

New Jersey: Religious Pluralism in the Northern and Central Suburbs

Karen Pechilis

New Jersey is a vibrant, diverse state because of its long history as a destination for immigrants to America. It is a place where they have settled and continue to settle: "In every census since 1840 it has been one of the states with the highest proportion of residents born outside the country" (Shaw, *Immigration*, 10). New Jersey gained a mix of ethnic groups during each of the three waves of immigration, which brought people from very different parts of the world to the Garden State: from Ireland, Germany, and Great Britain from 1830 to 1880; from southern and eastern Europe, including Poland, Italy, Hungary, and Greece from 1880 to 1925; and from Latin America and Asia from 1960 to the present.

Certainly New Jersey's proximity to New York was and is a contributing factor to its attractiveness to immigrants. However, as any New Jersey resident will point out, the gateways of Liberty Island, which holds the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island, which holds the historic administration center that has now been transformed into an outstanding museum, are much closer to the shores of New Jersey than they are to New York. Indeed, the State of New Jersey has recently negotiated with the State of New York for partial ownership and administration of these famous islands.

Traditionally, New Jersey's own nature as a manageably-sized state full of farmland and with rapidly industrializing centers provided the opportunities for work that the immigrants sought. However, as Douglas V. Shaw suggests, there was an ethnic difference overlaying the many differences between these rural and urban realities, which in effect created two New Jerseys:

As in the nation generally, immigration greatly increased New Jersey's rate of urbanization and industrialization. While some immigrants from every group scattered around the state, most crowded into the three northeastern counties of Essex, Hudson, and Passaic, and especially into the industrial cities of Newark, Jersey City, and Paterson. In 1850 57 percent of New Jersey's immigrants lived in these three counties. Seventy years later, in 1920, the figure was 58 percent. At the same time, fewer than 2 percent lived in the northwestern counties of Sussex, Warren, and Hunterdon.

Immigration, urbanization, and industrialization created two very different New Jerseys. One was a region of busy factories, screeching freight trains, and densely packed cities with large and growing immigrant populations. The other was a rural and small-town world that remained close to the land and was populated principally by native-born Protestants who traced their roots to colonial settlers. (Shaw, *Immigration*, 10)

These patterns of immigrants coming into New Jersey and the areas where they establish residence remain similar today. For example, New Jersey continues to attract new immigrants in great number—nearly 6% of the new arrivals, which puts New Jersey fifth behind the larger and more populous states of California, New York, Texas, and Florida (Ibid., 63). It is also the case that the settlement patterns of immigrants to New Jersey today mirror the traditional patterns: "In 1980 New Jersey contained 256,000 immigrants who

had arrived in the United States between 1970 and 1980. A majority, 51 percent, lived in Essex, Hudson, and Passaic counties. Fewer than one percent lived in Sussex, Warren, and Hunterdon" (Ibid., 10).

However, the patterns can no longer be understood as a divide between rural Protestant farmers of northern European descent and urban Orthodox merchants of southern European descent. Instead, the "two New Jerseys" are urban and suburban, which emblemize more overtly issues of affluence and race. The largest groups that have come to New Jersey in the last three decades are Hispanics from Portugal, Colombia, and Cuba, and Asians from India, Korea, and Japan. The Hispanics have tended to settle in urban areas: in 1980, 57% of the Puerto Ricans lived in Hudson, Essex, and Passaic counties and 57% of the Cubans lived in Hudson county alone (Ibid., 59, 65). For a discussion of religions and their communities in urban New Jersey, see the Pluralism Project Web Page on "The Newark Project," by Dr. Karen Brown of the Drew University Theological School and her colleagues.

This web page explores religions and their communities in suburban New Jersey. The suburbs have been much maligned as insular refuges from cities, created by "white flight" and characterized as "bedroom communities," but they share a similarity with neighborhoods in cities in that they both pose an enduring challenge: The right of people to live where they want or feel most comfortable versus our national imperative towards an integration in which educational and economic opportunities are available to all. People in both the cities and the suburbs have much work to do in reconciling these two deeply-held values.

Can suburban New Jersey directly encounter immigrant peoples, and engage with issues of cross-cultural understanding, including the values expressed in religious worship? Or are the numbers of immigrants that settle in the suburbs too small to provide a catalyst to such discussion? In the case of Asian immigrants, the numbers are there. Due to their education, affluence, and fluency in English, Asian groups have established themselves in New Jersey's suburbs:

Like other immigrants, most Asians have concentrated in northeastern New Jersey. Above average incomes, however, have led them to settle more in the suburbs than in the old central cities. In 1990 more of the state's Asians lived in suburban Bergen, Middlesex, and Morris counties (43 percent) than in the traditional immigrant centers of Hudson, Essex, and Passaic (26 percent). Even within the urban counties they tend not to settle in the central cities. For example, in 1990 15 percent of Essex County's Asians lived in Newark, as compared to 73 percent of Hispanics. In the Trenton area, only 6 percent of Mercer County's Asians lived in Trenton itself, compared to 63 percent of its Hispanics. Although traditional immigrant neighborhoods are hard to establish in the suburbs, Asians have tended to locate more in some communities than others. Clifton in the Paterson-Passaic area, Cherry Hill outside of Camden, and Edison near New Brunswick are all examples of suburban towns with relatively large concentrations of Asians. (Ibid., 68).

Among the many groups comprised by the designation, 'Asian', including south Asian Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Laotians, south Asian

Indians are the most numerous in New Jersey: "Between 1960 and 1980 New Jersey's Asian-born population grew from fifteen thousand to ninety-six thousand, and in 1990 272,000 New Jersey residents claimed Asian birth or ancestry.... The three largest Asian groups in New Jersey in 1980 were Indians (19,500), Filipinos (18,200), and Koreans (10,700).... Not all Asian immigrants are equally drawn to New Jersey. While the state regularly attracts about 10 percent of all Indians, it draws a scant 1 percent of Southeast Asians, such as Vietnamese and Laotians" (Ibid., 67).

These numbers are important in gaining a profile of the current make up and settlement patterns of recent immigrants to New Jersey. Their tendency to settle in the suburbs has helped us to define geographically our exploration of religious pluralism, with its focus on northern and central suburban New Jersey. However, while demographic numbers influence our study, they do not define its purpose. Our purpose, in keeping with the intention of the Harvard Pluralism Project, is to respond with interest to communities that are developing a public presence through religion, which they achieve in various ways, including building and outreach activities. A variety of traditions and their communities are thus here represented. In addition, we profile a number of groups in our area who are actively working on issues of inter-religious understanding.

A very helpful source which I have cited throughout this introduction is Douglas V. Shaw, *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History* (Trenton, NJ: New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of State, 1994). Shaw's book stands out in its discussion of contemporary Hispanic and Asian immigrants; other recent publications on immigration in New Jersey focus on the first two immigration waves. A helpful general source on ethnic groups in America is Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980).