

2023



Exploring AAPI Experiences of Religious Identity and Diversity:

A Report from Interfaith America in Partnership with The Asian American Foundation

Introduction

Since its founding, the United States has attracted people from various parts of the world who hold an array of religious, spiritual, and secular identities and ideals, but the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was a watershed moment for America’s religious diversity. This important legislation opened immigration to people beyond Western Europe and “in particular, the law created new opportunities for immigrants from Asian nations.”¹ In turn, Buddhists, Confucianists, Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, and many others began settling in the U.S. in significant numbers.

Even before the Immigration and Nationality Act, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were shaping America’s civic and religious landscape, and they have continued to do so in recent decades — all while enduring ongoing prejudice and discrimination. Alarming, the anti-Asian sentiment ushered in with the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased incidents of verbal abuse and violent attacks against members of AAPI communities.² The 2023 mass shootings in Half Moon Bay and Monterey Park, California, serve as further evidence that bigotry against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders persists in the United States today.³

With support from The Asian American Foundation, Interfaith America has embarked on a research endeavor to increase awareness and understanding of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Specifically, our work examines their complex religious, spiritual, and secular identities; explores the role of religion in fostering AAPI solidarity and belonging in the United States; and identifies promising practices for engaging AAPI communities in bridgebuilding work across racial and religious lines. This initiative also provides a unique opportunity to showcase as-yet-untold stories of AAPI leaders in different religious, civic, and professional sectors.

Together, the research and storytelling dimensions of this project are intended to combat anti-Asian hate and bigotry by fostering a deeper understanding of AAPI communities’ rich and multifaceted contributions to religious diversity in the United States. They also illuminate opportunities to collaborate with Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to achieve a more inclusive interfaith America. Therefore, what follows is not simply a culmination of our work exploring AAPI experiences of religious identity and diversity; rather, it is an invitation to pursue new pathways for unlocking the potential of America’s religious diversity.

¹ United States House of Representatives. (n.d.). *Historical highlights: Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*. History, Art & Archives. <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Immigration-and-Nationality-Act-of-1965/>

² OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates. (n.d.). *Explained: COVID-19 and the rise in anti-Asian hate*. <https://www.aapihatecrimes.org/facts>

³ Bhattacharya, S. (2023, January 24). Seven dead in California’s second mass shooting in three days. *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/at-least-seven-dead-in-californias-second-mass-shooting-in-three-days-11674531688?mod=hp_lead_pos5

Embracing Multiplicity:

The Both/And of AAPI Religious Identities

Each participant in this research was invited to describe their race or ethnicity, as well as their religious, spiritual, or secular outlook on life, in their own words. In doing so, most referenced an array of influences that shape their identities, including family history, cultural traditions, immigrant status, and growing-up experiences in the United States. In many cases, religious identity was inextricably intertwined with AAPI identity. As one participant noted, “In all of the responses, I was pretty mindful of, wow, what scope and to what histories and lineages do I draw toward or from?” Reflections like this one make clear the importance of examining how participants make meaning of “AAPI” in order to fully appreciate their diverse religious identifications.

“Words are complicated, just as every person is complicated. You can't make an acronym out of me.”

Throughout interviews and focus groups, the AAPI categorization was often described as too broad and thus inadequate for capturing important nuances and significant intra-group differences. “[It] feels like they took a third of the world and just made it into one title,” remarked a participant who identifies as Pakistani. At the same time, many people we interviewed — particularly those identifying as South Asian or Indigenous — expressed feeling excluded or misrepresented by a label they are nevertheless expected to use. “I've personally never identified as Asian American,” remarked a South Asian participant. “Of course, I'll check the box because that's what I have to do legally.” Nevertheless, several people in the study

asserted that a broad-based AAPI community is important for achieving common goals while also offering a network of support in the face of anti-Asian discrimination and hate.

Asian American identity is somewhat unique in the American context because it is not based off a shared geography, a shared language, or a shared culture, or a shared faith. It's based off a political expediency ... This idea of the political necessity of coming together because of numbers, lack of representation, and a recognition of the shared colonial history within the Asian American community.

—Navdeep Singh, Principal, Novalux Solutions

“Religiosity ... that asks you to identify a religious identity is a very particular and Western concept of religion. How does America understand what religious identity means and what is valid religious practice?”

Dissatisfaction with a label or categorization extended to religious identities, as well. Some participants in our study who identify as first-generation immigrants explained that religions they ascribe to are differently understood — and sometimes differently practiced — in the United States compared to their countries of origin: “It's really a difficult thing when I'm in the U.S. to talk about [being Catholic] because it doesn't fit into what people think of as Indian, and my Catholicism doesn't fit into what Catholicism is here.” Religious labels and their social or political connotations in the United States are limiting —

and at times detrimental — when trying to convey one’s religious identity.

In other instances, we heard about narrow conceptions of religious or spiritual identification that are prevalent in Western culture. For example, there is often an assumption that people have a single religious or spiritual identity — yet many Asian American and Pacific Islanders’ beliefs are multifaceted. One participant, self-described as both Christian and spiritually fluid, belongs to a group that is exploring “what it means to reclaim our Indigenous practices” and asking how to “[create] spaces for folks to live into those ancestral practices that we’re still in.” It can be challenging in the U.S. context to freely express a multiplicity

of religious identities, yet doing so appears to play a significant role at the intersection of AAPI race and religion.

It formed my ethnic identity to be a part of the Korean American Christian churches, especially when we were one of the first wave of immigrants to come to the U.S. [after the] 1965 Immigration Act ... In my later years, I started practicing Buddhism as a way to return to my ancestry and I found that Buddhist practices and the Buddhist way of being were so very familiar to me even though I grew up Christian. In a way, Buddhism has brought me back to the submerged Koreanness that I didn't realize was still there.

—Su Yon Pak, Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean, Union Theological Seminary



Students and staff at the Bodhi Day event on December 8, 2022 at Emory University. (Photo credit: Bennett Kane)

Practical Considerations

It's time to rethink how we ask about racial identity. At Interfaith America, we believe in the power of storytelling as a vehicle for fostering understanding of one another's religious beliefs and experiences. Understanding the fullness of people's racial identities might similarly require a more open and expansive approach. As interfaith leaders, we should consider: How can we create more opportunities for storytelling about racial identity in all its complexity? When is it appropriate and feasible to make questions about racial identity open-ended instead of a box to be checked? How could storytelling about racial identity shed light on important intersections between religion and race?

We need to reimagine how to conceptualize and articulate religious identity. For many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, the frameworks and language we use to discuss religious identity in the United States are insufficient. As one study participant observed, shortcomings also pose challenges for "a high number of spiritual-but-not-religious people [who] are multiple belongers." Finding more inclusive ways to express religious, spiritual, and secular perspectives, particularly given the large and growing presence of both AAPI communities and unaffiliated Americans, is imperative for advancing interfaith cooperation. Furthermore, we should center the wisdom and experience of our AAPI friends, colleagues, and interfaith partners as we endeavor to create space for co-existing beliefs, traditions, and practices in the U.S. religious landscape.

To address anti-Asian hate, we must cultivate a nuanced understanding of AAPI racial and religious diversity. Bigotry and hate against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders can be ignited by language, religion, culture, immigrant status, or even geography. It can also take different forms depending on the group being targeted. To effectively combat anti-Asian hate, we need to be more attuned to how it shows up in different AAPI communities. For example, when interfaith leaders understand the different causes and manifestations of bigotry facing Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, or Sikhs of different AAPI identities, they can tailor initiatives and responses accordingly. Success in this arena will depend on research findings that are sufficiently disaggregated and widely accessible to changemakers in different religious and civic spaces.



Jenan Mohajir (left) and Reema Kamran (right) in Interfaith America's Chicago office, February 2023. Photo credit: Kelly Feldmiller

Seeing and Being Seen:

Insights on AAPI Solidarity and Belonging

When we think about where Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are most readily “seen” in the United States today, incidents of anti-Asian hate and violence may come to mind. These incidents often bring together diverse AAPI communities through shared experiences of discrimination and tragedy. Lamentably, people identifying as AAPI feel seen less frequently within America’s religious landscape and positive experiences of belonging can be elusive. Nevertheless, several promising examples exist for how AAPI belonging might be cultivated in our society.

“When there was the rise of anti-AAPI hate crimes ... and reporters were picking up on this, I felt ... that finally ... I had some form of a platform to talk about these issues.”

We asked participants in our study to reflect on their experiences of AAPI solidarity, which often led to sharing about challenges, discrimination, or anti-Asian hate. Several people spoke about solidarity with other AAPI individuals in the wake of 9/11, COVID-19, or the Atlanta spa shootings. Some have found solidarity when navigating majority spaces with other Asian Americans — small U.S. towns and cities, college campuses, and even some professional sectors. For example, an unwelcoming climate in divinity school prompted one participant and his AAPI peers “to rally together ... as we tried to figure out our way through the institution [and] just graduate while still being able to celebrate our particularities and our ethnicities.”

For others, solidarity is realized through experiences distinct to their intersecting identities: “I think for myself, it [solidarity] has really been just the shared second-generation immigrant experience and having to navigate families and parents that may not understand the society and the life in which we’re navigating here.”

“My community is recognized in America’s religious diversity ... as a data point, but my community is misunderstood. My community is underrepresented. My community is misrepresented.”

Reflections on belonging — or a lack thereof — in the United States revealed important insights specific to religious identity and diversity. Several participants pointed to the Westernization of religious or spiritual practices with historic Asian roots as a barrier to belonging. “People tend to think of it in terms of white Buddhists,” one participant explained. “I know exactly how the people who are traditionally thought of as AAPI are feeling, that this is their tradition and they’re having, in many cases, to go to a white teacher to get what’s already culturally theirs.” Others described not feeling seen in today’s U.S. religious landscape. A participant identifying as Japanese American and Buddhist reflected, “The conception of the U.S. was built off of the persecution of those who are religious minorities and ethnic minorities, and so to be a part of America’s religious diversity isn’t something afforded to many of us.”

Yet another challenge to belonging relates to important religious and cultural holidays or celebrations being overlooked in mainstream culture. Relatedly, some people from religious minority groups feel compelled to play a “tokenized role or a very representational role” on behalf of their traditions and a lack of broader representation leaves many feeling unseen.

I see South Asians leading everywhere, but religion. I think partly it's because no one is leading on religion right now. We're going to lose 75%, 80% of our Protestant churches in the next 20 years. We're going to lose 20,000 churches ... I think it's not just that South Asians aren't leading on religion. No one's really leading on religion, quite frankly. We have to reimagine what religious leadership looks like in the future.

—Varun Soni, Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, University of Southern California

“When I’m speaking about religion with people, I feel like it’s tokenizing or ... I’m representing all Muslims, which is just too much work and pressure ... The actual sense of belonging, I think I would feel when ... that pressure’s not there.”



The Living Mandala on Emory's campus. One of only two Living Mandalas in the world and blessed by Buddhist monks from Drepung Loseling Monastery. (Photo credit: Bennett Kane)

When the people we interviewed do experience belonging, it tends to be in spaces where they can be their authentic selves — and these are often spaces that allow for religious and spiritual expression. One participant described his Taiwanese church growing up as “both a cultural center and a religious center ... very much an oasis” in a predominantly white community. When reflecting on belonging for Asian American Buddhists in higher education, another individual talked about the importance of creating “space that Buddhist students or Buddhist communities from all ... different traditions feel seen and have the resources that they need to be themselves, be their religious, spiritual selves.”

Our study also surfaced the power of interfaith engagement to foster AAPI belonging. Several participants spoke at length about friendships within which they could safely express their religious or spiritual beliefs. “My friends [in] middle school would actually fast with me in solidarity during Ramadan, and they would celebrate, eat with me,” one individual shared. Interfaith experiences like this one often involved people who did not identify as AAPI, but at other times they brought Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with diverse religious or spiritual identities together in meaningful ways.

I have this Asian-American sangha community that I connect with. They're of every tradition, but we're a sangha, so we come together to meditate. There's Christians, there's atheists, there's Buddhists in there. For some reason, I feel like I belong there because we all identify as Asian American. It's like regional. It's like we're Californians. There's a certain shared experience of being an Asian American from California.

—Vanessa Gomez Brake, Assistant Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, University of Southern California

Practical Considerations

We must nurture solidarity at all times — not just in the face of challenge. Opportunities abound to enhance solidarity for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Intentionally designing interfaith experiences for multiple belongsers is one way to bring together AAPI communities around a shared dimension of religious identity. We should also seek opportunities to foster solidarity among AAPI religious and spiritual leaders. Convening Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Indigenous, Muslim, Sikh, and other AAPI leaders would facilitate relationships and cooperation between identity groups while also magnifying their collective contributions to religious diversity in America. Finally, for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who are finding solidarity through challenges they face as second-generation immigrants, we should create occasions for celebrating their families' historic identities alongside their evolving American identities.

Firsthand stories of AAPI religious identity and diversity in America need to be elevated. Too often, AAPI religious or spiritual traditions are represented in the public sphere by people who do not identify as AAPI. We ought to create ways for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to tell their own stories, leveraging social media and other outlets to amplify their voices in mainstream spaces. These stories should include the work of interfaith leaders who are attending to lines of difference surfacing across America's changing religious landscape. Apart from storytelling, there are avenues for showcasing AAPI religious identity and diversity through direct participation in celebrations and traditions. As one participant aptly stated, "When I think of the holidays in my [Hindu] circle, holidays like Diwali or Navaratri or Holi ... they're very social events, people gather." How can such gatherings be designed to curate appreciative knowledge about different AAPI communities?



The Venerable Priya Sraman (left), Brahmacharini Shweta Chaitanya (center), and Rev. Dr. Greg McGonigle (right). (Atlanta Event Photography)

Interfaith Aptitude:

AAPI Bridgebuilding to Combat Bigotry and Hate

The AAPI experience of racism in America is complex and can undermine cooperation across religious as well as racial divides. A lack of widespread knowledge and appreciation for the history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States is at least partially to blame for existing challenges of insularity and mistrust. However, new generations of AAPI leaders are exhibiting both a willingness and commitment to bridgebuilding that combats bigotry and hate.

“It’s a dynamic reality ... people experiencing racism, at times perpetuating it, and then other times not even being seen.”

From the AAPI individuals we interviewed for this study, we heard about experiences of racism in myriad forms — within and beyond AAPI communities. Examples of racism perpetrated by people of other races highlighted ignorance and misinformation in the United States when it comes to Asian American and Pacific Islanders’ countries and cultures of origin, the history of immigration for different AAPI communities, and sociopolitical realities that have shaped AAPI pathways to the United States. Several people asserted that lack of education exacerbates racism toward Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. “Typically, one almost never hears about this in history class,” noted a Korean American participant, “that there were immigrants from Asia far before what is mostly recognized by our country.”

The AAPI community is very diverse regarding immigration history, socioeconomic status, religion, and other factors. Some members of the AAPI community are immigrants or children of immigrants, while others are multi-generational Americans. Some members are well off while others live under the poverty line. We have members of our community that are well educated and have post-graduate degrees while others have not completed high school ... [But] the community is united by shared experiences and have for many years stood together against discrimination, racism, and other forms of marginalization.

*—Reema Kamran, Co-Founder,
Muslim Civic Coalition*

When asked about within-group racism, participant responses often focused on power dynamics. According to one individual, “Looking at Hawaii and seeing how specifically Japanese Americans kind of rose in power and then asserted that power to subvert Hawaiian sovereignty ... really reflected what my experience was growing up as a Pacific Islander, of feeling really marginalized in these communities and not really accepted.”

Encounters with racism shared throughout the study likely contribute to insularity within AAPI communities, and understandably so. “I think my general experience and perspective and outlook has been this insular community that keeps to itself for many historical traumatic reasons,” shared a participant who identifies as Japanese American, “but in a way makes ... little effort to engage with community that’s right next door to them.” Unfortunately, our interviews also revealed

that such insularity has been detrimental to Asian American and Pacific Islanders' knowledge of and appreciation for people of other racial identities — thus perpetuating AAPI prejudice and discrimination toward Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.

“There's something about just showing up for people ... even if you disagree with them or even if you're not getting along with them.”



Paul Luu at the Chinese American Service League office in Chicago, Illinois. Photo credit: Kelly Feldmiller

It is critical that we take seriously the ways in which racism and insularity create barriers to AAPI communities' participation in interfaith and interracial cooperation. At the same time, the lived experiences of our study participants illustrate the critical role that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders can play — and are already playing — to confront hate and polarization in the United States

through bridgebuilding. Participants seemed not only comfortable but adept at collaborating across racial and religious lines — perhaps unsurprising given the complex racial and religious identities they themselves navigate. While engagement with people of diverse identities was sometimes described as a necessity or as born out of a “shared history and shared experience with racism,” more often it was driven by core values that shaped professional pursuits as well as personal relationships. As a Hindu participant explained, “Very much my ethos is, my way of doing social justice, it's ... just being proximate to people who are different from me.”

Our interviews also illuminated the unique potential of younger AAPI adults when it comes to collaborative action. “When I was growing up, it was always like, keep your head down, do your work, move forward,” reflected a South Asian participant. “I didn't understand ... Why should we be quiet about things?” This bent toward activism is not uncommon among all of Gen Z, nor is cooperation among people of diverse identities when advocating for social change. However, for younger Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, working together across racial divides may be catalyzed when they see themselves as part of the broader U.S. landscape. In other words, a greater sense of belonging can facilitate movement out of religious or cultural enclaves and into spaces of interfaith and interracial cooperation.

If we're not willing to further conversation on strategy to better all communities, then we need to have a different conversation. I'm seeing more of our young people really pushing back and having the conversation about working across racial sectors and having stronger solidarity with marginalized communities ... I am extremely hopeful about our young generation. Not only are they talking about this ... but many of them desire to take action to get things done.

—Paul Luu, CEO, Chinese American Service League



Dr. Darshan Mehta holds a meditation session with staff of Benson-Henry Institute in Boston, Massachusetts, March 7, 2023. Mikhail Glabets Photography 2023

Practical Considerations

AAPI storytelling should include historic as well as present-day narratives. Our findings suggest that combating the effects of racism requires not only fuller expression of Asian American and Pacific Islanders’ complex racial identities and greater visibility for today’s AAPI leaders and changemakers. Rather, building racial and cultural literacy through storytelling and education is necessary and should convey the pain and hope experienced by AAPI communities over time — in their own voices. Storytelling should also uplift the myriad religious and civic contributions Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have made throughout history, including contributions to bridgebuilding efforts in the United States. Doing so will help counter negative and misinformed narratives that propagate racism and discrimination against AAPI communities and other communities of color.

Multiracial coalition building can lead to individual and collective change. “There has already been amazing work done by the Black, Latinx, Indigenous communities,” remarked a South Asian study participant. “AAPI organizations, if they would work with them and strengthen basically the foundation that has been laid...I think that's a great way of aligning resources towards collective effort [s].” Coalitions have great promise for bringing AAPI and other racial identity groups together to address issues of common concern. Religious or spiritual communities are primed to be partners in coalition building given their intimate understanding of challenges their members face and the social capital they bring to mobilization efforts. An emerging generation of AAPI interfaith leaders is also ready and able to bring about change through coalition building. Empowering them to do so will undoubtedly advance our efforts to realize a truly interfaith America.

Conclusion

To fully unlock the potential of America’s religious diversity requires a nuanced understanding of that diversity in all its forms. Through this research, we have gleaned valuable insights about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that will enhance Interfaith America’s efforts to inspire, equip, and connect leaders in their collective pursuit of the common good. Current findings will inform future programming as well as engagement opportunities through our [Emerging Leaders Network](#). Going forward, we will also continue to engage the

rich qualitative data collected from participants who represent an extraordinary array of cultural, ethnic, and religious identities and experiences. Our learnings will be shared [on our website](#), alongside powerful stories of AAPI leaders and changemakers, to encourage dialogue and action that fosters greater equity and inclusion for AAPI communities. We invite all our partners to join us in these efforts to bring about a more inclusive interfaith America.

About the Research

This qualitative study was conducted to cultivate a deeper understanding of Asian American and Pacific Islanders’ (AAPI) experiences of religious identity and diversity in the United States. The research engaged 38 individuals identifying as AAPI in interviews or focus groups between November 2022 and February 2023. In total, 23 participants took part in virtual focus groups lasting 90 minutes; 15 participants completed hour-long, one-on-one virtual interviews. Additionally, two focus groups were held with 15 racially diverse interfaith leaders to elicit their experiences working with — and their perspectives of — Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

AAPI participants were recruited through Interfaith America’s national network as well as via recommendations and referrals from colleagues and network partners. They comprised a purposive sample of interfaith leaders with diverse racial and ethnic identifications, including Asian, Bengali, Diasporic Korean, Filipino/Filipino American, East Asian, Indian/Indian American, Japanese/Japanese American, Middle Eastern, Pakistani, Samoan, South Asian, Taiwanese/

Taiwanese American, Tokelauan, and multiracial. Participants included 17 men and 21 women who self-described as Agnostic, Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Evangelical, Hindu, Humanist, Interfaith, Jain, Muslim, Mystic, Nonreligious, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh, Spiritual, or some combination of these. The Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in this study also represent an array of professional sectors, including business, education, religion/spirituality, government, health care, nonprofit, and philanthropy.

Interview and focus group questions focused on examples of solidarity with or among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; perceptions of AAPI belonging within the U.S. religious landscape; experiences of racism or discrimination within AAPI communities; and models of cross-faith and cross-racial cooperation that hold promise for combating AAPI bigotry and hate. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed for analytic and storytelling purposes. A team of four researchers worked collaboratively to code all data collected and identify salient themes.



About Interfaith America

The mission of Interfaith America is to inspire, equip, and connect leaders and institutions to unlock the potential of America's religious diversity. Founded in 2002 on the idea that religious difference should serve as a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division, Interfaith America is the premier interfaith organization in the United States, with a \$13M+ budget, more than 50 full-time professional staff, and a network of thousands of interfaith leaders in higher education and other sectors such as health, racial equity, and civic life. Through its curricular development, grant and fellowship programs, educational events, research, thought leadership, and public narrative work, Interfaith America is equipping individuals and institutions with the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed for leadership in a religiously diverse world. Interfaith America the organization devotes its energies to serving as a catalyst, a resource, and a partner to engage our religious diversity in positive and productive ways to build interfaith America the nation.



About The Asian American Foundation

TAAF is dedicated to building a safer, more inclusive future for AAPIs everywhere. Founded in 2021 in response to the rise in anti-Asian hate and address the long-standing underinvestment in AAPI communities, TAAF funds best in class organizations working to mobilize against hate and violence, educate communities, and reclaim our narratives through our core pillars of Anti-hate, Education, Narrative Change, and Resources & Representation. Through our grants, high-impact initiatives, and events, we're creating a permanent and irrevocable sense of belonging for millions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States. For additional information about TAAF, please visit www.taaf.org.

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