jones 1960, 75-79; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000a; 2000b, 409-430).² This scholarship reveals a good deal about the role language plays in an immigrant congregation’s special tasks—over and above the usual ritual tasks of any congregation—namely, cultural reproduction, ethnic identity consolidation, and the social and civic integration of its members. Yet one obvious question has escaped systematic scholarly attention: What can we learn from an immigrant

congregation's name? Its name, after all, is a congregation's linguistic badge.

Drawing upon our research in the Chicago area, this article employs name analysis as an entrée to understanding the religious identities and civic relationships of immigrant congregations. Beginning in 2000 the authors directed the Religion, Immigration and Civil Society in Chicago (RICSC) Project, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts as part of its nationwide Gateway Cities research initiative. The RICSC Project studied religion's role in immigrant civic participation by conducting ethnographic research, documentary analysis, and formal face-to-face interviews at 16 immigrant congregations representing 7 religious traditions (Roman Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) and a variety of ethnic identities. The project also compiled data on other congregations with significant immigrant constituencies, defined as comprising at least 20 percent of total participants.

One of the first decisions an immigrant congregation must make is choosing an official or legal name. This will become the congregation's primary linguistic channel for public representation, both to its own clientele (actual and potential) and to outsiders, the latter including government bodies (e.g., when applying for tax exempt status or city permits), utilities (e.g., in listing a phone number), businesses (both among co-immigrants and in the larger society), other religious groups (whether considered allies or rivals), and neighbors (regardless of whether the congregation advertises itself).

Name selection is anything but a random process for all congregations, whether immigrant or indigenous, yet scholars have paid little attention to it. Wilbur Zelinsky's (2002) seminal study of church names in Cook County, Illinois, which appeared in this journal, documents the present dearth of knowledge. Zelinsky's primary interest is to compare naming patterns in white and black Christian congregations,

but many of his observations can be applied to immigrant congregations of all religious identities. For instance, he notes in passing the denominational peculiarities in some church names. Although “denomination” is too tight a concept for certain religious contexts, the principle is transferable beyond Christianity: some congregations adopt names signifying affiliation with or adherence to a larger institutional entity or traditional lineage. Such names are sometimes inherited by, bestowed upon, or imposed on an immigrant congregation; in any of these scenarios, the decision is not completely the prerogative of current congregational leaders and members.

Thirteen of our 16 primary research sites in Chicago fall under this denomination/lineage category. Three of these 13 inherited their names from an earlier and different time of congregational identity. The demographic and theological shift at Naperville Church of the Brethren (est. 1855), for instance, has been so great that Indian leaders have adopted an unofficial name—Gujarati Christian Fellowship—that both distances their membership from the liberal tendencies of the predominantly white denomination and signifies their adherence to generic Indian evangelical Protestantism in India and the US.

Two of the denomination/lineage names among our sites reflect (or at least imply) both the initial ethnic composition of the congregation and the predominant ethnic group today: Five Holy Martyrs (est. 1908, a Catholic church named after Poland’s first canonized saints) and St. Demetrios (a Greek Orthodox church since its inception in 1927). The names of five of our denomination/lineage sites—all of our Hindu and Buddhist sites, by the way—reflect a sectarian identity within a larger religious tradition: BAPS Shree Swaminarayan Mandir (followers of the Hindu holy man, Sahajanand Swami or Swaminarayan), Gayatri Pariwar Mandir (devotees of the Hindu goddess, Gayatri), International Society for Krishna Consciousness (devotees of the Hindu god, Krishna), Ling Shen Ching Tze Temple,

Chicago (name shared by the home temple of the True Buddha School, followers of the Chinese Grand Master Sheng-yen Lu), and HanMaUm Zen Center (followers of Master Dae Haeng Kun Sunim, head of the HanMaUm movement within the Chogye Order of Korean Seon or Zen Buddhism).

The three remaining site names carry generic connotations from their larger religious traditions rather than specific denomination/lineage markers. The acronym in Synagogue FREE's name identifies its target constituency, "*Friends of Refugees from Eastern Europe*," but the generic word "synagogue" does not indicate the congregation's Lubavitch Hasidic identity. Our two Muslim sites chose names featuring a generic marker of their religious tradition, *Islamic* Foundation and *Islamic* Cultural Center of Greater Chicago. In both cases, "Islamic" reflects a key religious ideal of the mosques, namely, to embody the *ummah*, an inclusive community based on Islamic unity that transcends ethnic and sectarian distinctions among Muslims (Numrich forthcoming). The choice of the generic word "Islamic" also implies the modernist or liberal theological perspective of most of the leaders of these mosques (see Esposito 1998; Khan 2003). The history of Islamic Cultural Center of Greater Chicago illustrates the symbolic significance of a congregation's name. The inclusiveness of the name expresses the mosque's intended multi-ethnic Islamic unity, in distinction from the ethnic specificity of its parent organization, the Bosnian American Cultural Association. Internal ethnic contention over institutional control of the mosque led to litigation before the Cook County Circuit Court, which was resolved in 1992 in favor of the inclusiveness signified by the mosque's name (Numrich forthcoming).

Zelinsky notes the relatively small number of church names that carry what he calls "nationalistic" connotations (e.g., *American* or *Lincoln*), which he contrasts to the larger society's penchant when naming streets, schools, parks, and enterprises of various sorts. None of our 16 site names reflects

nationalistic connotations, nor any kind of ethnic identity for that matter. Only two of the 16 include “locational” terms (Islamic Cultural Center of *Greater Chicago*, *Naperville Church of the Brethren*), the second largest category after “religious” in Zelinsky’s study.

In order to tease out the analytical implications of the naming patterns found in our small sample of research sites, we looked at some of the larger universes in which they stand, focusing on the names of all immigrant Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim congregations in the six-county Chicago region. This pool represents the three largest non-Christian religions in recent American immigration, religions largely bracketed out of Zelinsky’s study. We confirmed the existence of at least 33 Buddhist, 27 Hindu, and 50 Muslim congregations (there may have been a few others unknown to us). In addition to categorizing key characteristics of their names, we looked for correlations between the names and the civic engagement patterns of these immigrant congregations.

We must first note the obvious, which turns out to be more illuminating than it appears. All but one of the congregations include at least one religious term in their names. This may not seem surprising—after all, these are religious organizations. But a congregation must choose to express this aspect of its organizational identity, and religious identity clearly has primary importance despite the fact that immigrant congregations typically serve non-religious functions as well. A common institutional trajectory moves from an initial cultural or ethnic association (that may offer religious activities) to an eventual religious center (that also offers cultural or ethnic activities). A name change and consecration rituals often mark this shift, and the continuing mix of religious and ethnic/cultural activities sometimes leads to institutional conflict (Numrich 1996). The Turkish American Cultural Alliance, the only site in our overall pool that does not include a religious term in its name, exemplifies an immigrant cultural association that has become a *de facto*

religious center with an appointed clergy, although it has not changed its legal name to reflect this new institutional status.

Even more significant than the inclusion of a minimum of one religious term is the frequency of such terms in immigrant congregational names. Zelinsky notes that nearly two-thirds of the aggregate total of terms in his sample had religious connotations. In our overall pool of Chicago-area immigrant congregations, 58 percent of the aggregate total of terms are religious (slightly less than Zelinsky's figure), ranging from 47 percent among Muslims, to 60 percent among Buddhists, to 70 percent among Hindus. Some of the religious sentiments in these names are quite fetching, such as Wat Khmer Metta (Buddhist: Cambodian Temple of Loving Kindness), Manav Seva Mandir (Hindu: Temple Serving Humanity), and Masjid Noor (Muslim: Mosque of Light/Illumination).

A major distinction can be made between congregational names that indicate a particular denomination/lineage affiliation and those that carry more generic religious meanings. Examples of denomination/lineage markers among Muslim mosques include *Sunni*, *Shia*, and *Ismaili*, while generic markers include the ubiquitous *Islamic* and *Muslim*, as well as *Mosque* and *Masjid* (Arabic for Mosque). The preponderance of generic religious names among Buddhists and Muslims in Chicago stands in striking contrast to the situation among Hindus: 70 percent or more of Buddhist and Muslim names are generically religious, but only 26 percent of Hindu names are so. Another notable difference between Buddhists and Muslims on the one hand and Hindus on the other has to do with the preponderance of English words in congregational names (defined as 50 percent or more of the name): clear majorities of both Buddhist and Muslim names show a preponderance of English terminology, whereas less than half of the Hindu names do so.

In Zelinsky's study, "locational" terms (8 percent) ranked a distant second to "religious" terms (65 percent). Zelinsky found the use of locational terms unsurprising, given the place-based context of local religious organizations. Yet religious factors, such as denomination/lineage affiliation or simply the transcendent perspective of a religious worldview, may outweigh locale considerations in choosing an immigrant congregation's name. Some names identify the local affiliate of a larger religious enterprise, e.g., HanMaUm Zen Center of *Chicago*. Other immigrant congregations emphasize the territorial range of their actual or potential clientele, e.g., Islamic Cultural Center of *Greater Chicago* or Islamic Foundation *North*, the latter distinguishing itself thereby from the Islamic Foundation located in the western suburbs. While many immigrant congregations consider locality unimportant in choosing a name, the names of 46 percent of all Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim congregations in greater Chicago include terms reflecting their immediate locality, a far higher percentage than Zelinsky's study. Here again, Buddhists and Muslims stand in contrast to Hindus: nearly 60 percent of Hindu names refer to the local vicinity, but only about 40 percent of Buddhist and Muslim names do so.

Zelinsky found very few American nationalistic terms in his study. Chicago's immigrant Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim congregations likewise express little of their own national or ethnic identity in their names. Only one Hindu congregation does so explicitly, Sri Venkateswara (*Balaji*) Temple of Greater Chicago (*Balaji* indicating a south Indian identity), although a few other names imply regional specificity, e.g., the Swaminarayan temples, which represent a Gujarat-based movement. Only 3 of the 50 Muslim congregational names express national/ethnic identity, but even so, all three are balanced with American nationalistic terms: *Albanian American* Islamic Center, *Nigerian* Islamic Association of *United States of America*, and *Turkish American* Cultural Alliance. Chicago-area Buddhists employ a

comparatively larger number of national/ethnic terms (9 of 33 congregations, 27 percent), only one of which is balanced with an American nationalistic term (*Korean American Buddhist Association of the Midwest*). Despite this minor penchant of the Buddhists, the overall dearth of national/ethnic terms in immigrant congregational names was surprising. We expected more public expression of this social identity marker, although assimilationist pressures may be at work here (see below).

Table. Characteristics of Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim immigrant congregational names in the six-county Chicago region

Characteristics of congregational names	% of Buddhist names (N=33)	% of Hindu names (N=27)	% of Muslim names (N=50)	% of all names (N=110)
Frequent religious terms	60	70	47	58
Denomination/lineage terms	30	74	20	36
Generic religious terms	70	26	78	63
Preponderance of English terms	73	41	62	60
Immediate locality terms	42	59	42	46
National/ethnic terms	27	4	6	12

The accompanying table summarizes the key characteristics of the immigrant congregational names just described. The three religious groups, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, share a couple of characteristics but diverge in several significant ways. All three have relatively high occurrences of immediate locality markers in their congregational names when compared to the Christian churches of Zelinsky's study. All three have relatively low occurrences of national/ethnic markers in their congregational names, the highest (Buddhists) barely exceeding one in four congregations.

Where the three groups diverge, Buddhists and Muslims differ from Hindus. Hindu congregational names have a higher frequency of religious terms per se than is found

among either Buddhists or Muslims. In the opposed categories of denomination/lineage versus generic religious terminology, Buddhist and Muslim congregational names favor generic religious terminology, whereas Hindu congregational names favor denomination/lineage terminology. Buddhists and Muslims also differ from Hindus regarding the predominant language in congregational names: English predominates among Buddhists and Muslims, non-English among Hindus. Finally, Hindus use immediate locality markers more often than either Buddhists or Muslims. In sum, in all of these characteristics, Hindu congregational names favor particularity over universality. This may be partly attributable to strong universalistic tendencies in the doctrines and histories of Buddhism and Islam, both of which are “world” or “global” religions in a way that Hinduism is not, at least not yet.

We wondered whether an immigrant congregation’s name might indicate something about its relationship to the larger society. Relying on our research in the RICSC Project, previous research by co-author Numrich (1996; 1997; 2000a; 2000b; forthcoming), and informant knowledge, we assigned a somewhat crude measure of “high” versus “low” levels of civic engagement to each congregation in our pool of 110 Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim immigrant congregations in the Chicago area.

“High civic engagement” entails sustained institutional involvement with organizations, associations, and institutions outside of an immigrant congregation’s own ethnic and/or religious community. For instance, Muslim Community Center (MCC) on Chicago’s north side participates in neighborhood and citywide social advocacy initiatives, maintains excellent relationships with local government officials, and opens its facility for use by community groups. MCC is also a leading participant in interfaith activities, and was the only local mosque to co-sponsor the historic Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1993.

“Low civic engagement” entails minimal institutional involvement beyond one’s own ethnic and/or religious community, little more than maintaining existence as an organized entity in society, serving the needs of its own constituents, and conforming to minimum legal requirements. Several small neighborhood mosques in the vicinity of Muslim Community Center fit this description and look to MCC for advice when they must interact with the larger society in unfamiliar ways or for extended periods of time (Livezey et al. forthcoming).

We identified few high-engagement congregations in our overall pool (30 percent), Muslims having the greatest number (40 percent). We then looked for correlations between high civic engagement and name characteristics, both overall and specific to each religion, hypothesizing that high engagement would correlate with 1) low frequency of religious terms per se, 2) use of generic religious terms rather than denomination/lineage markers, 3) preponderance of English words, and 4) absence of national/ethnic terms. Hypothetically, such characteristics seem to indicate openness to the larger society and reluctance to portray a narrow identity, whether religious or national/ethnic. We hypothesized no correlation between civic engagement patterns and locational terms since the latter often signal a congregation’s appeal to potential constituencies within an immediate locality and thus carry little significance with regard to openness or closed-ness to the larger society.

Our hypothesized correlations held across the board with regard to preponderance of English words and absence of national/ethnic terms. High-engagement congregations from all three religions tend to have these name characteristics. The other hypothesized correlations held for some religions but not others. All of the high-engagement Buddhist and Hindu congregations have a high frequency of religious terms in their names, but most of the high-engagement Muslim congregations have a low frequency of

religious terms in their names (this departs from the pattern noted earlier regarding Buddhist and Muslim similarities over against Hindus). Nearly all of the high-engagement Buddhist and Muslim congregations use generic religious terms rather than denomination/lineage markers in their names, whereas nearly all of the high-engagement Hindu congregations use denomination/lineage markers in their names rather than generic religious terms (this is consistent with the pattern noted earlier).

What, then, can we learn about the religious identities and civic relationships of immigrant congregations through name analysis?

The most obvious fact is that the name virtually always signifies this organization as a religious association; in other words, religious identity is its primary organizing principle no matter what other functions an immigrant congregation serves. This is no trivial fact. Voluntary religious associations continue to be an important institutional presence in immigrant communities, and they do not mask their religious identities with secular or ambiguous terminology. The content of the religious terminology in an immigrant congregation's name depends on a combination of factors, both internal to the congregation and its larger religious tradition (e.g., specifying a denomination/lineage identity or using generic religious identity markers) and external to the congregation (e.g., assimilationist pressures to employ English terms and to avoid drawing attention to one's "differentness" or "foreignness"). The same internal/external calculus obtains in the choice of architectural facade, in which an immigrant congregation decides how much of its religious identity to reveal to the larger, sometimes unsympathetic, society. Mosque architecture in North America, for instance, has historically tended to downplay recognizably Islamic elements, which, by definition, clash with the cultural landscape (Khalidi 1998, 399-400).

In this internal/external decision-making calculus, immigrant congregational naming patterns share much in common with individual naming patterns among immigrants (Liebersohn 2000), although it appears that congregational naming is more resistant to assimilationist pressures than individual naming. This may be due to some extent to the historic American norms of religious freedom and tolerance for religious differences (Herberg 1956; Mead 1963). Less tolerance has been shown historically for national/ethnic differences, thus the reticence noted above to feature these identity markers in immigrant congregational names. Still, the reality of American history has been uneven with regard to religious freedom and tolerance. One reason for the commonalities between Buddhist and Muslim congregational naming patterns, over against Hindu naming, may be these religions' respective experiences with American prejudices. Buddhism and Islam have relatively long histories in this country, in both cases fraught with prejudice and confrontation (Kashima 1977; Haddad 1986), whereas Hindu immigration is a largely post-1965 phenomenon with comparatively less direct and sustained confrontation. This could explain Buddhist and Muslim tendencies to favor congregational names with more English and generic religious terms.

One trend that we do not see among any of these religions is the extreme Christianization (assimilation) of congregational names that occurred in Japanese-American Buddhism in the early 20th century, whereby many temples adopted the name *Church* and an entire denomination changed its name from the Buddhist *Mission* of North America to the Buddhist *Churches* of America in 1944. Only one congregation in our pool of 110 Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim congregations retains occasional use of such a name today, Chicago Nichiren Buddhist *Church* (also known as Chicago Nichiren Buddhist *Temple*). A less extreme assimilationist trend can be found in all three religious groups, namely,

choosing familiar English terms or equivalents over unfamiliar, religion-specific terms, e.g., *Temple* instead of *Wat* (Buddhism) or *Mandir* (Hinduism), and *Center* or even *Mosque* instead of *Masjid* (Islam). Such choices appear comparable to the dynamics of symbolic contamination/enhancement found in personal naming patterns, whereby a name can either lose or gain popularity depending on a larger cultural image associated with it (Lieberson 2000, 130-142).

The second fact that we can determine from an immigrant congregation's name is whether the congregation represents a particular denomination or lineage within its larger religious tradition. As with personal naming patterns (Perl and Wiggins 2004), certain names connote specific religious identities. But unlike personal religious name preferences, which face potential usurpation by other groups or by society as a whole, denomination/lineage names retain their specificity. Personal names that once carried Protestant or Catholic connotations may have been co-opted by others, but that hardly occurs with religious group names. The key issues here are whether an immigrant congregation has a specific denomination/lineage identity, and whether it advertises that identity in its name. Based on our analysis of Chicago immigrant congregations, it appears that denomination/lineage identity is more important to Hindus than to Buddhists and Muslims.

Thirdly, openness to engagement with the larger society cannot be predicted from either a denomination/lineage or a generic religious marker in a congregation's name. Denomination/lineage markers may indicate separation from co-religionists more than separation from society. Among Buddhists and Muslims, a generic religious name tends to indicate civic openness, yet Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhist temples or Ahmadiyya mosques (both of which tend to signify their specific identities in their names) can also be highly engaged because of their respective denomination/lineage emphases on civic engagement. The

same is true among Hindus, where generic terminology is rare ("Hindu" does not have the wide acceptance that "Islam" has among Muslims and "Buddhism" has among Buddhists). The key here is that civic engagement (or lack thereof) stems from the teachings of both a congregation and its larger religious tradition, whether that be a particular denomination/lineage or the religion as a whole. If civic engagement is part of an immigrant congregation's religious heritage, it will be civically engaged no matter its name.

Finally, an immigrant congregation with a preponderance of English and no national/ethnic terms in its name is likely to be open to engagement with the larger society. Given what we have said already about the complexities involved in this issue, however, these indicators should not be treated in a simplistic fashion. An immigrant congregation's name can imply something about its civic engagement patterns, but it is not necessarily the final word.

Notes

¹This article draws upon the draft manuscript of a forthcoming book based on the RICSC Project research, *Sacred Assemblies and Civil Society: How Religion Matters for America's Newest Immigrants* (Rutgers University Press). The authors thank Wilbur Zelinsky for his encouraging comments on an earlier version of this article.

²We define a congregation as "a local association of people who gather periodically for varied activities deemed to have religious significance" (also, see Chaves 2004, 1-2).

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