'Us' and 'Them': The role of religion in mediating and challenging the 'model minority' and other civic boundaries

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Abstract
This article examines how Korean Americans use the cultural resources of religious communities to mediate race, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries that have consequences for civic life. Specifically, I compare involvement of Korean Americans in second-generation Korean congregations to those in multiethnic churches. I find Korean Americans who participate in second-generation Korean churches use religion to largely reproduce images of Korean Americans as model minorities, and implicitly distance themselves from those whom they perceive as less financially successful. In contrast, Korean Americans in multiethnic congregations use religion to emphasize the commonality Korean Americans have with other minorities. By using a cultural framework that allows for the agency of individuals in identity and group boundary construction, this work more generally shows the potential for new Americans to use the cultural resources of local organizations to change existing ethnic and racial boundaries in the United States.

Keywords: Asian American; Korean American; model minority; civic boundaries; religion, social reproduction.

Constructing the ‘model minority’ and other group boundaries
Media, government, and schools portray Asian Americans as the ‘model minority’, contending that ethnic cultural traits predispose them to be financially and educationally successful (Osajima 1988; Okihiro 1994). These images foster boundaries between Asian Americans and other non-white Americans (Abelman and Lie 1995). The work of Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim (1989), and Ronald Takaki (2000) challenges the societal and institutional production of such stereotypes. Their research examines the socio-economic diversity...

Rarely, however, do researchers ask how Asian Americans use the cultural resources of organizational memberships to respond to societal boundaries and construct identities. For example, how do different collectives of Asian Americans, even within the same ethnicity, create diverse boundaries around race, ethnicity and class and what consequences do such understandings have on their participation in civil society?

This article examines one Asian American group: second-generation Korean Americans. I compare Korean Americans who attend second-generation Korean churches to those who are part of multiethnic churches, and ask to what extent Korean Americans in these different contexts reproduce images of themselves as model minorities and other group boundaries. I further ask what implications understandings of group boundaries, or who constitutes ‘us’ and ‘them,’ have on civic life for second-generation Korean Americans. By ‘civic life’ I mean both how individuals socially construct their responsibilities as citizens and the extent to which they participate in voluntary and political practices and associations. I focus on one particular aspect of civil society: how Korean Americans in different ethnic religious contexts view their responsibilities to help non-Koreans in social service settings.

The moral content of civic boundaries

Central scholars of racial formation, such as Fredrik Barth (1969), Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), have argued that new Americans socially construct racial boundaries based on existing categories in the United States. Over time the Irish became ‘white,’ for example (Ignatiev 1995). Alejandro Portes (1996) and Mary Waters (1999) contend post-1965 US immigrants often try to resist being identified with those who American society perceives as lower-class and instead pursue connection with Americans who are viewed as financially successful.

However, researchers have underestimated the extent to which new Americans might challenge existing racial, ethnic and class boundaries. An aspect of the ways in which individuals create group boundaries is shaped by societal constructs of race, ethnicity and class. Through using a cultural lens that allows for individual agency (Bourdieu 1973; Giddens 1984; Swidler 1986) I also argue, however,
that individuals themselves shape aspects of their own identities (Nagel 1994; Cornell 1996). One way they do this is through drawing on the ideological and other resources in their religious organizations, not only to reproduce but to re-define boundaries and inter-ethnic group life (Becker 1998; Emerson and Smith 2000).

The ways individuals create distance between themselves and others have moral in addition to ethnic dimensions. Moral boundaries, as Michèle Lamont (1992) explains, help an individual to make a distinction between oneself, the members of one’s group, and individuals and groups that one perceives as ‘other’ (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002). These boundaries often have elements of ‘right and wrong’ with civic consequences, and determine with whom one joins in political and social life. Religious communities are a central place where Americans develop rhetoric for moral discussion and methods of classification for defining who is more or less ‘right or holy’ (Bourdieu 1991; Wuthnow 1991). The spiritual interpretations of race, ethnicity and class in a congregation influence identity development among individuals through attaching moral meaning to such categories (Yancey 1998; Emerson and Smith 2000). These moral meanings have civic dimensions, providing members with ways to decide whom to help in both religious and non-religious settings.

Religion has an important place in motivating civic participation among the general American population (Wilson and Janoski 1995; Wuthnow 1995; Regnerus, Smith and Sikkink 1998), as well as, an historic role in immigrant adaptation. Religion both breaks down group boundaries, motivating individuals to help those outside their religious and ethnic communities, and helps them to retain ethnic and religious boundaries (Wuthnow 1995). Will Herberg (1955) writes in his work, Protestant, Catholic, Jew that for European immigrants, native religion was a reminder of home for the first generation. For the second generation religious and ethnic life was full of complexities, as they struggled with what it meant to adapt to a new environment. By the third generation the ethnic group was American, and no longer tied to their country of origin. Instead, national ethnic distinctions were blurred and new Americans found self-location in the legitimate American religions of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. Given this context the study of how new second-generation immigrants use religion to negotiate civic boundaries is particularly relevant.

Korean Americans

Korean Americans are a good population among whom to study how religious communities mediate categories that influence civic life. They form an older cohort than many other post-1965 second-generation immigrants, meaning civic practices, such as community involvement
and political participation, are more pertinent than they might be for those who have not yet reached young adulthood. Further, some first-generation Koreans come to the United States with the forms of capital necessary to succeed economically, meaning their children may have the kinds of resources that often foster civic participation in the wider American population (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Religion plays a central role in first- and second-generation Asian American communities, and particularly among Korean Americans (Kwon, Kim and Warner 2001; Min and Kim 2002). I study Korean Americans in evangelical congregations because evangelicalism is popular among Korean Americans and Americans more broadly (Min 1992; Kwon, Kim and Warner 2001; Min and Kim 2002). By evangelical I mean those who have a specific mission to tell others about their faith with the hope of converting them to Christianity (Smith et al. 1998).

I discovered diversity in the ways in which Korean Americans connected Christianity with race and class identities. Those who participated in a second-generation congregation saw their own and their parent’s generation as inherently more hard working than other minority groups, reinforcing boundaries between themselves and other non-white Americans. Such boundaries mean that they had difficulty helping those they viewed as less hard working; often Korean Americans put black Americans in this category, and in so doing reified the model minority stereotype. Korean Americans in multi-ethnic churches, however, generally had a different kind of rhetoric for boundary construction. The multiethnic churches I studied made being an ethnically diverse organization central to their core mission of ‘sharing the gospel’, providing a legitimate religious narrative for Korean Americans to emphasize their commonality with other minorities and feel more equipped to help them in social service settings.

Data collection

The data for this article were taken from a larger project that I conducted from January 2002 through January 2003. During those thirteen months, I did nine months of participant-observation in two central congregations, Grace Church, a second-generation Korean congregation and Manna Fellowship, a multiethnic church. Both churches were located in the Northeast of the United States, near a small urban area, which I called Old Town. I conducted a survey of the ethnic composition of each church [N = 225]. In addition, I did national interviews with second-generation Korean Americans in four multiethnic and three second-generation congregations in addition to Grace and Manna, for a total of nine congregations. The findings of
this study are based on participant-observation and eighty-eight in-depth interviews, including interviews I conducted with Korean Americans at Grace and Manna, the two central churches, as well as those with Korean Americans outside the two churches.

The close proximity of Grace and Manna to Old Town made it easier to observe their differences in relating to the community. Twenty-four per cent of families with children under five in Old Town lived in poverty, in comparison to 17 per cent of the US population overall; in terms of racial composition, the area had a large percentage of black Americans and Asian immigrants. Grace had ninety members and Manna had 150 members. Both churches were non-denominational and described themselves as evangelical. Each conducted its services in English and shared a building with another church. The class composition of Manna and Grace were also similar; both churches largely comprised young professionals.

I selected Grace because it was a second-generation congregation affiliated with a first-generation church. Yet, it also had an independent pastoral team; in these ways the church had a structure typical of many second-generation Korean congregations in the United States (Chai 2001; Kwon, Kim and Warner 2001). A survey I conducted showed the church was nearly all second-generation Korean, with only three members self-identifying as part of an Asian ethnic group other than Korean. I selected Manna because it was a multiethnic congregation and in close proximity to Grace. A church survey showed 15 per cent of those at Manna identified as ‘White American,’ 3 per cent as ‘African American,’ 73 per cent as ‘Asian American,’ one per cent as ‘Hispanic American,’ and 8 per cent as ‘Other’. The Asian American members of the congregation were from various Asian ethnic groups, including Chinese, Cambodian, Asian Indian, Vietnamese and Filipino. The Asian Americans were nearly all second-generation immigrants and, of the Asian Americans, 22 per cent were Korean. Using Michael Emerson and Karen Chai Kim’s (2003) definition of a multiracial congregation, the church was demographically multiracial because less than 80 per cent of its membership was any single racial group. The pastors and leadership of the congregation called the church multiethnic, however, and that is how I will refer to it throughout this article.

The interviews with Korean Americans in churches outside Grace and Manna were done in order to locate the two churches in the midst of other congregations of a similar type. I interviewed people in these other places also to be sure that the patterns I found at Grace and Manna were not unique to the region I studied and found they were not regionally specific. These interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone. I talked in person with Korean American leaders and members of churches in New Jersey, New York and
California. Additional interviews in Michigan, Illinois, California, and New York were done over the phone. I located national respondents through referrals from people at Grace and Manna or through my national respondents’ previous participation in a college campus evangelical ministry.

The interviews lasted between one and three hours and were semi-structured. Of the eighty-eight interviews, forty-six were conducted with those in the two central churches and forty-two with Korean Americans in the other churches. Forty-eight per cent of my respondents were men and 52 per cent were women. Besides their choice of church, my respondents were similar in other ways. They were all second-generation Korean Americans, young adults, between twenty-one and forty years old and American citizens. In addition, most were professionals in occupations such as teaching, medicine, business, or in graduate school. All the Korean Americans I talked with had or were pursuing a four-year college degree. Many spoke some Korean, although very few were bilingual, and all were completely fluent in English. Finally, my respondents had generally been a part of their respective congregation for at least a year.

I drew portions of interview data analysed for this article from a longer interview guide and transcribed and coded these sections for themes related to the connection between church participation and views of others, with particular attention to discussion of socio-economic difference, race and ethnicity (Strauss and Corbin 1990). I based analyses for this article primarily on the following questions:

How did you come to choose your current congregation?
If any, in what kinds of ways does your church influence the views you have about your relationship to your community?
What people would you find easiest to help in a volunteer setting?
Who would you find it more difficult or distance yourself from helping?

The purpose of this research is not to make a strict causal argument between congregational participation and the views of individual church members, controlling for other factors. To do so I would need access to data, which followed transitions between churches and allowed the study of correlation between congregational type and attitudes towards ethnic and civic boundaries. Rather, I am more concerned with how Korean Americans used the cultural resources of their congregations to develop civic group boundaries once they were already a part of their respective churches. I did, however, ask my respondents why they chose their particular congregation. None of the Korean Americans I talked with said they attended their church because of its view of Korean American financial success or approach
to civic life. They explained their choice of congregation largely in religious terms. Those at Grace generally wanted to remain part of a Korean church because they thought Korean congregations were more oriented around central Christian teachings and/or more focused on evangelism than non-Korean churches. Most Korean Americans at Manna, who were equally evangelical in Christian orientation as those at Grace, told me they chose the church because they disagreed with the approach second-generation Korean congregations had to Christianity. Korean Americans in other second-generation Korean and multiethnic churches gave similar responses.

Reproducing boundaries

According to Karen Chai (1998, 2001) and Kelly Chong (1998), Korean American congregations and fellowship groups often reproduce intertwined images of prestige, cultural hierarchy, and Korean Americans as model minorities. In one sense, Korean Americans at Grace and other second-generation churches used religious discourse to de-emphasize wealth accumulation. In another sense, however, both explicitly and implicitly, Korean American leaders in these congregations affirmed cultural ideals that Korean Americans were predisposed to financial achievement. During our interview, I asked Pastor Joseph, the head pastor of Grace, what kind of needs were faced by people in the congregation:

The second-generation Korean mentality is to need success. The first generation immigrated and they worked so their kids could have a better life. It is common to see the child drive a superior car to the parents. There is the perceived need to make lots of money. But the real need, I think, is to grow in the knowledge of the Bible.

Pastor Joseph wanted to be different from the ‘Korean mentality to need success’. His congregation should focus on things he considered most important to Christianity, such as commitment to understanding the Bible. Behind his statement, however, was also the assumption that Korean immigrant parents and their American-born children were successful financially.

Conversations with other leaders and individual members confirmed a similar tension. Joshua, thirty-one, worked as a businessman and was actively involved as a church leader at Grace. He told me a big concern for second-generation Koreans in his church was the struggle against making financial attainment the ultimate marker of meaning:

Because of our ethnic identity and our culture (emphasis added) we are very ambitious as a people. Korean Americans are very ambitious
Our parents tell us that we have to go to school and we have to get an “A” and we have to become lawyers and doctors. And if we don’t achieve some sort of social status, then we feel kind of belittled and inferior. If you look at our church . . . maybe only one or two people are not in graduate school, or are not doctors or lawyers. So we are very ambitious.

Christian rhetoric provided Joshua with multiple ways (or as Ann Swidler (1986) writes, ‘cultural tools’) to interpret wealth. For example, he could have viewed the resources of congregation members as ‘undeserved blessing’ from God. Yet, for Joshua, attending a congregation with other Korean American young professionals further confirmed an aspect of the model minority image; achievement was something ‘inherent’ and part of Korean American ethnic culture.

Pastors and leaders also used Christian rhetoric in ways that implicitly reinforced boundaries between other ethnic groups. In at least three different sermons during the time I was part of Grace, the pastor told members that to acknowledge discrimination or poverty was to ‘act like a victim’ and remove one’s focus from God. For example, one Sunday Pastor Joseph cautioned the church against devoting too much attention to their problems, poverty, or discrimination:

Grace needs to get their eyes off themselves and their own problems. We can not have that mentality and be a blessing . . . We need to focus on the needs of other people . . . How many people in this church see themselves as a victim? Jesus did not come so you would be a victim, but that you would overcome.

‘Getting one’s eyes off oneself’ or ‘not acting like a victim’ directed congregation members towards involvement in community social services. However, the approach Grace had to spirituality also had the unintended consequence of creating distance between Korean Americans and those they perceived as members of a class or ethnic group that talked about being ‘victimized.’

The media has often reported on the inter-racial conflict between first-generation Korean store owners and black American customers in urban areas (Abelman and Lie 1995). None of those I talked with at Grace or other second-generation Korean congregations overtly told me they experienced conflict with black Americans. Seventy-one per cent of Korean Americans at Grace, however, specifically said Korean Americans were ‘model minorities’, or mentioned they were inherently wealthy or predisposed to success. Many also mentioned their distance from other ethnic minority groups based on these attributes. Bill, twenty-six, worked as a computer engineer and attended Grace. The
way Bill talked about his relationship to black Americans reflected the rhetoric of the church sermons at Grace. As Bill put it, his parents succeeded ‘against the odds’ and were worthy of help. In contrast, Bill saw black Americans as a group he would find it challenging to help in a social service setting:

Maybe because of slavery, they always seem like they have a chip on their shoulder. Some are very proud and they don’t want help. They can do it on their own. I find that group tougher than others. Not all of them, but they always seem to have a chip on their shoulder because of racism. I feel bad because I don’t think that’s the case anymore.

Bill mentioned positive friendships with black American co-workers. Yet, neither his friendship with black Americans at work, nor his motivation as a Christian to help those who had less, was able to overcome his opinion that many black Americans had ‘a chip on their shoulder,’ and often ‘acted like victims’. In his mind, these factors made it difficult for Bill to help black Americans in a social service setting.

Sixty-nine per cent of Korean Americans in other second-generation congregations had a similar approach as Grace to the connection between Christianity and the creation of ethnic boundaries. In particular, I noticed these views when we were talking about black Americans. Daniel, twenty-eight, worked as a pharmacist and attended a second-generation Korean church located in New Jersey. Daniel told me that he thought ‘African Americans were often jealous’ of Korean American prosperity. When I asked Daniel why, in his opinion, black Americans ‘didn’t get ahead’ he explained:

They need to go to school and to work hard and not complain and spend so much time rioting like the Malcolm X people. Martin Luther King I respect immensely, but not Malcolm X . . . African Americans don’t want to get ahead, it seems, and just don’t work.

Daniel tried to make it very clear during our discussion that he did not discriminate against black Americans. This quote is most salient because of what it said about the way Daniel created group boundaries. He thought of himself as a typical Korean American: a Christian, hard-working, young professional. Daniel also told me the best American citizens were those who were Christians and worked diligently in their chosen profession. Those who he perceived as ‘working hard’ were more worthy and deserving of help.

Grace sponsored several social services to the surrounding community. Yet, identities as ‘middle-class professionals’ made it difficult to
relate to those in the community to whom they were providing social services. According to Simeon, twenty-five and a seminary student, when Korean Americans at Grace did an outreach to a local youth shelter for at-risk teenagers, Simeon wondered,

how the kids look at us when we come, because we are, you know, suburban Korean Americans. We received the best education. Like (Korean American) high school kids, they already have cars and we don’t really worry about finances and generally we come from pretty good famil(ies). And for us to come and really help them out, I feel that the kids might not buy it.

Simeon communicated a genuine desire to provide social services for the ‘at-risk’ youth in Old Town. Yet, he also had a set of implicit categories that made the teenagers they were reaching out to seem ‘other’. The adolescents came from ‘urban’ areas, ‘bad’ families, or were more generally from ‘a different place’. Later in our discussion, when I asked Simeon whom he might find easiest to help in a social service setting, he told me he would be most likely to help those who were like him, ‘other young adult Korean Americans’. Based on my observations and informal discussions with the leaders of the youth shelter where Grace volunteered, most of the teens there were racial and ethnic minorities; the shelter housed mainly black American and Latino/a youth, who did not have educational or economic resources. Simeon’s choice to stress an identity as a middle-class suburban American, however, rather than an identity as an ethnic minority, was very much a social decision and differed from identity construction among many of the Korean Americans who attended multiethnic congregations.

Re-negotiating model minority boundaries

Rudy Busto (1996), in his study of Asian American evangelical college fellowships, argues that evangelicalism often reinforces images of Asian Americans as model minorities. I found, however, that under certain conditions Korean American young professionals used evangelical Christianity to challenge stereotypes of Korean Americans as model minorities and stress their commonality with other Americans, acts that have the potential to re-shape the content of racial and ethnic boundaries.

Korean Americans who attended Manna were just as educated and as financially successful as were people at Grace. Attending a diverse church facilitated intimate relationships with those of other ethnic backgrounds. More than social interactions, however, Manna also provided sermons and public teachings to interpret inter-ethnic
relationships. My discussions with Korean Americans at Manna and those in other multiethnic churches reflected the emphasis their congregations placed on solidarity and commonality with other ethnic minorities. In particular, sermons and public teachings at Manna stressed that accumulated wealth resulted largely from God’s blessings rather than the hard work of individuals. This focus gave Korean Americans religious language to talk about what they had in common with other ethnic minorities, a perspective that facilitated civic relationships, particularly those with black Americans.

According to the congregational brochure, one of Manna’s core values was to ‘see the church as a group of people with different cultures’. In the church brochure, Manna justified this ‘multiethnic vision’ by supporting passages from the Bible that talked about ‘developing a church without walls in the area of cultures and backgrounds’. During teachings and sermons the leaders also stressed the importance of developing a multiethnic congregation. In one sermon, Pastor Phil, a Chinese immigrant American and one of the central pastors at Manna, told members of the congregation:

Let’s share (with others) about being multiethnic ... Pentecost was a multi-lingual church. The Greeks and Jews didn’t distribute things well enough. But God wanted everyone ... This applies to ... Manna.

Manna’s goal to become a fully multiethnic congregation was reflected in my conversations with individual Korean Americans in the church. This goal meant that Manna de-emphasized differences, socio-economic or ethnic, in favour of discussing the common characteristics of the church membership.

Korean Americans at Manna told me church teachings and the church leadership often helped them to see the spiritual importance of race relations and diversity more generally. Helen, twenty-five, worked as an administrative assistant for a trading firm. She said:

I was really glad that I went to Manna, because it opened me up. I never had many friends outside the Korean church. It was great, just to meet people from different backgrounds and to be able to worship the same God together, even though their ways might be different, our heart was the same.

Helen told me that attending Manna helped her see the importance of valuing ethnic diversity and diversity more generally.

Korean Americans in multiethnic churches outside of Manna also said their congregations helped them to see the importance of diversity. Jack, twenty-nine, attended a multiethnic congregation in
California. Jack said being a member of a multiethnic church really ‘opened his eyes’ to thinking about race:

A topic that we recently covered was racial reconciliation. That’s a huge belief that I think the church really opened my eyes to, personally. I don’t know if I’ve reconciled. But I know there needs to be some kind of change in my belief system or my attitude toward the whole idea of racial reconciliation.

As Jack understood it, while he was not thinking about racial reconciliation before attending his congregation, his church provided a religious lens through which to view race relations.

In sermons and in interviews with leaders and individual Korean Americans at Manna, I noticed wealth was talked about as part of God’s unmerited blessing rather than something they earned through their own hard work. This perspective formed the foundation for commonality between Korean Americans and other non-white Americans. Jim, twenty-five, attended seminary and worked as the youth pastor at Manna. He told me his father’s story as an example of why he provides help to those who have fewer financial resources than he does. According to Jim:

I hope to be used in some way to channel the resources that God has blessed us with to the poor, to those that don’t have as much ... Because my dad didn’t have much when he came here.

Instead of seeing material wealth and working hard primarily as things that he and his parents gained mainly through special cultural or ethnic predisposition, Jim, a church leader, saw them as ‘gifts from God.’ Having been blessed with these gifts entailed a responsibility to help others who had fewer resources.

Being a member of Manna also gave Korean Americans cultural resources to think about aspirations differently. Sasha, twenty-two, worked at a Korean school. After beginning to attend Manna, Sasha told me her view of spirituality and success changed:

I was made to be a certain way and in the Korean church I wasn’t able to be who I was made to be. I was kind of shut out. And then when I found Manna, I felt like wow, this is it. God created me to be a certain way and I felt like I finally found help, the help I needed to discover all the great things that God wanted me to pursue ... I think that even though our parents go to church, and are very committed ... when they talk to you about your career decisions ... it is not about God first, it is about succeed, success first.
Manna gave Sasha a narrative for success, which was legitimate within her religious framework. Sasha began to see pursuing her own career decisions not merely as gaining distance from her parents or becoming more assimilated to mainstream American culture, but as developing a clearer understanding of ‘God’s will.’

While those at Grace, the second generation Korean church, emphasized their inability to relate to Old Town’s residents, Korean Americans at Manna, a multiethnic church, stressed commonality with those in the urban area. Ninety-five per cent of the Korean Americans at Manna talked about what Korean Americans had in common with other ethnic minorities and 83 per cent of Korean Americans in multiethnic congregations outside Manna adopted such a ‘commonality’ position. Jeremy, twenty-one, and a college student told me that attending Manna helped him to think more about reaching out to Old Town.

Because if you think about it those families in Old Town, they are parents that are working their butts off to get their kids out of that neighbourhood so (their) kids won’t have to grow up in an environment with drugs and violence ... They are working so hard to get their kids out of there.

Jeremy viewed the people in Old Town as essentially ‘hard-working’ those who were doing their best against difficult odds, categories that classified them as similar to Korean Americans rather than ‘other’.

Using religious resources to stress identities as ethnic minorities rather than as middle-class professionals had consequences for civic life, particularly the negotiation of group boundaries with black Americans. Korean Americans at Manna emphasized similarities between Korean and black Americans and talked about the spiritual root of conflict, thereby removing blame from either group. Jeremy also told me:

At my church now, I feel like I fit in the most with a guy (who is) an African American ... My view is that African Americans and Koreans would get along really well, but that Satan, the enemy, has tried to make it so that we would hate one another ... I think we would get along so well because we both go through similar issues. Like debt and poverty and ... just the whole thing with family and I just think that both are very warm. Like we have warm sides to the parents and a very disciplinary side to the parents as well.

Jeremy implicitly rejected the idea that Korean Americans were model minorities by saying that they, like black Americans, had also struggled to overcome poverty and, in his opinion, that both groups
had family-oriented cultures. Manna provided Jeremy with a frame for conflict. The two groups were meant to be together. Conflicts were not due to the unwillingness of black Americans to follow the work ethic of Koreans; rather, the root of conflict was spiritual; it was simply the ‘work of Satan.’

These interpretations of group boundaries had consequences for ideas about civic life. For example, Korean Americans at Manna and other multiethnic churches were more likely to talk about political mobilization on the part of black Americans in ways that affirmed their solidarity. Eve, twenty-two, worked in business and attended Manna. She spoke favourably of the political achievements of black Americans and talked about cases of conflict between the two groups as ‘isolated incidents’ that should not affect their overall relationship:

Despite their (black Americans’) history and discrimination and what they went through, they are still able to voice it and they stand up for their rights and even their mistreatments in the past. (Where would you be most likely to volunteer?) An urban community is where I would have to live. And I really, really love black children. I think they are the cutest kids ever. I get their culture more than any other culture.

Both Bill, the member of Grace mentioned above, and Eve, had exposure to middle-class and poor black Americans. When compared with Bill, however, Eve treated the experiences black Americans had with racism as genuine. Exposure was not enough to dispel images of Korean Americans as model minorities; rather religion, as it was understood at Manna and other multiethnic churches, in part, helped Korean American members to re-negotiate boundaries with other racial groups and challenged the reproduction of Koreans as model minorities.

Conclusions

Using a cultural framework that takes individual agency into consideration, I have provided evidence that Korean American evangelicals in different ethnic religious contexts created group boundaries in different ways. The narratives of Korean Americans in second-generation and multiethnic churches reflected the ways in which their church communities connected religious with racial and socio-economic categories. Such constructs helped them to either accept or reject images of Asian Americans as model minorities and had consequences for civic life. While members of Grace and other second-generation churches used interpretations of Christianity to put constraints on financial success, the teaching of the congregation still
largely defined Korean Americans as inherently successful and thus different from other ethnic minority Americans. This group of Korean Americans constructed boundaries between themselves and those they thought of as less hard working, and expressed difficulty in helping these ‘other’ Americans.

Even though they shared largely the same socio-economic and professional status position as respondents at Grace, many of the Korean Americans at Manna and other multiethnic churches said church teachings changed their approach to inter-racial relationships. They came to view themselves more as ethnic minority Americans than as middle-class Americans. These Korean Americans interpreted financial success in ways that stressed their commonality with other groups, and viewed wealth accumulation as a result of ‘God’s provision’. This perspective allowed them to challenge aspects of Koreans as model minorities and helped them to recognize commonality with black Americans.

These results have important implications for American religious life. Although far more Korean Americans remain part of congregations composed largely of Koreans rather than becoming members of ethnically diverse congregations, an increasing number attend pan-Asian and multiethnic churches (Min and Kim 2002). Manna and the other multiethnic congregations in which I spoke with Korean Americans made being an ethnically diverse church central to their core mission of ‘sharing the gospel’. Korean Americans in these contexts found ways to break barriers between Asian ethnic groups and develop relationships with non-Asians because doing so was central to their version of the Christian mission. This particular approach affected the way Korean Americans formed group boundaries.

If the results for Korean Americans in the multiethnic churches I studied are replicated among those in other ethnically diverse churches, they reveal the ability of Korean Americans, and potentially other second-generation immigrants, to change American religious life. If religiously-based identities are found among a third generation of Korean Americans, this would confirm Will Herberg’s (1955) theory that it is the religious rather than other kinds of roots to which new Americans return. There is also the possibility that Korean Americans and other groups of new Americans will not only ‘assimilate’ into the broad religious category of Protestantism, as Herberg might postulate, but also change the civic boundaries of religion and ethnicity in American Protestantism, particularly those of evangelicalism.

This research also contributes to scholarly understanding of the intersection between race and civic life for new Americans. According to Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000), only between 7 and 10 per cent of congregations in the United States are multiethnic or
multiracial. Since most congregations are monoracial, remaining part of an English-speaking Korean congregation or Asian American congregation would have been a more natural step towards assimilation for Korean Americans than joining a multiethnic church. Korean Americans in multiethnic and multiracial churches may actually gain resources that change how civic life is constructed in American society through re-classifying group boundaries and the symbols surrounding such boundaries. For example, when individuals act as if discord between black and Korean Americans is not the result of inherent ethnic and class differences but simply ‘the work of Satan’ such re-orientations may change the actual relationships between these two groups outside of religious contexts.

These findings are further relevant to inter-group relationships in non-religious organizations. Merely being a member of a diverse organization may not be enough to change the perspective individuals have towards those of another race, ethnicity, or gender. There is often demographic diversity in organizations, particularly of women and racial and ethnic minorities, yet these groups still experience discriminatory practices (Pettigrew and Martin 1987). The data I have presented here reveal that membership in a multiethnic or multiracial organization may influence the attitudes of individuals most when racial diversity is crucial to accomplishing the core purpose and mission of the organization (Emerson and Smith 2000).

Most generally, I have shown how new Americans might create boundaries between their groups and others in ways that re-structure civic life. By using a cultural lens that allows for individual agency in responding to and creating group boundaries and societal constructs, this work joins with that of other researchers who show culture is not only imposed on individuals but can be used by them in the construction of identities (Cornell 1996). Based on these findings, researchers should consider how new Americans use the discourse in different voluntary organizations to create moral categories for civic life. Examining how Korean Americans in different ethnic religious contexts socially reproduce and challenge ethnic constructs that have consequences for civic life is a piece of much broader work that needs to be done. Such work should study not only how non-white immigrants adapt to prevailing narratives and practices of American civil society. We should also be concerned with how immigrants and their children might re-configure civil society in their own terms.

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Notes

1. ‘Second generation’ generally means those who were born in the United States, but have parents who immigrated to the United States as adults. A few of my respondents were born in Korea but came to the United States as young children and also identified as second generation.


3. By ‘forms of capital’ I mean resources, both monetary and non-monetary, that have a greater ‘pay-off’ than the commodity itself. For example, social capital could be networks with those who can provide jobs in the ethnic enclave economy or relationships with family members who encourage pursuing additional schooling (Nee and Sanders 2001).

4. See Smith et al. (1998) for an excellent discussion of American evangelicalism. Those who identify as evangelicals share certain core beliefs, including the Bible as trustworthy, hope for salvation in God’s son, Jesus and a personal knowledge of God. Smith contends at least twenty million Americans identify with the evangelical movement.

5. ‘Black American’ includes African Americans, West Indians, and Africans. I have used the term ‘African American’ where specifically stated by a respondent.

6. I use pseudonyms for the congregations and respondents in this article.

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