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The New England: America's Future?
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I spent several weeks this summer traveling in England. Under its blue skies (and also in the rain) it was good to see the spires of centuries-old churches rising from every village, the grand estate houses of minor nobility standing before carefully trimmed green lawns, the images of the Queen on everything from coins to shop walls. It was even fun struggling to drive on the left side of the road. Yes, Old England is still there.

But there is also a new England, an England that was created by the British Empire, by England's occupation of countries around the world--most prominently the Indian sub-continent, now known as the countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The new England to which I refer has been formed by people who have come from there to live in England.

These immigrants brought their culture with them, everything from food and clothing styles to religion. It is common to see Sikh men in their turbans driving down the road or young Muslim women with long head scarves and jeans walking to their classes at universities.

Food too has changed. In addition to the ubiquitous curry restaurants, grocery stores throughout England now carry foodstuffs, packaged meals and condiments for the cuisines of India and Pakistan. Local sandwich shops, formerly the home of Cornish pasties and ploughman's lunches, also carry vegetable samosas and onion bahjis. There are even new types of potato chips: Tikka Masala and Thai Lemon Grass appear alongside the flavors of barbeque and sour cream and onion.

More subtle than this, but perhaps with a deeper impact, a religious change is coming over England. Looking through the window on a train ride through the British midland counties, one frequently sees mosques, usually near big cities. On a ride through Blackburn, you can see five new mosques in one neighborhood alone, all tastefully built and designed to fit with the local architectural styles.

In cities a different change has taken place. Manchester has suffered from decades of the common urban problem of its people leaving the city to settle in the surrounding suburbs. As new churches and stores are built in the suburbs, the ones in the city fall empty. As Muslims and other immigrants move into the cities, they acquire these buildings for their own use. So it is not unusual to see a 300-year-old stone church with a sign indicating that it is now a Muslim school or a Hindu temple.

In a similar vein, Holy Isle in Scotland, which once was used by Christian hermits and monks seeking solitude, has been purchased by a group of Buddhist monks. They have established a retreat center there for contemplation and meditation.

The point is that when England sent its soldiers and administrators to other countries, it also opened the door to let people from those countries come into England. Occupation wasn't a one-way street, but more like a highway, with people from every country moving along it and stopping in different places.

Is this an image of United States' future? Should we expect significant immigration from Iraq and a Muslim-inspired impact on this country's religious culture? Perhaps, but probably not immediately. The British occupied India for more than a century. If the United States leaves Iraq in the next couple of years, I expect little influence.

But if we stay in Iraq for a long period of time, and if Iraqis begin to see American culture as a way to get ahead in life, then we should expect immigration. Iraqis will want to study science and technology in our universities, to learn the techniques of capitalism from our businessmen, and even perhaps to watch a mature democracy in action. They will bring their own practices with them as well, and they will change us even as we change them.