New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life (American Lectures on the History of Religions)

Bruce Lawrence
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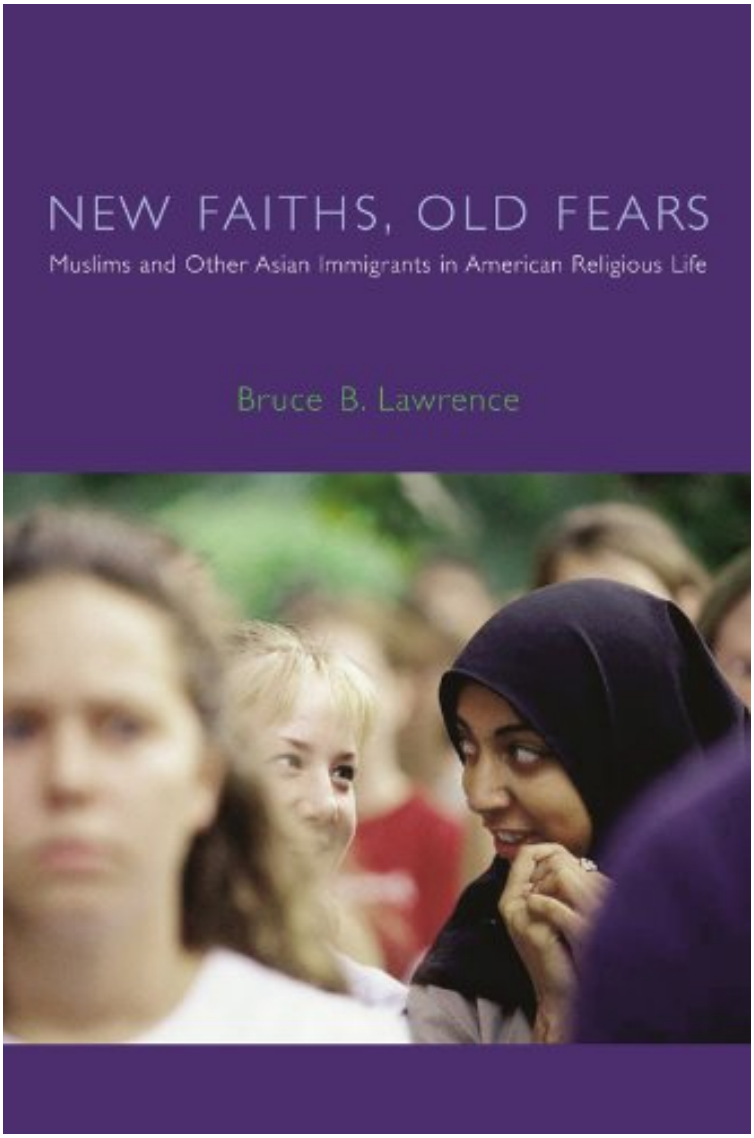

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Bruce Lawrence : New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life (American Lectures on the History of Religions) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious

Life (American Lectures on the History of Religions):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. American Religion and Politics: An Idealistic VisionBy Frank BellizziIn important ways, Bruce B. Lawrence's book "New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life" (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), updates the conversation that began in previous chapters of American religious history and historiography. What does Lawrence mean by "new faiths"? He means religions that in significant numbers are new to the United States as a result of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. All of them are identified with Asia. Specifically, they are Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Sikhism.In what sense does the obvious presence of recent immigrants from Asia provoke "old fears"? Basic to Lawrence's argument is the idea that "out-groups in the United States have been marginalized by both race and class" and that "both markers continue to elide in subtle but insidious new forms of prejudice" (15). In other words, in relation to the dominant Anglo group in the United States, the experiences of Asian along with Hispanic immigrants mirror the experiences of nonimmigrant minority groups, namely Native and African Americans (8). Lawrence's observation is the basis for a key phrase that comes up repeatedly in this book: "racialized class prejudice." The meaning of this phrase begins with the racial group that occupies the bad end of "an unspoken U.S. hierarchical social order," namely, African Americans. Lawrence asserts that because of a "persistent biracial patterning of norms and values" in the U.S., Asians, Hispanics, and American Indians are thereby implicated because they are not white (10).Basic to Lawrence's prescription for this new and partly-unique scenario are two key terms. The first is "polyvalence," which, he insists, is different from diversity. While diversity refers to "a myriad of changing forms," polyvalence involves "the plumbing of depths within each form" (9). In essence, Lawrence advocates the abandonment of an outdated, two-dimensional model and the adoption of something more like a three-dimensional model that is more equal to the tasks of understanding the present American reality and charting a course for the American future.Lawrence's second key term is "kaleidoculture" which he intends, above all, to serve as "the alternative to multiculturalism" (9). Here, the significant difference is that while "multiculturalism" presupposes that the simple fact of many cultures is an inherent good, "kaleidoculture" intends to evoke "a changing spectrum of cultural values and experiences, each set of which is bright and scintillating, worthy of attention, examination, and appreciation as well as debate, critique, and transformation" (9). Again, the contrast between two- versus three-dimensional comes to mind.In order to frame and illustrate his main point, in Chapter 1, Lawrence begins with what he calls "A Tale of Two Professors." They were Diana Eck and Samuel Huntington, both of Harvard. According to the vision cast by Eck, religious differences should represent a cross-cultural dialogue, one that people should join and encourage. The very different vision cast by Huntington was that religion was at the root of a mounting war not between nation-states, but between civilizations. Lawrence critiques both visions as being far too simplistic to account for and provide any sort of feasible prescription for the future. He sees and hopes for a mid-twenty-first century United States where "neither the alarmist predictions of Huntington nor the dialogic preferences of Eck will prevail" (44). Instead, there will be, or at least could be, in America a "polyvalent kaleidoculture" which will contain "fungible subgroups of Americans, all polyvalent, neither minority or majority, just American" (45).In subsequent chapters, Lawrence makes a number of telling observations, all of them designed to either highlight the need for an alternative vision or to commend the vision he has to offer. Along the way, he notes that non-governmental organizations, which stand at the center of a civil society, need not be thoroughly-secular. He says that religiously-oriented NGOs can and do, in fact, work quite well in civil societies in nations such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Senegal (Chapter 2). Lawrence also notes that racialized class prejudice has the effect of creating pariahs out of new immigrants (Chapter 3). Such is partially responsible for the ironically-low number of religious options for new immigrants to the United States. Many of them, such as recent immigrants from Iran, choose not to practice Islam in America (Chapter 4). Nearing the end of his book, Lawrence laments that although Roman Catholics and Jews have been more or less successfully grafted onto the tree of what Henry May called "Progressive Patriotic Protestantism," Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs are still excluded. His sermonic final paragraph brings together and presses his prescription:"[T]he challenge for American courts and schools and government agencies . . . is to affirm polyvalence, to admit that difference is not just possible but healthy, and at the same time to work for a kaleidoculture, to have every building block in the future of American society given its worth and its place in the land of the free and the home of brave. Who are the free? Who will dare to be brave? Every American, not just those with the privilege and power and history to claim America as their, not others' homeland, but also Asians and Latinos who share, with African Americans and Amerindians, a dream that America's future is greater than its past. Progressive Protestant Patriots will have to move over and share the dream with other Americans who are not less patriotic or progressive because they happen not to be Protestant or Anglo. Polyvalence will succeed because it must" (144).Going forward, it will be interesting to see if something like the program stated here will succeed.

As a result of immigration from Asia in the wake of the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act, the fastest-growing religions in Americafaster than all Christian groups combinedare Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. In this remarkable book, a leading scholar of religion asks how these new faiths have changed or have been changed

by the pluralist face of American civil society. How have these new religious minorities been affected by the deep-rooted American ambivalence toward foreign traditions? Bruce Lawrence casts a comparativist eye on the American religious scene and explores the ways in which various groups of Asian immigrants have, and sometimes have not, been integrated into the American polity. In the process, he offers several important correctives. Too often, Lawrence argues, profiles of Asian American experience focus exclusively on immigrants from East Asia, to the exclusion of South Asian and West Asian voices.New Faiths, Old Fears seeks to make all Asians equally important and to break free of traditional geographic markers, most reflecting nineteenth-century imperial values, that artificially divide the people of the "Middle East" from the rest of Asia, with whom they share certain religious and cultural ties. Iranian Americans, in particular, emerge as a vital bridge group whose experience tells us much about how Asians of many different backgrounds have found their way in their new nation.Beyond simply expanding and refining our conception of who Asian Americans are, Lawrence draws instructive comparisons between Asian Americans' experience and those of Native, African, and Hispanic Americans, exposing undercurrents of racial and class antagonisms. He concludes that we cannot fully comprehend the contours and valences of culture and religion in America without understanding how this racialized class prejudice shapes the views of the dominant class toward immigrants and other marginal groups.

[Lawrence] speaks at length on the social, political, and religious tensions within American culture today... recommended. (Choice)Bruce Lawrence concludes his thought-provoking essay with a powerful critique of multicultural approaches that ignore divergencies within religious traditions... (Malise Ruthven Times Literary Supplement)a compelling, informed critique and analysis that should provoke citizens to a finer citizenship (James L. Peacock Journal of the American Academy of Religion)an inventive and timely exploration of contemporary American religion, politics, and culture, and exploration that will surely stimulate further research and discussion (Karen Leonard History of Religions)This book not only fills in some key theoretical gaps, but also offers new and hopeful models for conceiving of American diversity. (American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences)About the AuthorBruce B. Lawrence is the Nancy and Jeffrey Marcus Professor of Religion and chair of the department of religion at Duke University. He is the author of many books, including Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age.