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Richard Alba on Bright and Blurred Boundaries

Researchers have long recognized the boundary-crossing character of assimilation. Regardless of background and historical period, immigrants shed with unequal celerity self definitions based on national origin and past behavior to become members of their adopted countries. The traversing of borders, some of them physical and most of them cultural, may be indisputable but, according to Richard Alba, one of the top scholars in immigration studies, not all demarcation lines are the same. In a recent article, Alba builds on a comparison of second-generation Mexicans in the U.S., North Africans in France, and Turks in Germany to distinguish between bright and blurred boundaries.¹ In the first instance, immigrant children are cast as permanent outsiders; in the second, they are better able to negotiate avenues for social integration. This conceptualization has momentous implications for theory and policy—bright boundaries tend to produce marginalization, blurred ones augur integration.

Religion and Boundary Making

Religion—in addition to citizenship, language and race—is a major factor shaping boundaries and creating distance between native and immigrant populations. In European societies, argues Alba, it has been a key institutional location for the differentiation between native-born citizens and aspiring immigrants. For Mexicans in the U.S. its significance is less obvious. Throughout most of their history, Americans defined their country as white and Protestant. In the early 1900s the arrival of large numbers of eastern and southern European Catholics and Jews generated intense xenophobia. Religious differences were seen as incompatible with normative institutions and values. The Protestant zealotry of the Ku Klux Klan, which revived in 1915 and reached the zenith of its membership and influence during the 1920s, marks only the extreme pole of a spectrum of anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic attitudes. Yet, with the passage of time, those positions were muted. Catholicism and Judaism became part of the American landscape, changing in practice, and allowing for once sharp delineations to become softer. Reformed



Muslim immigrants from the Maghreb wearing traditional attire in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower.
(Associated Press)

Jews, for example, found wide acceptance in the U.S. and what had been a minor holiday, Hanukkah, was elevated in status to provide Jewish children with an equivalent to Christmas. The easing of marriage restrictions among members of various ethnic groups is another example offered by Alba to illustrate the dwindling of differences in the process of immigrant integration.

The Fuzzy Edges of Mexican Catholicism

Because they are predominantly Catholic, the mainstream-immigrant boundary is also attenuated for Mexicans, although it has not been erased. In several respects, the position of Mexicans resembles that of Southern Italian immigrants a century ago. They are bearers of a *syncretic* Catholicism that has absorbed elements from various traditions and folk practices. Consequently, they have been receptive to new teachings on the part of Protestant denominations, as was the case for southern Italians. Within the American Catholic Church, they belong mostly to ethnically Mexican parishes but their more general definition as members of a common Christian tradition enables them to integrate into mainstream institutions as part of the process of social and economic mobility.

¹ Alba, Richard (2005) "Bright vs. blurred boundaries: Second-generation assimilation and exclusion in France, Germany, and the United States." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28 1(January): 20-49.

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On the other hand, in the post 9/11 climate of hostility against illegal immigrants, most of them Mexican, the Catholic Church is reclaiming an important role, using scriptural writings and teachings to oppose harsh legislation and violence against newcomers, especially those without proper documentation. Alba's insights suggest that a reaffirmation of Catholic sentiment among Mexicans in tandem with repressive government policies may turn the blurred boundaries around that group into sharper demarcation lines.

The European Contrast

Muslims in European societies face a markedly different situation. Historically, religious conflicts in France and Germany were bloody and prolonged. The institutionalization of Catholicism in France and of Catholicism and Lutheranism in Germany were the resolution to centuries-long conflict. Both countries have reached accommodations with Judaism, which remains a minority religion and, in Germany, an uncomfortable one.

The role of religiously drawn boundaries in western European societies, says Alba, appears paradoxical since their mainstream is overtly secular. Levels of religious belief and practice are much lower in Europe than in the U.S. The state and civil society have made attempts to open up to Muslims, most recently in France, by the establishment of the *Conseil français du culte musulman*. Nevertheless, the way in which Christian religiosity has been institutionalized and constitutes, through customs and habits of thought, part of collective self definitions make it difficult for Islam to achieve parity. While secular natives in those societies may see religion as a minor feature of their culture, Muslims cannot help but to be aware of the secondary status of their religion.

According to Alba, the German case is the most striking because in that country established religions receive financial support through the tax system, which allows each taxpayer to designate one of them to receive a 'church tax'. So far, however, Islam has not partaken of this benefit because its non-hierarchical, polyphonic nature does not entail a legally recognizable authority that can receive and distribute tax support. In other words, because Islam is not organized in the same way as the established churches it falls outside the state-supported mainstream. There is, moreover, considerable

resistance to granting Islam parity. According to 1996 survey data, 60 percent of West Germans and 88 percent of East Germans are against Islamic religious instruction in schools.

Such tensions acquire epic proportions in public spaces. In locations like Bavaria crucifixes still hang in the majority of public school classrooms, despite court judgments that have found them in conflict with the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. In cities like Munich and Nuremberg Christmas is an all-encompassing festivity. The onset of Lent is marked by riotous *Fasching* celebrations. No resident in these cities can be unaware of the open displays, a fact doubly significant to the mostly Turkish Muslim street cleaners who must sweep up the debris.

In France the subtle institutionalization of Christianity also produces a bright boundary for Muslims. By contrast to Germany, the role of the French state is not overt, since it adheres to *laïcité*, that is, strict neutrality with respect to religion. Nevertheless, in a society where a single confession, Roman Catholicism, has for centuries been dominant, secularism can work to confine other religions to marginality. The recognition of the major Christian holidays is taken for granted. The display of nativity scenes in post offices and on the square facing the Paris city hall are not considered violations of the separation of church and state. There is no equivalent recognition for Muslim holidays.

The paradoxes of the state-religion relationship in a society that views itself as laic are revealed in agonizing public debates. In a context where the wearing of crosses and yarmulkes do not arise controversy, the wearing of head scarves by young Muslim women has drawn a sharp line around Islam.

In both France and Germany, a widespread problem for Muslims is that of establishing suitable places of worship. Such buildings render the relationship between religion and society visible in material form. An estimated four million Muslims in France have 1,558 prayer spaces in all of France, the vast majority of them quite small—only 20 can hold more than a thousand congregants. In all, there are five mosques in use in France that were built expressly as such. By contrast, there are some 40,000 Catholic structures.





Political and Practical Implications

Richard Alba's distinction between blurred and bright boundaries in immigrant assimilation is more than an exercise in elegant conceptualization. His distinction offers a way to rethink political and policy-related issues. At the beginning of the 21st century, when religious narratives have emerged as fertile arenas for the articulation of resistance against and extension of Western domination, Christianity is increasingly presented in opposition to Muslim claims for vindication and redress. Alba's work shows how the high level of embeddedness of mainstream religions in European societies, despite their vaunted secular character, create greater difficulties than in the United States—an ostensibly ultra-religious country—for the assimilation of Muslims. Unless countries like Germany and France enact policies aimed to blur the sharp lines around minority religions they face continued conflict and social disruption.

Alba's conceptualization also facilitates comparative research. Immigration studies have been dominated by U.S. scholars who, not surprisingly, have ushered in a panoply of ideas relevant to the American scene. Many of those ideas, however, are not easily transposed to the European, Asian or African landscapes. The differentiation between blurred and bright boundaries may yet enable us to obtain a more subtle and precise understanding of the immigrant condition in various geographical settings.

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distinguished scholars, social thinkers, and activists to discuss the ethical and practical dimensions in the relationship between contemporary religious practices and international migration. What is the role of national states in promoting immigrant rights? How do religious narratives interpret and are affected by the experience of immigrants? What are the perspectives of Christian denominations towards legal and illegal immigration and how do they complement or differ from the positions taken by other religions? How is religion becoming a terrain for the expression of contested perspectives about immigration? These are among the questions that the conference will explore.

CMD Fall 2006 Colloquium Series

The Center for Migration and Development is pleased to announce the following presenters for our Fall Colloquium Series.

- ❖ Filiz Garip, Princeton University
Thursday, October 19 – 165 Wallace Hall, 4:30 P.M.
"Social Capital and Migration: How do Similar Resources Lead to Divergent Outcomes"
- ❖ Barbara Stallings, Brown University
Thursday, November 9 – 165 Wallace Hall, 4:30 P.M.
"Finance for Development: Latin America in Comparative Perspective"
- ❖ Danilo Mandic, Princeton University
Thursday, November 16 – 165 Wallace Hall, 4:30 P.M.
"Myths and Bombs: War, State Popularity and the Role of National Mythology in Serbia."
- ❖ Adam Abelson, Princeton University
Thursday, November 30 – 165 Wallace Hall, 4:30 P.M.
"The Fruits of War: Salvadoran Youth Gangs and Transnational Migration"
- ❖ Documentary Film
Co-Produced by Lorraine Gray and Patricia Fernández-Kelly, Princeton University
Thursday, December 7 – 101 Friend Center, 4:30 P.M.
"The Global Assembly Line"

"The Good Samaritan in the Age of Globalization: Religion, International Migration and the World Economy"

Mark your calendars - This two-day conference sponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion in collaboration with the Center for Migration and Development is scheduled to take place on **March 29-30, 2007**. The conference will bring together a small number of

