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I confess: I'm no teenager, and haven't been one for quite some time. I don't know too many contemporary teenagers, either. To make matters worse, I've never even taught teenagers, unless you count the day and a half I once spent participating in a university program for gifted adolescents. When it comes to America's teens, I'm clearly out of my element and clueless, to boot. Even so, when Oxford University Press invited me to write a history book on immigration and American religion for "young adults," I had no reservations about signing on the dotted line.

I rationalized my decision to produce *Immigration and American Religion*, one of seventeen volumes in Oxford's Religion in American Life series, by choosing to see the project as an extension of a role I have inhabited for many years: that of public historian. Having actively shuttled between the academy and the museum world where I've consulted on and curated dozens of interpretive historical exhibitions, I am mindful of the manifold challenges of presenting history to audiences unfamiliar with and often bored by the past. I relish those challenges. Surely, I reasoned, writing a book for "young adults" could not be all that different.

In most respects, it wasn't so very different. Like exhibitions, this enterprise, too, called for a special set of presentational skills and strategies: a strong sense of narrative, attentiveness to detail, and a willingness to take the most complex historiographic debates and theoretical arguments about equally complex phenomena like faith and ritual, and simplify them. More a matter of distillation than of dumbing down, writing history for teenage readers prompted me to

take, say, the voluminous literature on the Puritans or the growing literature on the post-1965 immigrant experience and to turn it over and over again to find the nub of the story.

What's more, each story in this volume, much like objects in an exhibition, must stand on its own, without benefit of helping hands. It cannot rely on exhaustive footnoting to buttress its claims or on lengthy citations from leading historians of immigration or American religion to give voice to ideas. Everything must come from within; nothing can be mediated. The only voices that can legitimately make themselves heard are those of the immigrants themselves. Consequently, memoir, autobiography, diary entries, and firsthand eyewitness accounts loomed large in this account. If they happened to be those of teenagers, so much the better.

I made a point, in fact, of drawing on sources that both captured the voices of teenage immigrants and reflected their youthful perspective on religion. I related how, in 18th century Pennsylvania, male teenage Moravians, members of the Renewed Unity of Brethren, were forced to abide by a curfew and how, in late nineteenth century New York, young Italian immigrants delighted in religious street festivals like the *feste della Madonna di Monte Carmelo*, and in the new clothes they wore to greet the Madonna. I told of Jewish immigrant boys preparing for their bar mitzvah in America of the early 1900s; of a Puerto Rican immigrant, decades later, lyrically recalling the santos that kept him company in the dark of night; and of a fifteen-year-old Latina in Phoenix, Arizona, getting ready for her quinceanera in the 1990's. Time and again, the voices and experiences of these young immigrants not only animated the text but framed its overarching narrative as well, helping to unify what might otherwise have been a parade of chapters, each devoted to a different immigrant group. Focusing on the religious experience and sensibility of teenage immigrants across time, space, and country of origin had the added effect of highlighting the similarities rather than the differences among them.

I also made a point of paying close attention to lived religion, to the tension between religious ideals and everyday life thinking that might appeal to young readers too. Incorporating numerous instances of such tension into the text, I described New England women who, hiding behind their oversized church bonnets, dozed off during the sermon while their men folk gathered outside to talk about farming rather than God; pastors who despaired of their congregants, and congregants who, despairing of their pastors, preferred to play basketball on Sunday rather than attend church. I made sure to make room for human foibles, frailties, and idiosyncrasies. I felt that this material, the stuff of history, had a far greater chance of engaging adolescents than a dutiful recitation of dates, places, and grand theories.

Energized by my mandate to make the past come alive, to introduce teenagers to the joys of

history, and to suggest something of the complexity and vibrancy of America's religious landscape, I never felt I was in danger of compromising my scholarly integrity or of making short shrift of my academic training. On the contrary. Whether the subject at hand was the development of the American Catholic Church, the experience of Chinese immigrants in nineteenth century California, or the emergence of an Islamic American community at the end of the twentieth, writing *Immigration and American Religion* called on my interpretive skills at every turn. Unable to assume any knowledge whatsoever on the part of my audience, I had to explain everything (succinctly, no less) while also placing a premium on clarity and liveliness. Sustaining the interest of my readers as they made their way from the seventeenth century to contemporary times brought into play every one of my classroom skills.

In other words, writing this book was far from easy. It was hard to avoid the temptation to clog the narrative with interpretive asides, to pile on the detail, to lead with theory rather than incident and, above all, to footnote. Finding the right phrase (somewhere between the language of the academy and the language of the street), striking the right note (neither lofty nor overly familiar), and knowing when to step in and when to step out also took quite a lot of writing and rewriting.

Eventually, after many false starts and long hours spent staring at the screen, I found my bearings, much as the subjects of this book — the Bradfords and the Freys, the Kellys and the Cohens, the Hongs and the Itos, the Rodriguezes and the Kassams — ultimately found theirs, transforming the United States in the process.