Perceptions about immigrants play a much greater role in the alleged U.S. culture wars than actual facts. Having limited experience with Muslims, Hindus, or Evangelicals who don’t speak English, many people automatically assume that the non-Christian newcomer holds beliefs that will destroy the American fabric. But when we listen to immigrants’ voices what do we actually hear? This article presents findings from a study of South Asian Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, and Protestant immigrants living in the metropolitan Boston area that examined religious life across borders and its influence on civic engagement. Newcomers do come from countries where ideas about how to manage diversity and expectations about inter-group relations differ from those in the United States. They bring different notions about the relationship between church and state. They have very strong, mostly negative opinions about politics. But what they wanted to do about it was not that different from most of the people already living in this country. Their vision of a good society and their practice of faith within it have a lot in common with that of many Americans.

Key Words: Religion and Politics, Transnationalism, Migrant Religion, US Religion, Culture War, Civil Sphere
The United States is gripped by debates over morality, liberty, and identity (Hunter 1991; Wolfe 1998; Wuthnow 2004; Baker 2005). In its most dramatic telling, those on the Right of the fault line want to let religion loose in the workplace, school, and political arena. People on the Left want to lock religion up and throw away the key. But these debates have yet to acknowledge dramatic social changes. Antagonists on both sides are operating according to assumptions that do not accurately reflect the world we live in. The majority of Americans think that once immigrants arrive, they abandon their ties to their homelands, or at least that they should. Most people have limited experience with Muslims, Hindus, or Evangelicals who don’t speak English. They automatically assume these people are terrorists, fundamentalists, or that they hold such different beliefs they will either destroy the American fabric or shift it too far to the right.

This article presents findings from a study of transnational migration and religion in four immigrant communities based on interviews with 247 individuals living in the Boston Metropolitan area including Muslims from Pakistani, 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 50 family members and friends in each of the communities migrants come from (Levitt 2007). One of the goals of this study was to understand the kinds of identities migrants claim and how they
want to act on them. How did these potential citizens of the world actually think about who they are and what did they want to do about it? How does religion figure into the rights and responsibilities of global citizenship and where they are fulfilled?

My conversations revolved around several related questions. I first asked about people about their assumptions about inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations, the relationship between church and state, and their expectations about politics in general, based on their experiences in their homelands. I then asked them to talk about how they envisioned a good society and how we should go about creating one. What constitutes good citizenship? What does it mean to be an American? What did they think the appropriate role of religion in public life to be? Next, our conversations turned to the relationship between politics and religion. How did religion help incorporate them into the political and civic life of the U.S. and their homelands? How did their faith shape their political views and choices?

What I heard rarely conformed to what the proponents on either side of the culture wars suggest. Newcomers do come from countries where ideas about how to manage diversity and expectations about inter-group relations differ from those in the United States. They do bring different notions about the relationship between church and state. They have very strong, mostly negative, opinions about politics. But what they wanted to do about it was not that different from most of the people already living in the United States. Their vision of a good society and their practice of faith within it have a lot in common with that of many Americans. There are both extreme conservatives and extreme liberals but most people fall somewhere in between. Hot button issues like abortion or the death penalty inspire passionate debates, in the same way they do among
the native-born. However, most people are much more concerned about the same bread and butter issues, such as health care, jobs, and education, we all care about. In general, new immigrants steady the American religious boat rather than rock it.

**Managing Diversity: Living Side by Side, Church and State, and Politics**

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 preexisting 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 drawers; in others, it’s a case of a round peg in 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 minorities. Rule-makers, having always been in charge, can’t 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 that as a way to demonstrate they are American. Their Hindu ness, Catholicism, or Muslimness is untouchable because they come from places where most of the people they interacted with each day 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 introduces her children.

Immigrants’ presumptions about public life, and the cognitive file folders 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. France, he argued, characterized ethnic relations in terms of republican ideas of *citoyenneté* and *intégration*. The British discussed similar issues in terms of managing race relations and fostering multiculturalism. These differences were rooted in distinct national ‘philosophies of integration’, based on different understandings of civil and political membership, nationality, and pluralism. Each country has its own ‘public philosophy’ that emerges from this shared set of ideas, cultural symbols, and language.

The migrants in this story move from countries with very different philosophies of integration than those that prevail in place in the United States. Different expectations about relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and about how much newcomers or minorities can ultimately become part of ‘us’ are also at play. Their homelands were not founded by immigrants. Their national story has not been about incorporating newcomers. Nor is it
about living somewhere where there is no official state church. They have 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 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 fifteen per cent of the population. They lived in villages or neighborhoods strictly segregated by caste and religion, and they couldn’t recall 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 clearly 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, although it quickly changed back since, as one gentleman reminded me, ‘the rest of world was open for business on Fridays’. While officially a secular model of government, the state actively regulates religious life, in no small part, because Islamist parties favoring the creation of a theocratic state have gained power over the last decade. *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, was an evangelical preacher and popular governor from Rio de Janeiro, just one of many Pentecostals claiming a place in Brazilian politics since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1988. 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). When the new constitution was drafted in 1988, Protestants actively opposed giving Catholics a disproportionate influence over the national calendar, philanthropic laws, or use of public space.

India’s Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) ascension to power beginning in 1998 also signaled 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 purposefully failing to bring the perpetrators to justice. In fact, the U.S. government denied Chief Minister Modi a visa in 2005 because of his alleged support of terrorist activities. Some people see religious groups such as the ISSO (International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization), BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri
Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha), and Swadhyaya as fueling this fundamentalist Neo-Hindu agenda.

In general, the people I talked with deeply distrusted politics, whether or not it was accompanied by a stiff dose of religion. You shouldn’t, they warned me, ‘come near a politician with a ten-foot pole’. They used phrases like ‘useless’, ‘inefficient’, and ‘rotten to the core’, over and over, to describe their governments. If the state couldn't provide basic services like health and education, how could it run fair elections? And why did it care so much about them now when it never paid any attention to them before they migrated? Many people thought it was a complete waste of time to participate in homeland politics; they were not so sure about U.S. politics either. ‘Brazilians have become inoculated against politician’s promises’, Gilberto in Valadares told me. ‘Why should we vote, when each government is worse then the next?’ he lamented. To believe in the political system, and to feel that political participation was worth their while, would be an uphill battle.

A ‘Good Society’

Given this background, immigrants might be expected to import worldviews antithetical to those in the United States. Those who predict that newcomers will only fuel the cultural fires may be right. But when I talked with people about what they wanted for themselves and their children and what their rights and responsibilities were, these differences largely disappeared. While they recognize they use different file drawers in their home countries, most people feel it is their responsibility to adjust to those they encountered in the United States. For them, homeland dreams and American dreams are not that far apart.
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 25 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 they are not realized in one’s own country (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Esmer 2003; Inglehart and Baker 2000; PEW Research Center 2002). A worldview commonly associated with the ‘Protestant Ethic’, for example, which embraces trust, respect, hard work, and determination, is prevalent throughout the East and 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. Neighbors 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 don’t benefit from directly. Freedom of religion and speech are guaranteed. Moreover, in an ideal society, the 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 that racial and class differences were inevitable. Certain people are natural achievers. They
have the ability to do more so they get more. ‘Even five children of the same parents are not equal’, Didiji, the leader of the Hindu Swadhyaya community, said. ‘You can feel emotional oneness but you cannot expect intellectual or economic equality’. Most people were not particularly concerned that some people do better than others. It’s one thing if a group is extremely disadvantaged but it is just the way things are when one group gets a better deal than the rest.

Creating Good Societies – What’s 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 getting us there. They used their faith to construct theologies of change, or their ideas about how to make the world a better place. It was their guide for how to put these ideas into practice. It influences when and where they participate civically and politically and who the beneficiaries are.

Many people said that to achieve a good society, you need good citizens, which represented different things to different people. For John Doherty, born in Inishowen, and now in his seventies, living in the United States, being a good citizen is the same anywhere. It is about neighborliness. ‘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. When asked to describe a good citizen, he answered, ‘Do you have a couple of hours?’
There was a Jewish psychologist, who had been, I'm not too sure, in one of the prison camps, Dachau or whatever, Erich Fromm. He spent a number of years in this country after World War II and he was interviewed as he was leaving New York City. One of the points he made in that talk was that corresponding to the Statue of Liberty there should be a Statue of Responsibility in San Francisco Bay. Because you don't have real freedom without responsibility. He said the stress, the accentuation that freedom receives, is good. But it needs to be counterbalanced with its counterpart - responsibility. Today, people try to get off, claiming guilt or anything, simply because they do not want to own up to the fact that they're responsible for their actions…Being a citizen is an honor and a privilege. It gives me rights but it also gives me duties. I'm not too sure people think about citizenship that way, that it's a privilege, it's an honor to be an American and it's an honor to contribute to making it a better country and making all of us a better people.

Most people believed religion had a role to play in making a good society a reality, even if it hadn’t 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. Most people think that religious leaders wield a positive influence. In fact, Norris and Inglehart (2004, p. 17) question the actual the feasibility of a cultural separation of church and state. ‘The distinctive worldviews 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’. Indeed, in the United States, the separation of ‘church and state’ has not, even after two hundred 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%) favor 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 don’t have religion, many people asked, how do you know what is right and wrong? It is the ethical baseline in a world where, too often, selfishness and greed 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 naïve.

Cathleen, a migrant from Inishowen in her forties, agrees.

I’m a pretty religious person but I tend to keep it to myself. I don’t feel like I have to advertise in public how important my faith is to me in my daily life. But it is. I would say that I try to think about God in everything I do, every time I open my mouth. If people think I’m a good person and that I give back to my community, they don’t realize it’s because of my faith. I’m not trying to make everyone else believe what I believe. I’m just centering my own life based on my own beliefs. So, you see, you can be religious and not make everyone else be. You can live out your beliefs and not make everyone else follow.

Given religion free reign, people admitted, was not without problems. Politicians often misuse faith for their own purposes -- it’s 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 didn’t really influence everyday life. There were folks who wanted to obey the Qur’an strictly but they didn’t 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.

When I left the country, religion was a side issue. And that’s how my family lived, and really, the whole country lived like that. And now when
you go back, although I know it's just a small percentage, religion dominates the place so much that everybody, it’s not everybody, but the aura is like, it’s become a religious state, and that bothers me a lot.

Gabriela, a forty-five year woman from Valadares, also has no inherent problem with religion. She just wants it to stay within certain limits.

    I really don't have a problem with religion. It's the imposition of religion that is bothersome. And I'm beginning to see that a lot. So wearing the hijab, there's nothing wrong if you wear it by choice. It's when France tries to stop it that it bothers me. At the same time, when I see little girls bogged down by those long robes in parts of the Middle East and the boys are wearing shorts and running around, I say you are handicapping that girl to begin with. Her role in life is defined. So that doesn't feel fair to me either.

    The idea is to distinguish between the public politics of religious communities and its individual members’ beliefs. This was especially important to Gujaratis who worried about the people who hold NRIs responsible for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India. But most people adamantly opposed such projects. It didn’t mean that they were particularly fond of Muslims. Old prejudices and hurts die hard. But that was not the reason they were Swaminarayan or Swadhyaya, and this was not what their faith was intended for.

    I know that a lot of people think that Pramukh Swami and Dadaji are good friends with the RSS. There are a lot of rumors about the tons of money NRIs send back to India to help these groups. I don’t know if this is true
or not. There is probably something to it. But that’s not why I am here. In fact, I hate that my religious community has that reputation. It seems to me the worst kind of perversion. Do I wish that Indian society did a better job of living up to Hindu values? Yes. But does that mean that I want to kick all the Muslims out of our country? No. But we can’t always control what our leaders do or what the public thinks about us. We can only stay true to our own personal faith (Raj Bhatt, 46 year old, Gujarati immigrant).

**Americanness – What’s unique about it?**

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 to my question. They didn’t always agree with all the values they found here, or unconditionally adopt the entire package, but they respected America. They also felt it was their job to get with the American program 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 neighbors and being able to determine autonomously 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 pajamas 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. A number of respondents believe that America honors 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 is it 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 practice 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 they came into contact with. That was, in part, because that was where they had the most contact with the native-born. Work or school was also two of the few places immigrants inhabited where American values predominated. And Americanness received high marks. You move up because of your ability, not your connections. Rules are made to be followed, not simply disregarded every time the boss disagrees. It’s not that America isn’t corrupt, respondents told me, but it is nothing compared to India or Brazil.

Americanness, though, comes with a price. Francisco, from Valadares, in his early thirties, clearly recognizes 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 Americanness 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 neighbors 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, avoids hiring other Pakistanis. They are highly technically skilled, he said, but they can’t think outside the box. They’re afraid to challenge authority. It takes the ‘FOBs’ or those who are ‘Fresh-off-the-Boat’ forever to realize that they don't have to stand up when the boss comes into the room and that they don’t have to call him ‘sir’. ‘This’, he said, ‘goes against the grain of capitalism’.
American-ness also means 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 don’t have to pay attention to what goes on outside it. In contrast, even the humblest worker in Pakistan or Brazil has to know what’s happening because they come from places too poor and powerless to afford to isolate themselves.

Unlike Pakistan, in the U.S. 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 U.S., 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 slackness, however, the overwhelming majority appreciated the United States. They were grateful for the opportunities this country afforded them, emphatically stating they would not have achieved what they did if they stayed home. Moreover, the beauty of America is, ‘If you don’t have to agree with everything, you just have to accept the basic contours; when you live in Rome, you should live basically like Romans’. They felt it is 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’, twenty-five 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 Pathway to Americanness and Politics

Most people, therefore, admired American culture and embraced aspects of it selectively. They wanted to be part of this country’s civic life and 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 don’t all come from the same country. Sometimes, they even find themselves sitting in the same pew as the native-born. Migrants hear
sermons and attend programs that influence how they think about changing the world. Their experiences in religious communities influence how they put these into practice. In some cases, as with the Irish and Brazilian Catholics in the United States, it also integrates them into influential, well-endowed institutions with a great deal of clout. Rather than being mutually exclusive domains, then, religion and politics speak to one another -- clearly and often.

When people interact with each other, in their neighborhoods, at work, or when they drink coffee after worship, they create ‘social capital’ – or the various enabling and empowering resources generated by social relations, including trust, norms and reciprocity (Putnam 2000). Connections created by faith are by far the most power social capital generators. ‘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.

But, as Putnam and others warn, not all social capital is created equal (Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen 2003; Portes and Landolt 1996; Hardwick 2003). Certain forms of ‘bonding’ social capital, which builds internal connections, can keep marginalized groups isolated. People develop norms of reciprocity and trust among others in their own network, but that doesn’t necessarily translate into building bridges toward the mainstream. Thus, the age-old story about immigrant churches helping members acclimate to the United States, as well as stay connected to their homelands (in other words, providing ‘bridging ‘social capital) is sometimes incomplete (Curry 2003;
Halpern 2005). There has to be a sufficient combination of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital for these relations to develop.

Indeed, religious membership was a potent source of social capital for the people I spoke with. For one thing, participating in religious communities taught them political skills. Even when religious institutions don’t have an explicit political agenda, people learn about fundraising, organizing, and leadership by participating in faith communities which they then apply to other settings (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; DeSipio 2002). Information is disseminated and opinions are formed. What happens at the church or mosque strongly influences how people distribute their time and money between home and host-country issues.

People belonging to communities where they interact regularly with native-born co-religionists get a crash course in Civics. Inishoweners, for example, often attend Mass in English alongside native-born parishioners, 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, like signing petitions or attending a ‘Meet the Candidates Night’, that they had never done in Inishowen. Worshipping next to people from other countries was also an eye-opening experience. Brendan, a thirty-seven-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 flavors.

It hadn’t occurred to most people to think about church as a place to find a job or an apartment. ‘In Ireland’, according to Dan, a thirty-five 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 members’ political participation. The Irish Apostolate/USA, for example, has become something of an advocacy group, working for migrants in the US, the UK, and Ireland. In 2000, it joined with a coalition of US-based Irish Immigration Centers to promote immigrants’ rights. The Irish government stays 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 the Apostolate’s 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’.

Often, the social capital produced in religious contexts remained within their own communities, ‘bonding’ them to the familiar. For example, Valadarenses’ religious political socialization keeps them firmly tied to Brazil. Both Protestants and Catholics I interviewed usually attend services led by a Brazilian-born leader, conducted in Portuguese. Many congregants still send contributions to the churches they attended before migrating. They remain on the rolls as dues-paying or tithing members. They contribute to projects and campaigns that help Brazilian causes. They discuss Brazilian politics over coffee following weekly services.

Members of foreign-born led congregations that are hosted by native-born churches receive an intermediary education in U.S. politics. When they interact with other members, during inter-ethnic services or at all-church events, they learn about the issues facing their communities and how to address them. The greater the contact, the more skilled they become. In contrast, members of stand-alone congregations, with few U.S. ties, are on their own. They have no one to help them map out the ‘lay of the land’ or to guide their initial forays into it. They gain few political tools by participating in faith communities because they do not know whom to reach out to, and few outsiders reach 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 forty-five year old from Valadares).

**Religious vs. Political Landscapes**

But a big question remains. Once people decide what they think about religion and politics, and acquire civic skills by participating in faith communities, what do they want to do about it? Their answers not only reflect how they think about making the world a better place but also suggest who gets to come along for the ride. And they reveal how people map out the real and imagined landscapes they inhabit – their personal accounting of the relative weight of the political and sacred and where each stands in relation to the other. The immigrant who cares more about places of pilgrimage or holy sites and shrines makes different types of political decisions and embraces different goals than the person who raises the national flag first and foremost.

**Religious Global Citizens**

A small group of people saw themselves living within a landscape where religious institutions prevail over the political. They tended to be Religious Global Citizens, though
there were some among them who embraced ethnicity or cosmopolitanism as the predominant force shaping their identity. Religious Global Citizens see themselves, above all, as belonging to communities of faith that include fellow believers around the world. Religious citizenship entails rights and duties that complement, supplement, and sometimes contradict other forms of belonging, but for this group, religious rules matter most.⁹

Pastor Wilson, from the International Church of the Four Square Gospel, is an example of someone who puts the religious landscape first. He believes that the world would be a better place if everyone was a Religious Global Citizen. He doesn’t believe it’s his responsibility to convince the members of his congregation to participate in U.S. or Brazilian politics. He wants them to feel that they belong to Christ’s Kingdom, where they are accountable to God and subject to his laws and teachings. It’s not that political citizenship is unimportant. It’s that when people are good Christians, they will 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 neighborhoods. They will be concerned about other's 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 U.S. 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 residents of God's Kingdom, the power of the Prophet, Christ, or Pramukh Swami far outweighs that of any elected official. It’s not difficult to decide where to put your loyalty or energy because God always wins.

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 Luis and Vikram see themselves as living in a religious space and responsible to a religious polity. Their political choices and how they act on them reflect this stance. Zara, a 37-year-old woman from Gujarat, agrees.

I know that some people turn to politicians when they have a problem. Well, I turn to Pramukh Swami. I don't need politics because I have the Swaminarayan community. I don't know anyone in our community who has gone to a government office when they couldn't pay the doctor or they lost their job. Here or in Gujarat, we turn to each other. Now, if you are not a member in-good-standing, people are not going to help you. But if
you come regularly, contribute, and volunteer, then you have the right to
get help. If you are a good citizen of our community, then you will be
treated that way (Zara Baghat, 37-year-old Gujarati woman).

The protagonists at either extreme of America’s alleged culture wars fear this kind
of individual. They are too religious for people on the Left, who fear they will
undermine the secular public sphere. People on the Right probably admire their religious
fervor but dislike that it’s Hindu or Muslim flavored, or even ‘Made in Brazil’.

But this group is largely outnumbered. For most 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 and ballot boxes everywhere.
Their responses to my questions about how they wanted to translate their faith into action
feel into three broad categories. Some wanted to put religion first but use it as a platform
to help all humankind. Others wanted to pursue both religious and political solutions.
And a small proportion wanted to keep religion out of it altogether.

There were people like Pastor Wilson or Vikram, who put religion before politics,
but who heard that as a call to help people both inside and outside their communities.
This is the politics of inclusive Religious Global Citizens. Their faith also matters more
to them than the nation or the ethnic group, and it colors how they vote, give to charity,
or volunteer. But their theologies of change are all encompassing. They are about
making the world better for everyone, not just people who look or think like they do.

Take twenty-eight year old Samina, who migrated from Pakistan. She is firmly
rooted on religious ground, although her politics extends well 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.

Forty-year-old Teresa, from Valadares, feels the same way. She believes you make the world better by getting to know people, sharing with them, and then potentially changing them and/or being changed yourself in response. She belongs to a congregation in Framingham, hosted by a Congregationalist Church with many gay and lesbian members. She recalled many difficult conversations among the members of her church about how they should interact with their hosts. Some members rejected the idea of praying alongside homosexuals out-of-hand. They declined invitations to attend bilingual services and left to join other congregations. At first, the pastor agreed. But as he got to know his hosts better, he changed his mind.

I remember the day he gave a sermon on just that topic. He said Christ taught us about unconditional love, and that means unconditional. We might change someone by getting to close to them or we might be changed
ourselves. That was a very difficult thing for me because we had always been taught, and taught others for that matter, that homosexuality was the ultimate sin. But I decided to go. What he said made sense to me. Besides they were reaching out to us, they wanted to love us. It would have been unchristian not to respond. And once homosexuality had a human face, I couldn’t really hate them anymore. I might not agree with how they lived their lives but they were fine, honest people. Some of our members left our church. They couldn’t get used to the idea. But many of us stayed and became very close friends. I was very sad to leave that church when I came back here.

She finally realized that she had changed as much as she changed others, and that was exactly the point. Her faith, she said, had inspired her to reach out beyond her ‘comfort zone’, and God had rewarded her with this unexpected gift.

‘One Bird – Two Stones’

A second group wants to change the world through religion and politics. For them, the two realms co-exist and sometimes even complement each other. They’re not inherently contradictory or in competition with one another. Your political views naturally inform the kind of religion you practice 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’s not always easy, they admit, but you can work it out.
For Ali, a thirty-five-year old man from Karachi, religion and politics are like two tools from the same tool box. 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 11th, 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.

Twenty-eight-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 asks? Religion and politics work together. When you raise your voice in several places at the same time, you’re more likely to be heard.

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 can’t 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.

Admittedly, tensions arise when you try to be true to your faith within a secular society. Anna, a sixty-four year old Valadarense, must take time off from work to prepare herself spiritually for Easter because in the United States, people normally work during Holy Week. Ahmed, in his forties, asked his boss to let him pray in an empty office and to take breaks during prayer times. When his former boss wouldn’t agree, he quit. Others reasoned away the conflict between the secular and the religious. They acknowledged the inconsistencies but sought ways to resolve them. Time and time again in my conversations, people brought up Muslim adultery laws as an example of beliefs that have been tragically misunderstood. Samir Nasrullah, a thirty-five year old Pakistani, described it as follows
You know, we talk about having the right to this and the right to that. In Islam, it is the reverse. Before you get rights, the first thing is duty. So, for example, you have a duty to protect people from harm. If you see someone being oppressed, whether it’s a Christian or another Muslim, it is your job to protect the person and allow him to practice his religion. People talk a lot about this issue of adultery and they say Islam is such a barbaric religion because if someone is an adulterer you stone them to death. But you have to remember that this is also tied to a burden of proof that is so heavy, it can never be met. You have to have four witnesses who actually witnessed the sexual act. The only way that something like that would happen is that you either invite people into your house or you are doing it in the street like a prostitute. So the issue is what you do in the privacy of your home is nobody's business. But the moment you start to do something in public, it affects the entire community. And because in Islam, things like adultery are considered to be sinful acts that have a great consequence, the level of punishment is very severe, but then on the other hand, the burden of proof is so severe. It is a system of checks and balances.

From people like forty-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’re all tuned in to a similar channel.
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.

Likewise, Claire, a sixty-plus Inishowener says,

I think no matter what religion you are, it’s the same, if you're a Baptist, Protestant, Presbyterian, or a Catholic. Oh God, I just hope you have some religion. I think we're all the same as long as you believe in God. Religion is really about how you treat others more than how many times you get down on your knees and pray. It's much more important to help people than to say the rosary every night.

Finally, some people, the religious and the barely-believing among them, want to keep religion out of politics. One part of this 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 air in the places they come from. That’s why they’re so happy it’s not that way in the United States. ‘I was glad to leave Ireland’, said twenty-eight 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 okay for people to be very religious but they should just live and let live.

Brian and Ismael can easily reel off a long list of the historical ills religion is responsible for perpetrating. The world would be a better place, they say, if religion would ‘just stay out of it’.

But there are others, like Priya, from Gujarat, and Ronaldo, from Valadares, who call themselves believers, 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 simply don’t feel the need to wear it on their sleeves or to advertise it to everyone. In fact, they think it’s better for people keep their beliefs to themselves. If your faith influences how you vote or the kinds of community projects you’re involved in, that’s okay, but everyone
else doesn’t need to know about it. Ronaldo, a 39-year-old migrant from Valadares, related,

I consider myself to be a very religious person. I mean, I spend three, four nights a week at my church. It is the center of our family’s life. But I still think that religion and politics should be separate. If I chose 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 (Ronaldo, 39-year-old migrant from Valadares)

Priya says that even though she has become more observant since she came to the United States, it hasn’t changed her mind about the need to keep religion and politics apart.

‘Look at Gujarat’, she says, ‘so much bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims. That is not what God intended. I don’t want a group of Swamis telling the rest of us how to live our lives. That totally distorts my faith for political purposes’.

The Bottom Line

What does all this add up to? In the current climate, perceptions about immigrants play a much greater role in the ‘culture wars’ than actual, empirical facts. Many people fear the non-Christian newcomer without ever having talked to her. But if we listen to immigrant voices, what do we actually hear? Do they exacerbate or assuage these conflicts?

If the voices expressed here are any indication, incorporating immigrants into national debates is not likely to shift the arguments considerably in either direction.

People from all four of the faith traditions represented in my sample articulated views spanning the political spectrum, from the very liberal to the very conservative. What they
said echoes the variety of opinions expressed by native-born Americans. Americans’
general beliefs and values, as well as their views on controversial moral issues, such as
abortion, the death penalty, gays and lesbians, and gender quality, do not vary
significantly based on whether they are an immigrant or not (GSS Cumulative Datafile
1972-2000; GSS 2004; Etzioni 2004). Factors such as age, how often you attend church
and your level of religious commitment have a much higher impact on beliefs and values
than ethnic or religious divisions. A much higher percentage of ‘highly-committed’
individuals believe ‘churches should express views on political matters’ (73% vs. 59%),
for instance, then the differences between Catholics and Mainline Protestants (46% vs.
43%) or Whites and Hispanics (50% vs. 53%). In fact, practicing Protestants’ views are
strikingly similar to those of Catholics (Jones 2005). Immigrants, then, are potential
partners on all sides of these debates.

In the end, I found, of course, individuals who want us all to believe as they do,
but they have plenty of good company among native-born Americans. And those I spoke
with who want religion to dominate public life will also find strong support from certain
native-born corners. But I heard countless responses, even among those who hold faith
dear, that clearly exhibit tolerance and respect for other people’s choices. They may want
to live their faith in a particular way, but they don’t expect everyone else to join them.
Rather than having their minds made up before the conversation begins, they are
struggling to figure out what they want to say and what they want to do about religion,
politics, and the struggle for a ‘good society’. Hot button issues, like homosexuality or
abortion, evoke heated responses from all sides. But most people are much more
concerned about education, healthcare, and responsible government, not only for
United States, but also the places they come from. Their vision of a good society looks a lot like the pictures painted by people from California to Kalamazoo.

Notes

1 This article is based on Levitt’s book, God Needs No Passport: How Immigrants are Changing the American Religious Landscape, forthcoming from The New Press, 2007.

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3 Although, in 1991, an overwhelming ninety-two per cent of the Irish population was Roman Catholic, Inishoweners’ ‘troubles’ with their Protestant neighbors were clearly on their minds, and came up frequently in our interviews, particularly because so many
families had been directly affected by them. Gujarat, where Muslims represent only 10-15 per cent of the population, was the site of major communal violence in 1969, 1992, 1998 and, again, in 2002. While sectarian violence between Sunni and Shi’aa Muslims is what ails Pakistan of late, the specter of Hindu India still looms large.


7 The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, also known simply as the *Sangh*, is translated from the Sanskrit as the ‘National Volunteers' Union’.


9 I purposefully use the term ‘citizenship’, although I know many will disagree. The legal definition of citizenship refers to a formal membership status in a self-governing political community with rights and obligations, from which non-members are excluded. Accordingly, there are serious economic and political limitations that religious citizenship cannot redress for undocumented migrants. Moreover, religious institutions do not command the same authority and legitimacy as the state. I insist on the citizenship metaphor, however, to make an important point. I am primarily concerned with migrants’ subjective identity choices rather than with how institutional arrangements constrain their ability to act on what they think and feel. Most importantly, those who claim religious citizenship understand it to operate similarly to its political counterpart. They use similar words and analogies to describe both two membership categories. The political limits to religious citizenship does not prevent them from equating the two.
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