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Religion as a path to civic engagement

Peggy Levitt

Abstract

Dreams of global citizenship have long captured the Western imagination, but religion is rarely seen as a possible contributor to its emergence. This paper uses the case of transnational migrants – potential global citizens par excellence – to explore the relationship between religion and politics across borders. Based on a study of Indian Hindus, Pakistani Muslims, Irish Catholics and Brazilian Protestant immigrants living in the metropolitan Boston area, it examines how these citizens of the world actually think about who they are and what they want to do about it. How does religion figure in the rights and responsibilities of global citizenship, where are these fulfilled and who benefits from them? I argue that, while a small group claims an exclusive variety of religious global citizenship and is concerned only about helping those who share their point of view, the vast majority are open to partnerships around major social issues, such as education, health and employment. Religion is an under-utilized, positive force that social scientists and activists can no longer afford to ignore.

Keywords: Religion and politics; transnationalism; migrant religion; US religion; political incorporation; civil engagement.

Dreams of world citizenship have always figured large in the Western imagination. They were part of Kant’s vision of a ‘perpetual peace’ in a world that would be liberated from irrational prejudices. Goethe envisioned a world society that would overcome the limits of German militarism. Marx predicted that an international society would emerge in which workers would unite to overcome capitalism’s bonds (Turner 2001).

Religion has also provided grist for imagining memberships beyond the nation. Implicit in Augustine’s idea of the City of God, where the legacy of Roman global society would be perfected, was the idea of belonging to several communities at once. Luther spoke of ‘two kingdoms’ – the kingdom of Christ, inhabited by true believers who
were ‘subject to Christ’, and the kingdom of the world, where non-
Christians lived under the rule of the law. He believed people could
belong to the kingdom of God and contribute to the kingdom of the
world at the same time, although one kingdom was clearly more
important than the other (Ahern 1999). Thomas Aquinas saw
individuals as members of families, nation-states and the human
community, and grappled with how life could be organized across all
three.

Transnational migrants, or people who live aspects of their lives
across borders, are potential citizens of the world. They continue to
identify with the places they come from, the places they settle and
other places around the world where their compatriots and co-
religionists live. But social scientists and activists rarely consider
religion as a potential catalyst for humanitarian activism or a
cosmopolitan embrace. There are good reasons. History is filled with
examples where faith has inspired violence and hatred. Osama Bin
Laden is our most infamous contemporary transnational religious
activist. But let us not forget Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King.
History is also filled with examples of people who mobilized their faith
to abolish slavery and to fight for civil rights.

This article purposefully integrates religion into discussions about
transnational civic and political incorporation. It asks how the
relationship between religion, identity and participation changes
when it is enacted across borders. It examines religious mechanisms
for political socialization and the extent to which a religiously shaped
politics results. Finally, it asks what transnational migrants’ experi-
ences reveal about religion as a potential catalyst of cosmopolitanism
and global citizenship.

My discussion is based on a study of four immigrant communities in
the Boston metropolitan area. One of my concerns was to understand
how people used religion to belong to several communities simulta-
neously and how their activities transformed the religious landscape.
The 247 people I spoke with included Muslims from Pakistan, Hindus
from Gujarat State in India, Protestants from Governador Valadares
in Brazil and Irish Catholics from the Inishowen peninsula in County
Donegal. I also interviewed at least fifty family members and friends in
each community of origin.

My conversations revolved around several related questions. I first
asked people about their assumptions about inter-ethnic and inter-
faith relations, the relationship between church and state and their
expectations about politics in general. I then asked them to share their
visions of a good society and how one might be achieved. What
constitutes good citizenship? What does it mean to be an American?
What is the appropriate role of religion in public life? Next, our
conversations turned to the relationship between politics and religion.
How does religion shape where and how migrants participate politically? How does their faith shape their political views, choices and activities?

Understanding religion across borders

Public and private religion is alive and well. While social scientists in general, and migration scholars in particular, have long overlooked religion’s prominent role in public life, much recent work has tried to fill this lacuna. Religion supports and is itself transformed by all aspects of the migration experience – the journey, the process of settlement and the emergence of ethnic and transnational ties (McAlister 2002; Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Hirschman 2004; Richman 2005). Religion also links people across space and time by allowing them to feel part of a chain of memory connecting the past, present and future (Tweed 1997; Davie 2000; Hervieu-Léger 2000).

Religious belonging does not just link migrants to co-religionists in the home and host countries; global religious movements unite members, wherever they live, to fellow believers around the globe (Bowen 2004; Marquardt 2005). Migrants and non-migrants who follow particular saints, deities or religious teachers also form imagined global communities of connection. Communities of religious scholars meet, actually and virtually, to agree upon how to translate what are considered universal beliefs and rituals to particular, real-life contexts (Bowen 2004).

New religious architectures create and are created by these transnational religious communities (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Levitt 2007). Transnational religious institutions may complement or compete with political entities on the world stage (Rudolph and Piscatori 1997). Pope John Paul II, for example, positioned himself as a spokesperson for humanity, issuing encyclicals and taking stands on events not just concerning Catholics. By so doing, he became, according to Casanova (1994, p. 130), ‘the high priest of a new universal civil religion of humanity and the first citizen of a global civil society’.

Belonging to religious institutions socializes members into receiving-country politics (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Menjivar 2002; Yang 2002). Commitments to religious identities and religious organizations facilitate the acquisition of an American cultural toolkit for immigrants and their children: a new language, a new political and civic culture, and new loyalties. Religious networks, celebrations, rituals and organizations serve as a forum in which many first- and second-generation Americans become schooled in American politics and lay claim to public recognition and government assistance for their communities (Menjivar 1999; Yang 1999; Jones-Correa and
Leal 2001; Yang and Ebaugh 2001a; DeSipio 2002; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Lee, Pachon and Barreto 2002; Martes, Braga and Rodriguez 2002; Sherman 2003; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003; Levitt 2004).

But religion also enables migrants to sustain continued participation in homeland affairs (Wellmeier 1998; Menjivar 1999, 2003; Peterson, Vásquez and Williams 2001; Guest 2003; Freston 2004; Levitt 2004; Carnes and Yang 2004). Transnational migrants transform religious practice in their homelands, exporting both more moderate and more conservative versions of a faith, often with political and social consequences. For instance, many hold non-resident Indians [NRIs] responsible for the recent rise in Hindu fundamentalism in India.

This paper builds on this recent work by looking at how migrants who actually (and virtually) belong to religious organizations, movements and networks understand and ultimately make sense of the competing assumptions about religious and political life at work in their countries of origin and their new homelands. How does religion shape the rights and responsibilities of global citizenship? My discussion is based on interviews with migrants from the Inishowen Peninsula in County Donegal in Ireland (52), the city of Governador Valadares in the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil (70), Gujarat State in India (64) and the cities of Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan (61). I talked with slightly more men (52 per cent) than women (48 per cent). Roughly one-third were in their thirties (32.5 per cent); approximately 20 per cent each were in their twenties, forties, or fifty years or older. The majority arrived in the United States when they were in their twenties (61 per cent) or in their teens (24 per cent). Because nearly two-thirds of the sample was at least 30 years old, a significant number have been in the United States for some time – about two-thirds for at least ten years. Most people were married or in some form of committed union (70 per cent) or had been married at some point in their lives.

Managing diversity

Understanding how people define the collective good and their part in creating it requires looking at the mental maps they use to make sense of the world. The religious and professional organizations, social movements and even the generations people belong to, all influence the ideas they take in and how they make sense of them (Zerubavel 1997). People’s mental maps are a product of how they think as individuals and how they think as members of groups. Their interpretations also depend on their pre-existing beliefs, prejudices and assumptions. A Muslim uses a Muslim set of file folders to organize the new information she receives about religion and public
life in the United States. A Gujarati brings a Hindu set of cognitive categories to the same challenge. Both are exposed to the same information, but what they assimilate and how they interpret it depends on the assumptions and cognitive tools they bring to bear. When people live lives that cross borders, they belong to communities influenced by several cultural contexts at the same time. In some cases, what they have left behind and what they encounter fits into the same file drawers; in others, it is a case of working a round peg into a square hole.

What people choose to include in their mental file cabinets also depends on whether they are the ‘rule-makers’, or part of the majority in their homelands, or among the ‘rule-takers’, or the minority. Rule-makers, having always been in charge, cannot imagine what it feels like to have another group set the terms of the status quo or how that this might weaken their own position. They are not worried, for example, that having a Christmas tree in their homes will undermine their children’s religious identities. In fact, they see it as a way of demonstrating they are American. Their Hindu-ness, Catholicism or Muslim-ness is untouchable because they come from places where most of the people they interacted with shared their beliefs. The Brazilian Protestant, on the other hand, is more defensive, because she comes from a country with a Catholic majority. She is more careful about what she takes in or to what she will expose her children.

Immigrants’ presumptions about public life, and the cognitive files they use to organize them, are also shaped by the ‘philosophies of integration’ in place in the countries they come from. Adrian Favell (2001) compared how differing philosophical outlooks in England and France framed debates about race, immigration and citizenship. Each country has its own ‘public philosophy’ that emerges from this shared set of ideas, cultural symbols and language.

The migrants in this story also moved from countries with philosophies of integration very different from those in place in the United States. Different expectations about relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and about how much newcomers or minorities could ultimately become like ‘us’ were also at play. Their homelands were not founded by immigrants. Their national story was not about incorporating newcomers. Nor was it about living somewhere where there is no official state church. They had not been brought up to assume that some kind of cultural mixing and social integration was automatically a good thing. Their personal philosophies of integration reflected these experiences.

In fact, Inishoweners, Gujaratis and Pakistanis come from places where ethnic and religious distinctions rule the day. Furthermore, most people in my sample had had little contact with people unlike themselves. Everyone in Inishowen knew there were Protestant families
living ‘over in Buncrana’, but they generally kept to themselves. In Baroda, most people equated being Hindu with being Indian without giving it a second thought, even though that meant excluding nearly 15 per cent of the population. They lived in villages or neighbourhoods strictly segregated by caste and religion, and they could not remember any government attempt to improve Hindu-Muslim relations.

Immigrants also came from countries with very different understandings about the relationship between church and state. In Pakistan, India, Ireland and Brazil, religion plays an active role in politics and the state routinely manages aspects of religious life. Islam, for example, is the state religion in the ‘Islamic Republic of Pakistan’. The country’s president and prime minister must be Muslim and pledge allegiance to the ‘Islamic ideology’. In the early 1980s, Pakistan even briefly experimented with making Friday, the day of communal prayer, its national day of rest. While officially a secular model of government, the state actively regulates religious life, in no small part because of the increasing power of Islamist parties. Islamiyyat or Islamic studies are compulsory for all students in state schools. The government recently attempted to register and standardize the curriculum in the thousands of privately run madrasahs or Islamic schools throughout the country, although it met with limited success.

Even in officially secular states, such as India and Brazil, religion is alive and well in the political arena. During the 2002 Brazilian presidential election, the third-place candidate, Anthony Garotinho, a popular governor from Rio de Janeiro, was an evangelical preacher. At that time, thirty-two lawmakers in the 513-member Chamber of Deputies made up the so-called ‘evangelical bench’. By 2005, there were sixty-two evangelical deputies and three senators (Novaes 2005).

India’s Bharatiya Janata Party’s [BJP] ascension to power, which began in 1998 also signalled a shrinking of secular space, as L. K. Advani, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Party President, indicated when he described the party as ‘the chosen instrument of the divine.’ In the last decade, Gujarat has witnessed some of the worst communal violence in its history. Over 100,000 Muslims have been displaced. Independent human rights advocates have accused the BJP of purposely failing to bring the perpetrators to justice. In fact, the US government denied Chief Minister Modi a visa in 2005 because of his alleged support of terrorist activities.

In general, the people I talked with deeply distrusted politics, whether or not it came with a stiff dose of religion. You should not ‘come near a politician with a ten-foot pole’, they warned me. They used phrases like ‘useless’, ‘inefficient’ and ‘rotten to the core’ to describe their governments. If the state cannot provide basic services like health and education, how can it run fair elections? And why does it care so much about them now when it never paid any attention to me
before I migrated? Many people thought it was a complete waste of time to participate in homeland politics; and they were not so sure about US politics either.

A ‘good society’

International public opinion surveys like the World Values Survey and the Pew Global Attitudes Survey have measured people’s beliefs about things like religion, politics and globalization for over twenty-five years (Inglehart 2006). Regardless of the data, the conclusions are the same – there are few differences in moral values throughout the globe. There is much more consistency across civilizations than within them. In particular, political attitudes are remarkably consistent: a desire for religious and personal freedom as well as democratic ideals predominates, even if these are not realized in one’s own country (Inglehart and Baker 2000; PEW Research Center 2002; Esmer 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2004). A worldview which embraces trust, respect, hard work and determination is prevalent throughout the East and the West (Esmer 2003).

My conversations corroborated these findings. Immigrants from around the world, and from different faith traditions, expressed remarkably similar ideas about what constitutes a good society. In such a world, no one lacks food, clothing or shelter. Neighbours care for each other. Basic decency rules the day – people tell the truth; they treat each other with respect; they obey the rules. They give generously to causes they do not benefit from directly. Freedom of religion and speech are guaranteed. Moreover, in an ideal society, institutions work. People obey the law and the law protects them in return. It treats individuals equally regardless of what they think about God or how much money they make. You rely on the police rather than fear them. Schools educate, hospitals cure and politicians represent the interests of their constituents.

It is not a society in which everyone is equal, however. Most people claimed racial and class differences were inevitable. Certain people are natural achievers. They have the ability to do more so they get more. Most people were not particularly concerned that some people do better than others. It is one thing if a group is extremely disadvantaged but it is just the way things are when one group does better than the rest.

Creating good societies: what has religion got to do with it?

People from many different backgrounds were deeply concerned with what makes a good society and the proper role of faith in achieving one. They used religion to construct theologies of change about how to
make the world a better place. These principles were their guide for how to put these ideas into practice. They influence when and where individuals participate civically and politically, and who the beneficiaries of their good works are.

Several people said that to achieve a good society, you need good citizens, which meant different things to different people. For John Doherty, born in Inishowen and now in his seventies and living in the United States, being a good citizen is the same anywhere in the world. It is about neighbourliness. ‘How can you have a good community if people don’t know each other and watch out for each other?’ he asked. For Rosemary Houghton, also in her seventies, it means having some kind of faith. ‘I think a good American should have some religion, I don’t care whether it’s Catholic or Protestant, long as you are good in your own faith, what you believe, higher power, whatever you believe.’ Father John, her cousin, in his sixties, stressed responsibility.

Most people believed religion had a role to play in making a good society a reality, even if it had not always done so in their ancestral homes. Their views also echoed those expressed by respondents in the World Values Survey. Authors Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004) propose a ‘cultural axiom’ – religion’s role remains strong, even as societies grow more secular in other ways, such as declining church attendance. In fact, Norris and Inglehart question the actual feasibility of a cultural separation of church and state. ‘The distinctive world-views that were originally linked with religious traditions’ they write, ‘have shaped the cultures of each nation in an enduring fashion; today, these distinctive values are transmitted to the citizens even if they never set foot in a church, temple or mosque’ (2004, p. 17). Indeed, in the United States, the separation of ‘church and state’ has not, even after 200 years, led to a decisive split between religion and politics. According to a 2004 survey, only 18 per cent of Americans would remove the Ten Commandments from public buildings, a solid majority (59 per cent) favour teaching creationism in schools and nearly one-third support making Christianity the official religion of the United States (Barna Research Group 2004).

My conversations also revealed a desire to bring religious values into the public square. If you do not have religion, many people asked, how do you know what is right and wrong? It is the ethical baseline in a world where selfishness and greed too often rule the day. Religious differences are a natural, inevitable part of human nature. But most of us, people assured me, realize there is no absolute truth. They are willing to discuss things. They just have to be sure to treat others with respect. ‘Most people’, said Ashu, in his thirties:

are not like Chief Minister Modi or even like President Bush. We believe. We pray. We try to live our lives the way we think God
would want us to. And not just our personal lives but our lives in our communities. But that doesn’t mean we have to force what we believe down other people’s throats. It doesn’t mean that we are going to strap bombs to our backs and kill other people. I feel so sad that the people who do this have spoiled it for the rest of us. Those of us who are trying to live a moral, religious life have a difficult time raising these views in public because the way the world is today, people think we’re just naive.

Giving religion free reign, people admitted, is not without its problems. Politicians often misuse faith for their own purposes – it is hard to argue with people who claim that God is on their side. They misrepresent God’s words to achieve their own ends. Thirty-five-year-old Malika, for example, remembers the Pakistan of her youth as a very religious country, but one where religion did not really influence everyday life. There were folks who wanted to obey the Qur’an strictly but they did not expect everyone else to. Now, things are different. The religious genie is out of the bottle and out of control. Powerful people in powerful places are distorting faith and using it to pursue what she sees as ‘unfaithful’ goals.

The idea is to distinguish between the public politics of religious communities and what its individual members believe. This was especially important to Gujaratis who worried about the people who hold NRIs responsible for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. Most people adamantly opposed such projects. It did not mean that they were particularly fond of Muslims. Old prejudices and hurts die hard. But that was not the reason they embraced Hinduism, and this was not what their faith was intended for.

American-ness

Given that people bring very different mental maps to the immigrant experience, how do they ultimately make sense of what they encounter? What does being ‘American’ mean to them and how does it differ from other identities? Most people had a ready answer. They did not always agree with what they considered to be American values nor did they want to adopt the entire package unconditionally, but they respected America. They also felt it was their responsibility to adapt to the American way of life rather than the other way around.

Almost everyone equated being American with being tolerant and knowing how to get along in a pluralistic society. It meant being liberated from the watchful and demanding eyes of your relatives and neighbours and being able to determine who you are and what you really believe. ‘What is American about me’, said Narendra, a Gujarati in his twenties, ‘is probably the ability to challenge everything. I only
believe certain things very deeply that I have thought through for myself. The ability to make a choice and the power that comes from that. I think that's probably American.’

Being American meant being able to be an individual. According to Najiba, a 44-year-old migrant, American-ness is a state of mind.

I am very American but so was my mother and my mother never came to this country until she got cancer and was ready to die.

*So, what is American?*

To be yourself. You know there is beauty in being a nobody, when nobody looks at you, nobody cares, you can be walking around in your pyjamas and nobody would care. . . . My mother was not the least concerned about physical appearances or social strata or anything. She was a physician. She was very strong. She was the major breadwinner in our household. She was a feminist. She called the shots, how we lived, where we went to school.

*Why is that American?*

Because she claimed the right to exist. I think being American is that you can do what you want to do. You have the right to determine what you want to do. For anybody. In Pakistan, there are all these constraints.

Moreover, American-ness was big enough to encompass good Hindu-ness and good Muslim-ness. Numerous respondents argued that America honours Muslim values more than most places. It is wealthy enough that the Prophet’s teachings can actually be put into place, was what Imram, a 38-year-old male migrant from Pakistan, told me.

I always tell people from Muslim countries, none of you have ever really tested Islam in the way in which it is meant to be tested – as a pluralistic religion that is tolerant of everyone and accepts everybody for what they are. I tell people that America is probably the most Islamic country in the world even though it is not a Muslim country. Because in theory, it has all the same principles that an Islamic state is supposed to have. So freedom of expression, of thought, the freedom to associate, religious tolerance, the fact that everyone can practise their religion and no one can tell you otherwise. Now these are all the things that are in an Islamic state. . . . I would say the word tolerance, and I would even go beyond that because tolerance, in my mind, means that you can just bear to have someone there, you tolerate them, but it goes far beyond that. It is really acceptance and brotherhood. That is really its essence.
People tended to associate the positive aspects of American-ness with their workplace or with the social institutions in which they interacted. That was, in part, because those were the places where they had the most contact with the native-born. Work and school were also two places immigrants inhabited where American values predominated. And American-ness received high marks. You moved up because of your ability, not your connections. Rules were made to be followed, not simply disregarded every time the boss disagrees. It is not that America is not corrupt, respondents told me, it is just that it is less so than India or Brazil.

American-ness, though, comes with a price. Francisco, from Valadares, in his early thirties, clearly recognized the trade-offs. Because America is more individualistic, people care more about themselves. They have less time for others. Family life, particularly the relationship between adult children and their elderly parents, suffers. People claimed American-ness when they ‘acted like workaholics’. They were Americans when they put performance before people, sacrificing their humanity to get ahead. ‘But this is what you need to do in this country to succeed’, as Dilip, a Gujarati financial planner in his thirties described:

In many ways, the biggest thing I had to learn was not to call everyone “Mister”. At work, I treated everyone with respect, no matter who they were. I was told that, you know, you’re being way too nice, just cut it off, you have to take authority. I have a mentor, a senior mentor, here at work and he teaches me like psychology like what I have to do, what I don’t have to do. I don’t have to say, “Oh, thank you for meeting with me”, he says, I should say, “I appreciate meeting you”. Little things like that that make a difference. Ever since we were little we treated everybody with the same respect, especially elders, teachers. Normally in our religion it’s the teachers are up there, parents are up there and then your neighbours are up there [gestures at a high level with his hand]. And people don’t tend to do that here. With teachers, especially they don’t do that. You can’t treat your boss like that or they won’t take you seriously.

For that very reason, Zariad, also in his thirties, avoided hiring other Pakistanis. They are highly technically skilled, he said, but they cannot think outside the box. They are afraid to challenge authority. It takes the ‘FOBs’ or those who are ‘Fresh-off-the-Boat’ forever to realize that they do not have to stand up when the boss comes into the room and that they do not have to call him ‘Sir’. ‘This’, he said, ‘goes against the grain of capitalism.’

American-ness also meant being more concerned about the material than the spiritual. In exchange for individual autonomy, you get moral
laxity. Parents and children grow distant. Boys and girls interact from a young age in ways that made many people uncomfortable. There is too much sex, too much alcohol and too much freedom in general.

Finally, American-ness also signifies a certain ignorance about the rest of the world. The United States is so big and powerful, people feel they do not have to pay attention to what goes on outside it. In contrast, even the humblest worker in Pakistan or Brazil has to know what is happening because they come from places too poor and powerless to afford to isolate themselves.

Unlike Pakistan, in the US you don’t care about anything, you are living on this huge island, which has everything, which has every wonderful thing God could create. If there could be an Eden in the world, it would be the US, and I am not talking about the people. It is vast, the skies are bluer, the trees are greener, the mountains are there, the rivers are there, what more could you want? I mean this is the most gorgeous land of all lands. It’s not overpopulated. You have the ultimate life and you have created this wonderful existence in which the individual can strive and succeed. And what is going on in the rest of the world is hunger, poverty, man upon man, the trees are dying, people don’t care. It is true even for Muslims that have moved here or the Pakistanis that have moved here, we become selfish. We are all about creating our own Eden. We don’t care what is happening back there because we have the perfect existence. Now, take people in Europe or in Asia or in Africa. In those countries, the world is very small, they are more aware of what is happening in other countries. But if you talk to a blue-collar worker here, he doesn’t care, he just wants to know what he is doing Friday, what game the Patriots are winning. In Pakistan, you go to any fruit seller or newspaper seller on the street and he will involve you in a long discussion about how to interpret events in Ethiopia.

Even with its individualism and moral permissiveness, however, the overwhelming majority appreciated the United States. They were grateful for the opportunities the country afforded them, stating emphatically that they would not have achieved what they had if they stayed home. Moreover, the beauty of America is, ‘you don’t have to agree with everything, you just have to accept the basic contours’. They felt it was incumbent upon immigrants to adjust and adapt, not the other way around. ‘Islam teaches us to obey the laws of the land where we are living’, 25-year-old Samir told me. ‘If there is a conflict between the national law and Islamic law, it’s the national law that prevails.’
Religion as a path to politics

Most people selectively embraced aspects of American civic and political life. Religion was often the path they followed to get there. Faith communities come equipped with powerful resources and tools that encourage civic activism and shape its outcomes. They bring people into contact with fellow believers who do not all come from the same country. Sometimes, migrants even find themselves sharing a pew with someone who is native-born. They hear sermons and participate in activities that influence how they think about changing the world and shift how they put these into practice. In some cases, as with the Irish and Brazilian Catholics in the United States, religious membership integrates migrants into strong, well-endowed institutions with a great deal of clout. Rather than being mutually exclusive domains, religion and politics speak to each other clearly and often.

‘Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America’, Robert Putnam (2000), p. 66) asserts. His research revealed that nearly half the associational memberships in American were church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character and half of all volunteering occurred in religious contexts.7

Indeed, religious membership was a potent social capital source for the people I talked with, though it often remained within their own communities. For one thing, participating in religious communities taught them political skills. Even when religious institutions did not have explicit political agendas, people learned about fundraising, organizing and leadership by participating, which they then applied to other settings. Information was disseminated and opinions were formed. What happened at the church or mosque strongly influenced how they distributed their time and money between home- and host-country issues.

People who belong to communities where they interact regularly with native-born co-religionists get a crash course in civics. Inishowen, for example, attended mass in English alongside native-born parishioners and led by native and foreign-born priests. Unlike non-English speakers, who often form their own ethnic parish councils, they participated directly in parish governance. They could rattle off a list of things they did at church that they had never done in Inishowen, such as signing petitions or attending a ‘Meet the Candidates Night’. Worshipping next to people from other countries was also an eye-opening experience. Brendan, a 37-year-old migrant put it this way:

You know in Malin everyone is Catholic. Irish and Catholic are synonymous. But here, at St. Michael’s, there are Vietnamese Catholics, and Polish Catholics, and Dominican Catholics. They
all come with their own idea about how to worship and what is right and wrong. It really made me think for the first time, well, maybe the way we do it at home isn’t the only way. It’s been good for us to learn from these other groups and to realize that Catholicism comes in a lot of different flavours.

It hadn’t occurred to most people that going to church could help you find a job or apartment. ‘In Ireland’, according to Dan, a 35-year-old return migrant in Buncrana, ‘we go to church for 45 minutes, and that’s it until next week. The Church and the state are so intertwined, the priests would never say anything against the government. Over in Boston, the priest used to say things and I didn’t always agree. But you had to hand it to him for not being afraid to speak up.’

In addition to providing services, some religious groups actively encourage political participation. The Irish Apostolate/USA, for example, has become something of an advocacy group, working for migrants in the US and Ireland. In 2000, it joined with a coalition of Irish immigration centres across the country to promote immigrant rights. The Irish government stayed in touch with the emigrant community through the Apostolate. ‘When they need to know what is going on’, said Father Mike, ‘they ask a priest.’

The Minister of Foreign Affairs came here three years ago and the Minister for Social Welfare came last year. Any time a President comes, like Mary Robinson or Mary McCalese, they come and talk to us. Mary Robinson came and talked to us at lunch and asked us about the different issues we confront. We also visit Irish prisoners here and we keep the government informed about whether they are being treated properly, what their sentences are, whether they can be sent back home. We are the voice of the immigrant community for the Irish government.

The Apostolate’s priests also see keeping emigrants on the Irish public’s radar screen as part of their job. Father Ronald, who directs its activities from Dublin, worries that people will forget emigrants because, by leaving, they call into question the strength of the Celtic Tiger. ‘But, no matter why they leave’, he said, ‘we still have to look out for them.’

Valadarenses’ religious political socialization keeps them firmly tied to Brazil. Both Protestants and Catholics usually attended Portuguese-language services led by a fellow migrant. Many congregants still sent contributions to the churches they attended before they moved. They remained on the rolls as dues-paying or tithing members. They contributed to projects and campaigns to help Brazilian causes. And
Brazilian politics was the topic of conversation during the coffee hour following Mass. Members of foreign-born led congregations hosted by native-born churches received an intermediary education in US politics. When they interacted with other members, during inter-ethnic services or church-wide events, they learned about the issues facing their communities and how to address them. The greater the contact, the more skilled they became. In contrast, members of stand-alone congregations, with few US ties, were on their own. They had no one to tell them about the lay of the land or to guide their initial forays into it. They gained few political tools by participating in faith communities because they did not know who to reach out to and few reached out to them.

I remember when they were going to tear down the stores on the block where our church was located. We didn’t even know about it because most of us couldn’t speak English. But one Sunday, Sister Flor came in and she told us what was happening. We had no idea what to do, what our rights were, who we should talk to at the Town Hall. Luckily, someone worked with another person from Brazil who had been in Framingham for a long time. He came by and talked to our Pastor about what our options were. He helped us deal with the landlord and to find another home for our church. (Cristina, a 45-year-old from Valadares).

Religious versus political rainbows

But a big question remains. Once people decided what they thought about religion and politics, and acquired skills by participating in faith communities, what did they want to do about it? Their answers not only reflected how social change becomes possible but also where it takes place and who comes along for the ride. They also revealed the ways in which people locate the real and imagined landscapes they inhabit – not only the relative importance of their ancestral homes and their adopted countries, but also their personal accounting of the political and the sacred in relation to each other. The immigrant who cares more about holy sites and shrines makes different kinds of political decisions and has different goals than the person who puts the national flag above all else.

A small group of people saw themselves living first and foremost in a religious landscape where religious institutions prevailed over the political. Pastor Wilson, from the International Church of the Four Square Gospel, is someone who holds this point of view. The world would be a better place, he says, if everyone would just put God first. He does not believe it is his responsibility to encourage his congregation to participate in either US or Brazilian politics. He wants them to
feel as if they belong to Christ’s Kingdom, where they are accountable to God and subject to his laws and teachings. It is not that political citizenship is unimportant. It is that, when people are good Christians, they will automatically be good citizens too.

So when we teach them to be consistent in their faith, they will be, at the same time, good people, good husbands, because they will try to help others, to try to make a difference in their neighbourhoods. They will be concerned about others’ well-being. So it’s not necessary to become legal and become naturalized and so forth. But in the Bible itself, in the way that Christians should be, would be enough for them to be good citizens. . . . There are ways of being in the world that have nothing to do with whether you are Brazilian or whether you are from the US but that have more to do with faith in Christ. I teach my followers that they have a responsibility to all mankind but especially to their fellow Christians. We live in a world where Christ is the king, not George Bush or Fernando Collor.

For these residents of God’s Kingdom, the power of the Prophet, Christ or Pramukh Swami far outweights that of any elected official. It is not hard to decide where to put your loyalty or energy because God always comes first.

If I had to chose, I would say that I try to live my life as if I lived in Swadhyaya country. By that I mean, Dadaji teaches us a whole wonderful set of lessons about how we should conduct ourselves. And I try to really live up to them. I mean, can you really tell me that Prime Minister Singh is a better leader, a more moral person than God? Even Gandhi can’t compete. So, yes, I live in between India and the United States and I try to give back to each country but it’s because I follow God. (Vikram, 45-year-old migrant)

People like Pastor Wilson and Vikram see themselves as living in a religious space and responsible to a religious polity. They are religious global citizens, and the political choices they make and how they act upon them reflect this stance.

But this group is largely outnumbered. For most of the people I spoke with, it was not nearly that simple. They want to live in imagined religious landscapes and real political ones. They want to change the world in confessionals as well as ballot boxes. Their responses to my questions about how they wanted to translate their faith into action fell into three broad categories. Some wanted to put religion first but use it as a platform to help all humankind, some wanted to pursue both religious and political solutions and a number wanted to keep religion out of the picture altogether.
There were people like Pastor Wilson who also put religion before politics but understood this as a call to help people inside and outside their particular communities. This is the politics of ‘inclusive’ religious global citizens. Their faith also matters more to them than their nationality or their ethnicity and it colours the way they vote, donate to charity or volunteer. Their theologies of change, however, are all encompassing. They are about making the world better for everyone, not just people who look or think as they do.

Take 28-year-old Samina, who migrated from Pakistan. She is firmly rooted in a religious map, although her politics extends way beyond those who share the territory. The point, she says, is to interact with other people and ‘get to know what they think and feel’. You change the world by setting a good example.

As an adult, being a Muslim has always mattered more to me than being from Pakistan. And Muslims believe in the Umma, the idea of a worldwide political community. So it’s not a stretch for many of us to feel more connected to Muslims around the world than those who say that they are Pakistanis or Malaysians first. But for me belonging to the Umma means working outside it. By that I mean, that is where I start from but not where I finish. Because I am a Muslim first, I have to care about others. When we help anyone, besides just our own, we set an example of how to change the world.

A second group wants to change the world through religion and politics working hand in hand. The two realms coexist and sometimes even complement each other. They are not inherently contradictory or in competition with one another. Your political views naturally inform the kind of religion you practise and your religious beliefs naturally inform your politics. You can choose to put religion first but always in accordance with secular law, putting the political landscape before its religious counterpart. It is not always easy but you can work it out.

For Ali, a 35-year-old man from Karachi, religion and politics are like two tools in the toolbox of life. Some problems demand religious responses while others are best addressed through political means.

I guess I see myself as a card-carrying member of two communities. I am American and I am a Muslim. As a member of both groups, I have certain obligations and I can expect certain things in return. We have all been worried, after September 11, about Pakistan and about the Muslim community here. Some of us wrote to our Congressman. Some of us gave talks at the local high school. Some of us thought that to defend Muslim rights we should work as Muslims. The mosque became a place where we could organize ourselves and
reach out to the broader community. I chose to work from a religious base because I think that religious problems need religious solutions. But others disagree and do it their own way. Everything helps because we are ultimately all fighting for the same cause.

Similarly, 28-year-old Annie from Inishowen believes religious and political citizenship are perfect complements. Why not, ‘excuse the expression, try killing the bird with several stones?’ she asked. Religion and politics can work together. When you raise your voice in several places at the same time, you are more likely to be heard, she believes.

First and foremost, I am a Catholic. That is the community that matters most to me and that I try to give the most back to. But why not get politicians to help you along the way? Last year, at our church, we worked a lot on school vouchers. A lot of families wanted to be able to send their kids to parochial schools. We organized activities at the Church and with the Archdiocese but we also contacted our local representatives. There’s a long history of that in Boston, you know, of Irishness and Catholicness being the same thing.

For Tayibba, in her forties, you cannot separate religion from politics because Islam is a way of life.

Islam is not just a religion and a belief. It’s a way of life. It affects everything that you do every single day. How you eat, how you talk, how you behave, and not just with fellow Muslims but with everybody else. Understanding everybody else’s ways, the politeness and the fairness, the justice. So for us it’s really about humanity. You cannot separate religious from secular law. You have to find a way to obey Muslim laws and secular laws wherever you live.

And for those who share 40-year-old Aisha’s point of view, the tension between religion and politics is vastly overblown, because we all believe in pretty much the same thing. The religious and the secular are not that different because we all listen to similar channels.

I mean we all believe in one God. A lot of people don’t know this but Prophet Mohammed also taught us that Jesus Christ is also our prophet. We totally believe that Moses was a prophet too. Most of the principles are common. So the principles of humanity, you know, taking care of other people and human rights, it’s the same. To me, these are fundamental human issues that are not necessarily Islamic alone. We should all follow them.
Finally, some people, both the religious and the barely believing among them, simply want to keep religion out of politics. One sector of this last group asserts unconditionally that religion does not define who they are. They admit that some of their traditions have religious roots but they prefer to think of them as cultural. They realize that religion permeates the very air in the places they come from. That is why they are so happy they live in the United States.

I was glad to leave Ireland [said 28-year-old Brian], I mean, Ireland is a lot less religious than it used to be. The Church doesn’t have the same kind of power that it had, say, even ten years ago. But even so, so much of what we do is influenced by Catholicism. How men and women relate to each other, how we think about sexuality, how we think about sin. These roots run very deep and they will take generations to go away. And you see it in politics. A politician can’t go too much against the Church or he’ll have no chance at all. It’s hard to be pro-abortion or pro-gay rights. I think that limits my personal freedom and it limits Ireland. I think that’s one of the reasons why America is farther ahead.

Pakistan [Ismael, in his early fifties, said] has become so religious, you can’t go anywhere without bumping into it. Well, I’m not a very religious person. And I don’t really want anyone telling me what do. Not the President or an Imam. Pakistan would be better off and make more progress, if it went back to the other side of the pendulum and became more secular again. It’s OK for people to be very religious but they should just live and let live.

Brian and Ismael are the first to rattle off a long list of the historical ills religion is responsible for. The world would be a better place, they say, if religion would just stay out of it.

But there are others, like 39-year-old Ronaldo, from Valadares, who call themselves believers and yet still want faith to remain outside the political fray. When they talk about their lives and what matters to them, religion looms large. They just do not feel the need to wear it on their sleeve or to advertise it to everyone. In fact, they think it is better for people to keep their beliefs to themselves. If your faith influences how you vote or the kinds of community projects you are involved in, that is OK, but not everyone needs to know about it.

I consider myself to be a very religious person. I mean, I spend three, four nights a week at my church. It is the centre of our family’s life. But I still think that religion and politics should be separate. If I choose to live according to my faith, that is one thing. But if the government tries to make me do that, it’s another. That’s where we
run into problems. Religion should play a minimal role in politics. It certainly needs to be kept under control.

Can religion a humanist make?

Kant imagined a global society whose members belonged to a single community bound by a universal morality (Vertovec and Cohen 2003). While he recognized that difference, and even nations, would persist, he believed cooperation was possible because a shared global ethic would produce uniformity and consensus. Kant’s cosmopolitans, however, were rootless. They felt no particular loyalty or responsibility towards their compatriots, co-religionists or co-ethnics because they had no affinity to any one group. This bourgeois elite benefited from everywhere and contributed nowhere, to everyone’s detriment.

While contemporary globalization has reawakened hopes of increased humanitarianism, many researchers and activists automatically assume that religion cannot play a role in its achievement. Recent discussions of cosmopolitanism recognize that local distinctions will persist, but that they should be tempered by general ethical constraints such as a respect for basic human rights. While, in theory, cosmopolitanism seeks an allegiance to humanity writ large, in reality everyone belongs to social groups, networks and culture. In other words, like the individuals described here, every contemporary cosmopolitan is somehow rooted somewhere. Each individual cobbles together his or her own combination of universal and particularistic ethnic, national and religious elements (Calhoun 2002).

Thus Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998) describes the ‘cosmopolitan patriot’, whose concern for his homeland does not prevent him from ‘caring for lives nearer by’. His cosmopolitan patriots live in a world of increasing transnational exchanges, in which local cultural practices migrate, influence and are influenced by new settings. This ‘persistent process of cultural hybridization’ creates a rooted cosmopolitan who is ‘attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but [takes] pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people’. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum writes of the student in America who ‘may continue to regard herself as in part defined by her particular loves – for her family, for her religious and/or ethnic and/or racial community or communities but who must also, and centrally, learn to recognize humanity wherever she encounters it’ (1996, p. 9).

This understanding of cosmopolitanism is less an ideology than an attitude, that is compatible with many subjective experiences (Werbner 2002). And it is no longer, if it ever was, the exclusive province of the elite. Labour migrants, sojourners and refugees are also open to the world, although they interact with it differently than their professional
counterparts (Hannerz 1996; Ong and Nonnini 1997). Cultural mixing occurs for both groups but it produces different kinds of results.

Noticeably absent is religion. Religious groups have rarely been seen as instances of cosmopolitanism or as inspiring their members to look beyond their own club. Political theorists from John Stuart Mill to Ernest Gellner summarily concluded that religious allegiances automatically produced parochialism, absolutism and intolerance. But, if nationalism and patriotism can sometimes inspire humanitarianism, why can religion not do the same?

Van der Veer (2002) convincingly argues that linking religion to cosmopolitanism is not automatically mistaken. Liberals and secularists often assume it is, because some religious groups are hard at work trying to convince the rest of us of their absolute truth. But there are also many cases where constructive dialogue and discussion takes place, where religious communities not only inspire but demand that their members look beyond their own walls. I found that, within the same religious community, some members tried to impose their view on non-members and others willingly compromised and listened. Hot button issues, like abortion and the death penalty, sparked heated responses but most people cared much more about basic issues like education, the environment, housing and jobs. Their definition of a good society was not so different from how people define it around the world.

Students of citizenship are also struggling to understand how people balance the competing demands of the multiple communities they belong to. They want to know how people claim rights in a public sphere that stretches beyond the nation-state. They distinguish between liberal and republican concepts of citizenship. The first sees citizenship as a legal position, or as full membership in a formal political community. The second views citizenship as a desirable activity, the extent and quality of which depends on how much a person participates (Kymlicka and Norman 1994). My notion of religious citizenship draws upon the latter.

When we talk about citizenship, we are also talking about identity. How people think of themselves, racially, ethnically or religiously, strongly influences how they see themselves as citizens, how they perceive their rights and obligations and how they participate in the public sphere and why (Isin and Wood 1999; Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999).

Both republican and liberal versions of citizenship share certain assumptions about the relationship between citizenship and identity. They both see it as universal, and the individual or group as particular, and locate citizenship at the level of the nation-state. Such a view artificially separates citizenship and identity and assumes that each individual and group understands, experiences and practises citizenship
in the same way. But identity, Chantal Mouffe (1992) argues, is ‘an ensemble of subject positions’ (such as female, Hindu, Gujarati and Bhagat). Its dimensions mutually shape each other such that Hindu women and Evangelical Christian women understand being female differently. During a particular struggle, one dimension of identity prevails. Its other dimensions are defined in relation to that predominant position.

Each individual, then, experiences and expresses different forms of citizenship (Isin and Wood 1999). A woman expresses a form of social-gendered citizenship when she demands changes in health service provision and a form of global economic citizenship when she demands changes in WTO trade policies (Jones and Gaventa 2002). Seen in this way, citizens have a different relationship of belonging, action and accountability with the many different institutions that influence their lives (Isin and Wood 1999). The individual participates in and makes claims at various sites and levels of social interaction. The same person is included on the basis of one status and excluded on the basis of another.

Again, though religion is rarely a part of these discussions, some migrants clearly claim religious global citizenship. They see themselves as embedded in a religious landscape, the Kingdom of God or the Umma, which supersedes its political counterpart. The religious global citizenship they embrace mirrors the logic of political citizenship. It comes with rights, such as representation and protection, and responsibilities, like paying dues, obeying the rules, and participating actively.

Religious global citizenship has an exclusive and an inclusive variety. It inspires some to care only for the members of their own community, while it inspires others to care for people all over the world. Some migrants entered the political arena through religious channels. They acquired information, skills and contacts at church or at the mosque that then informed their political and civic lives. Theirs was a religiously infused politics.

Automatically dismissing religion as a potential catalyst for cosmopolitanism or progressive activism is not only bad social science. It is also a case of missed opportunities – of failing to recognize and harness powerful social change resources. Religion is alive and well in the public sphere. It is not going away. While some embrace the politics of inclusive religious citizenship, many others are potential partners, willing to seek common ground on basic issues like jobs and schools. In the United States, the religious right has monopolized religion for its own purposes for nearly three decades. Given the current state of affairs, that is no longer an option.
Notes

2. See Levitt (2007) for an in-depth discussion of the study sample and methodology.
3. With the exception of Brazil where there has been a national debate about racial harmony.
7. On the potential for religious social capital to operate beyond the boundaries of the church, see Corwin Smidt’s (2003) edited volume on religion as social capital, particularly chapters by Warren (2003), Wood (2003) and Nemeth and Luiden (2003).
8. Fox (2005) makes a useful distinction between ‘transnational’ citizenship and ‘global’ citizenship. The former is membership in political communities that are not limited to states. These are cross-border communities that are not global in scope. It can also refer to bi-national or bi-local relationships that are quite bound in terms of specific political communities (not necessarily nation-states). Cosmopolitan citizenship does not necessarily have a cross-border dimension, in terms of either community membership or rights.
9. For civic republican thinkers, citizenship is the overarching civic identity produced by and productive of a sense of belonging to a particular nation-state (Habermas 1998). For liberal thinkers, citizenship denotes formal membership in a nation-state, an identity, which is universally defined in order to promote formal equality in rights and obligations for all (Jones and Gaventa 2002).

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