Helen Rose Ebaugh

TRANSNATIONALITY AND RELIGION IN IMMIGRANT CONGREGATIONS: THE GLOBAL IMPACT

Abstract

The subfield of religion and the new immigrants in the American context has evolved through three major stages. In the first stage researchers focused on ways in which immigrant congregations facilitated the adaptation of immigrants into a new society. The second stage expanded the analyses to take into account religious influences between home and host countries, with the realization that most immigrants maintain ties in both societies. The paper argues that we are entering a third stage of analysis, namely, the global impact that international migration is having in terms of religious patterns worldwide. Several challenges face researchers who are studying religion and globalization, especially related to conceptual and methodological issues involved. Case material is presented on the Gulen Movement as one example of a religious movement that is rapidly becoming global.

Key words: religion and immigration; transnationalism; global religious movements

Prior to the mid 1990’s very little systematic data was available on the interconnections between religion and the lives of the new immigrants. As scholars of immigration, we knew a lot about their labor participation, educational levels, household composition and economic status. However, largely due to methodological considerations and lack of focus on religious factors we knew almost nothing about the role that religious identification and practice might play in their decision to migrate or in their adaptation to a new home country. All that changed in the late 1990s with the development of the subfield that we now know as religion and the new immigrants. Since that time, a mere dozen years or so, we have seen a proliferation of studies that relate religion with aspects of immigration.

My work during the past decade has focused on research related to religion and immigration in the U.S. context. This article, therefore, is based primarily on studies done in the American context. I see three major stages in the evolution of the subfield known as religion and the new immigrants. The first studies focused on the role that religious congregations play in helping immigrants settle and adapt to a new homeland. The second stage moved beyond those issues to introduce a transnational perspective...
with focus on one border, that is, home and host country ties of migrants. We are now just beginning to develop a third focus, also transnational but across multiple borders, that is, considerations of how religious factors impact the global religious ties being created by international migration flows. In this talk I will briefly review what we learned in the first two stages of development of the field and then suggest some issues that I think are important as we move into issues of religion and global migration.

Stage one: Religion and immigrant adaptation

The NEICP (New Ethnic and Immigrant Congregations Project) resulted in the first book that launched the subfield, *Gatherings In Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, edited by R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner (1998). The dozen chapters report the fieldwork of doctoral and post-doctoral students who studied immigrant congregations across the United States, including Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Rastafarian. Regardless of differences in doctrine and ritual, it was obvious that congregations provide sacred space and social ties that are important in assisting immigrants to relocate and become established members in a new society. Among the dozen case studies, however, there are significant variations in ways in which congregations provide these functions. Such variations include: ethnic vs. multi-ethnic composition of the congregation, cohort differences in terms of length of time in the U.S., gender roles, language usage and generational cooperation and conflict.

In my estimation, Warner’s Introduction to the book which, no doubt, framed the field studies, was a major contribution in establishing and providing guidance to the newly emerging field of religion and the new immigrants. Warner’s chapter raised issues that came to frame American debates and research agendas for what followed. For example, how «new» is the new immigration, has been heatedly debated in the dozen or so years since the book was published (Glick Schiller 1999; Portes et al. 1999; Perlman and Waldinger 1999; Foner 2000; Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Alba and Nee 2003). So, too, is the argument that transnationalism is a hallmark of modern immigration (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Alba and Nee 2003; Levitt 2001; Smith 2002). Likewise, Warners’ insistence that the project include «ethnic» as well as «new immigrant» in its title acknowledges the fact that some national origins groups, such as Mexicans and Chinese, have been in the United States long before changes in the 1965 immigration laws. Also agenda setting was Warner’s justification and clarification for using the term «immigrant congregation» to describe the local, face to face religious assemblies organized by ethnic/immigrant groups. His further argument that such religious assemblies tend, over time, to develop congregational forms characteristic of American Protestantism has been empirically verified repeatedly in the hundreds of studies of immigrant congregations conducted since he first proposed the idea.

My work with Janet Chafetz in the RENIR (Religion, Ethnicity and New Immigrant Research) project in Houston, Texas built on this previous research but did two things that were not accomplished in the first project. We included two Buddhist congregations, one Vietnamese and the other Chinese, a religious tradition not included in the
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NEICP project. Secondly, we developed interview schedules and observation protocols that we used across the 13 sites that we studied. Therefore, we were able to make some systematic comparisons and contrasts between immigrant incorporation in differing religious congregations, resulting in findings that could then be tested in other religious settings (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000). We learned, for example, ways in which religious congregations both perpetuate traditional gender roles and also situations in which they promote gender equality (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999). Likewise, we compared formal and informal structures of providing social services to immigrants (Ebaugh and Pipes 2001) as well as variations in the reproduction of ethnic identity among the second generation. The issue of being a minority or majority religion, both in the home and host countries, and how that difference impacts adaptation and recruitment emerged as an important variable when comparing the 13 congregations that we studied (Yang and Ebaugh 2001a).

At the conclusion of the three year study, Fenggang Yang, then a post-doc in the study, and I published our piece in the *American Sociological Review* (2001b) in which we argued on the basis of our data that three processes of change are occurring in new immigrant religions: 1) that they are adopting the congregational form in organizational structure and ritual; 2) they are returning to theological foundations as they confront diverse subtraditions and ethnic groups within a religion; and 3) they are reaching beyond traditional ethnic and religious boundaries to include other peoples. These changes, we argue, have transnational implications for global religious systems as immigrants relate to home communities and diasporas around the world.

Toward the conclusion of our project, the Pew Charitable Trusts funded the Gateway Six Projects, an effort to study religion among the new immigrants in six gateway cities in the U.S. in addition to our work in Houston: New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles and San Francisco. To my regret, the six projects were funded independently and used different research questions and designs rather than being coordinated into one unified design. As a result, we have 10 or so monographs and many scholarly articles recently published from the project in which we have a lot of descriptive data on unique cases but little comparative data that could lead to more systematic understanding of how religious congregations function in varying social and political contexts.

Likewise, while I applaud the addition of religion items in the New Immigrant Survey (e.g. Cadge and Ecklund 2006; Jasso and Rosenzweig 2006; Connor 2009) and helped construct potential items to be included, the fact that consistent items are not used in each wave makes comparisons over time difficult. The items that ultimately made their way into the final survey are also, in my judgment, not the most important ones that could have been included.

Stage two: Religion and transnationalism

While *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Basch et al. 1994) set the agenda for a transnational
perspective across academic disciplines, the book has very little to say about ways in which religious systems relate to transnational phenomena. Likewise, the landmark volume, The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience (Hirschman et al. 1999) does not even include religion in its index. It was Peggy Levitt, perhaps more than any other single scholar, who relentlessly insisted that the religion of new immigrants had significant impact back in their home countries. Beginning with her 1999 article in the International Migration Review (Levitt 1999) in which she introduced the term «social remittances,» along with her article a year earlier in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (Levitt 1998) in which she described religion as a remittance that immigrants sent back to their home country, her transnational focus on immigrant religion began to find its way into almost every article that talked about religion and the new immigrants. Then, in 2001, she published her book, The Transnational Villagers (Levitt 2001), in which she grounded her theoretical ideas in empirical data describing the lives of immigrants from Miraflores in the Dominican Republic who migrated to Boston but live simultaneously in both countries. The stories of weekly or sometimes daily telephone calls or emails back and forth across national borders between mothers in Boston and their children in Miraflores or between sisters who live transnationally but share their lives on a routine basis challenged the notion that immigrants leave behind their old lives and identities to reconstruct new lives as citizens in a new country. Rather, by the turn of the new century transnationalism was the taken for granted paradigm describing the lives of migrants, including their religious lives as well as their political, economic and family arrangements. The often quoted phrase of Basch et al. (1994) from the early 1990’s that immigrants live «with feet in two worlds» was grounded in many case studies in the decade that followed.

Despite the flurry of work labeled «transnationalism» in the mid to late 1990s, the concept remained a blurry one, a catchall notion that sometimes referred to globalization (Beyer 1994; Kearney 1995; Held et al. 1999), diasporas (Cohen 2008; Vertovec 1997), transnational social fields (Basch et al. 1994; Mahler 1998), transnational communities (Goldring 1998; Rouse 1992; Smith 1997), transnational social circles (Rouse 1992) and binational societies (Guarnizo 1994). In an effort to bring intellectual order to the field, Portes et al. in their special edition of Racial and Ethnic Studies (1999) on the issue of Transnational Communities limit the concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation. For methodological reasons, they define the individual and his or her support networks as the proper unit of analysis when considering transnational activities. From data on individuals, they argue, it becomes possible to identity the transnational counterparts in the home country, and to garner information to establish the aggregate structural effects of these activities.

Smith and Guarnizo (1998) juxtaposed «transnationalism from below» or the everyday, grounded practices of individuals and groups and their home country counterparts with «transnationalism from above» or activities initiated and conducted by powerful institutional actors such as multinational corporations and states. This distinction has been utilized by a number of sociologists of religion to understand the interrelationships between religious institutions such as churches, seminaries and reli-
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gious social services organizations and their impact on the transnational lives of individual immigrants. Fortuny (2002), for example, describes a large Mexican evangelical church with over one and a half million adherents in Mexico and 1200 members who migrated to Houston, Texas. Once a year the majority of Houston members travel to Guadalajara, Mexico, for the annual Santa Cema celebration where tens of thousands of members gather for a week to celebrate their common origins, beliefs and rituals and where young people hope to meet potential spouses. Power, control and organization of the event are centralized in Guadalajara and determine the behavior of the immigrants both during the week’s festivities and upon their return to Houston. Family and friendship networks become social capital for the people involved as vital information, experiences and contacts are shared and constantly transmitted between network members to ease their multiple everyday activities such as getting jobs, education and housing, changing legal status, sending remittances back home and learning the best times and easiest border-crossing spots. Oftentimes members crossing the border illegally have to stay in a border town such as Cuidad Juarez or El Paso, Texas, and seek out members who offer them food and housing and assist them in contacting the right people to get to their destinations. Because of the wide and solid networks within the Church, members can always find someone on whom to rely and whom to trust in case of problems. It is the interplay of institutional and individual ties across borders that constitute the fabric of this transnational church and strengthen the links between the sending and receiving countries and religious communities.

Levitt (2001) inserts an intermediary level between institutional and individual actors involved in transnational interactions, that of the community. She argues that the kinds of transnational practices migrants and nonmigrants engage in, and the impact of these activities, are a function of the kinds of organized social groups within which they are carried out. The economic initiatives, political activities, and socio-cultural enterprises they engage in are powerfully shaped by the social fields in which they occur and by social fields she refers to the varied social groups to which immigrants belong and in which they live their lives. Levitt sees community groups as the mechanism whereby the state or international religious groups reach out to individuals on both sides of the border.

Transnationalism, as an abstract and heuristic concept, is nebulous when we attempt to translate it into empirical research. However, with the above distinctions, researchers began to focus on various levels of religious phenomena, including institutional spheres (i.e. international and national churches; national religious organizations), religious leaders, local chapters of national organizations, parish and congregational settings and individual network ties between members in home and host countries. It is the intricate interactions on these various levels that provide a rich but complex picture of how transnationalism works in the lives of immigrants.

As both Portes et al. (1999) and Vertovec (2004) remind us, large scale transformations in culture, value systems and even social systems can sometimes result from numerous individual and collective short-term actions within social environments that span distant locales. Migrant transnational practices can modify the everyday social lives and even institutional structures in some cases. Kyle (2000), for example, descri-
bes how transnational peasants from Andean Ecuador changed family and economic systems in their home country by their numerous and continued exchange of goods, ideas and practices back and forth between home country and their various places of settlement. We can now document extensively how economic remittances on the part of hundreds and sometimes thousands of migrants, oftentimes in terms of $10.00 or $100 at a time impact entire economic structures in the home country. The United Nations estimates that 500 million people worldwide (8 percent of the world’s population) receive remittances from migrants. In 2006 Mexican citizens received $60 billion in remittances, money that then found its way into the consumer markets and boosted Mexico’s economy (Castles and Miller 2009). Likewise, religious remittances can impact religious institutions in the home country such as changes in gender roles within churches and temples, ways of collecting money from church members and modes of worship.

When Chafetz and I wrote our second book from the RENIR project, Religion Across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks (2002), there were relatively few case studies that traced transnational religious beliefs, practices and networks between host and home communities (i.e. Levitt 2001; Menjivar 2000; McAlister 1998; Baia 2001; Gomez and Vasquez 2001; Peterson and Vasquez 2001). Levitt’s work was among the most recognized in terms of setting an agenda for such studies. However, like the other studies, she focuses upon only one type of transnationalism, namely, ties among closely knit immigrant communities whose members share one or two identifiable locales in their home society, or “transnational villages,” as she calls them. The question remained whether her findings and those of the other case studies could generalize to transnational groups whose members are less closely bound geographically and socially. What patterns would emerge in studies that focused upon communities that originate in widely varied geographic locations, have different immigration histories, consist of different levels of financial and human capital, and practice different religious traditions than those included in the existent studies?

From our first RENIR project in Houston, we realized that some groups form transnational networks that are not limited to specific home countries and whose remittance pathways are more diverse than those that characterize closely bound communities that had been previously studied. For RENIR II we selected six congregations that provided variation in geographic proximity of communities of origin, immigration history, faith, socioeconomic status of immigrant population, and the extent to which immigrants come from a tightly bounded geographic area. On the basis of these criteria we studied: the Argentine Brethren Church; Luz del Mundo Mexican evangelical church; a Catholic immigrant church from Monterrey, Mexico; a Chinese Christian nondenominational church; a Vietnamese Buddhist Temple with roots in Ho Chi Minh City; and a Guatemalan Mayan evangelical church. We utilized network analysis as a methodology, building on Levitt’s notion of social remittances, including religious items, that she argues travel through identifiable pathways, are transmitted systematically and intentionally, and are usually transferred between individuals who know one another personally or who are connected by mutual social ties. The results of our three year, multi-continent study are reported in our 2002 book, as well as a number of arti-
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cles that are based on that research (Yang and Ebaugh 2001a, 2001b; Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Ebaugh 2003, 2004).

The transnational paradigm that focuses on immigrant ties between home and host country at various levels, institutional, organizational, individual, has now become a mainstay in studies of new immigrant groups in the U. S., alongside focus upon the resources that religious institutions offer new immigrants. It is my contention, however, that the field is beginning to move into a third phase of development, that is, how religious beliefs, practices, norms and institutions operate as immigrants migrate from their home communities to new areas of settlement around the world. Rather than focusing on ties between immigrants in their home and hosts countries, this approach traces ties and their impact from a home country to manifold destinations to which immigrants migrate. I am especially interested in how religious movements are developing, alongside the diasporas that define international migration in the 21st century.

Stage three: Religion and international migration

International migration is not a new historical phenomenon. People have always migrated to escape political persecution, ethnic conflict and poverty. However, because of recent political and cultural changes, as well as the development of new technologies of transport and communication, international mobility has become easier and more frequent. The United Nations estimates that in 1960, 76 million people migrated across countries to live in another country for 12 months or more. The comparable figure for 2005 was 191 million (UNDESA 2005). By 2007 that figure rose to 200 million, or 3 percent of the world’s population (Castles and Miller 2009). The United Nations estimates that there are 214 million migrants across the globe, an increase of about 37 percent in two decades (United Nations Statistics 2009).

Regardless of the nuances of meaning of the term «globalization»¹, and there are many, international migration is a central dynamic within globalization. In fact, several recent scholars contend that the international movement of people is the third wave of globalization, after the movement of goods (trade) and the movement of finance (Castles and Miller 2009). There are ways in which today’s migrants differ from previous streams that affect the character of current globalization. First, migrants are truly global, hailing from all parts of the world rather than just from Europe or from poor regions of the world. Secondly, over half of the world’s migrants are women, many of them migrating without their children whom they leave behind with extended family. Thirdly, and most importantly from the perspective of globalization is that today migrants stay connected with their home countries by means of cheaper air travel, cell phones, faxes, email, instant messenger and international sites such as SKYPE. All of these changes impact the flow of religious changes as well as those of trade, finance, politics, security and business.

As migration becomes easier and more and more people are mobile, many of them have relationships in two or more countries simultaneously. These relationships are often political, economic, social, cultural and religious and bind individuals and fami-
lies across borders such that activities and influences reverberate not only between home and host societies but everywhere in the world where migrants settle and people maintain ties with one another. New forms of interdependence, transactions and mutual influence are rapidly transforming the lives of millions of people and impacting the institutions and fabric of states and regions around the world.

The majority of people in the world (estimated to be 97 percent in 2000) are not international migrants (Castles and Miller 2009). However, their lives and their communities are changed by migration (see Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002). As beliefs, practices, experiences and attitudes are conveyed back to home communities by migrants who have left to create new lives elsewhere, minds and lifestyles of people «back home» change in response. One example we documented repeatedly in our Religion Across Borders study (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002) is that of gender practices. Female immigrants in Houston communicate with mothers, sisters and friends in the home country describing the opportunities they had to get educated, work and take up roles in their churches, temples and mosques, roles that were difficult if not impossible back home.

As women in home communities began questioning gender issues that were previously taken for granted and effecting changes in their own communities it helped prepare future immigrants for wherever they might migrate, thus effecting cultural changes globally through international migration.

Despite the plethora of literature on international migration, including books too numerous to list (for summaries, see Castles 1996; Castles and Miller 2009; Held et al. 1999; Cohen 2008) and journals devoted to the topic (e.g. International Migration Review; International Migration; Global Networks; Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies), relatively little has been written on the processes and impact of international migration on issues of religion. Academic focus has been primarily on the political, economic and security issues associated with increased migration of large populations across the borders of nation-states. For example, Castles and Miller’s latest edition of the Age of Migration (2009, 4th edition) does not even list religion in their index and only mentions religious phenomena 3–4 times throughout the book, even though religious networks are an essential part of the pathways through which global processes operate.

There are a few exceptions to the lack of focus on religious implications of international migration. Several of these deal with religion and diasporas, a specific type of international migration. Vertovec (2000) defines a diaspora as «an imagined connection between a post-migration (including refugee) population and a place of origin and with people of similar cultural origins elsewhere.»

Cohen (2008) in listing nine characteristics of a diaspora, emphasizes the dispersal from a homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions, a collective memory and myth about the homeland and a strong ethnic group consciousness based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate. While Cohen acknowledges that the Jewish diaspora is most frequently cited as a model of a diasporic group, he devotes only two pages to discussing religious aspects of the many diasporas that he considers. In these two pages he focuses upon the broad issue of how
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migrants in a diaspora can maintain contact with the principal epicenters of their religions (i.e. Jews with Jerusalem, Catholics with the Vatican, Sikhs with Amritsar, Muslims with Mecca) and that pilgrimages to these centers renews enthusiasm and unites members of the diaspora from around the world, thus creating and sustaining a world religion.

In his latest book, *Transnationalism*, Vertovec (2009) makes a significant contribution by focusing on migrant transnational practices in the areas of politics, economics and religion. In his chapter on religion, he goes to great lengths to differentiate diasporas, migration, minority status and transnationalism and to insist that the terms not be used interchangeably. Keeping in mind these distinctions, it is now time to outline major conceptual issues involved in studying religion in each of the contexts as well as methodologies most appropriate in each situation.

What Chafetz and I discovered in the RENIR II phase of our new immigrant study, as we spent time in the home communities of the new immigrants whom we had studied in Houston, is that changes in religious practices that were made by the immigrants in their transplanted religious communities were transported back to families, friends and religious institutions in the home community. These changes impacted practices and ways of «doing religion» back home, thus preparing future migrants for life in the United States but were also transported to the many and varied other places to which people migrated. An example of this is the «camp/retreat parks» organized by Argentine evangelicals (Plymouth Brethren) in the United States, modeled on Protestant religious summer camps in the U.S. (Cook 2002). Over the course of several years, lay missionaries from Houston returned to Mendoza, Argentina, and began several camps there. Another Houston Brethren couple went as missionaries to Spain and began camps there while another migrant from Argentina who was familiar with a camp in West Texas migrated to Honduras and started a religious camp in central Honduras. Leaders in the various camps keep close contact with one another and share institutional resources as well as personal ties.

In the same volume, Fenggang Yang (2002) describes a transnational Christian community with trans-Pacific networks formed by contacts between individuals, single churches and parachurch international organizations. Migrants in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China connect to their counterparts in the U.S. and Canada primarily through missionaries from the central Houston church and through pastors, many of whom studied at the same or related seminaries and who attend the same evangelistic meetings, retreats and workshops and are invited to preach at one another’s churches.

My current research focuses upon a Muslim movement that is rapidly becoming global with institutions currently in 120 countries on five continents. The Gulen Movement has its origins in Turkey when Mr. Fethullah Gulen, a self educated imam who was influenced by Said Nursi, began preaching in mosques, cafes and street corners in Izmir. His message targeted what he saw as a basic need in Turkey in the late 1960s and early 1970s, namely, the challenge of educating Turkey’s youth in modern sciences while, simultaneously, instilling in them moral values and Islamic pride. He was able to convince businessmen and entrepreneurs in Izmir and eventually throughout Turkey
of the need to build educational institutions of the finest quality to combat the illiteracy of Turkey’s youth. They began by constructing dormitories where young people, especially from rural areas, lived while attending high schools and universities. Tutoring was also provided in the dorms by university students and teachers. This was followed by erecting preparatory schools to prepare high school seniors for the mandatory university exams. Within a short period of time, the academic success of these endeavors became known throughout Turkey and people lined up to be admitted. Those who could not afford even the minimal tuition or board were subsidized by scholarships provided by the businessmen and other supporters of the movement.

When President Ozal in the 1980’s changed Turkey’s policies and allowed for the establishment of private schools, Mr. Gulen persuaded local businessmen to finance the opening of private schools, often referred to as «Gulen schools,» first in Izmir and Ankara and ultimately throughout the country. These schools, staffed primarily by teachers who were part of the movement, soon became known as the premier private schools in Turkey, demonstrated by the fact that their students routinely won the top prizes in the International Science Olympiads and garnered top positions in the best universities in Turkey.

President Ozal’s liberal economic policies promoted the growth and international expansion of Turkish companies, many of which were headed by supporters of the movement. Mr. Gulen encouraged his supporters to grow their businesses, expand them globally, and to contribute a portion of their wealth to the support of the schools and educational projects. Today there are over 500 Gulen-inspired schools in Turkey, educating thousands of young Turks each year.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Mr. Gulen foresaw the vacuum that would emerge and encouraged the businessmen to go to the former Soviet republics to set up schools there. In 1992 the first school outside Turkey was established in Azerbaijan and today they exist throughout all of the former Soviet republics except in Uzbekistan. From there schools were established in most countries to which Turks associated so that today there exists over 1000 schools in 120 countries on 5 continents. What I am discovering is that the movement has become global in the sense of it’s worldwide spread, but also transnational in that members associated with the movement interact frequently across borders, sharing information, helping one another as needs arise, serving as contacts in foreign countries, organizing international conferences and trips, and providing a social network for reinforcing and sharing common beliefs, practices and memories.

The movement is not without its critics; in fact, it is highly controversial not only in Turkey but in many communities to which members have migrated. In the Appendix to the book I report the results of 30 interviews we conducted with some of the most outspoken critics in Turkey as well as five in Houston. I then address the criticisms on the basis of the data I collected on the movement, especially the 103 interviews I conducted with supporters in Turkey as well as field observations over four trips to Turkey.

My recent book on the movement (Ebaugh 2010) describes the movement as it began and developed in Turkey. I have, however, initiated a follow up project in which I am tracing the movement as it spread from Turkey through Azerbaijan to the rest of
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the world. It is this research that has prodded me to think more systematically about methodological approaches to the study of global or international religious movements and I would like to share briefly some of what I am pondering. This will, hopefully, provoke some discussion of the general issues involved in the study of global religious movements.

On the one hand, we are challenged to think clearly and conceptually about the ways in which we think and talk about interconnections between religion and globalization. Csordas (2009), in his recent book, Transnational Transcendence, differentiates between the phrases «religion and globalization» and the «globalization of religion.» The first, he argues, implies the relation of religion and globalization as two separate analytic domains, with the sense of economic globalization being the dominant one. If this is the case, the danger is that religion will be considered as a reaction to global economics rather than as one of two domains that are equal in terms of social and cultural forces, thus conceptualizing religion as epiphenomena of a primary economic reality.

The conception of global religion as the «globalization of religion» also has its dangers, Csordas argues, in the assumption that the cultural influence of globalization is unidirectional, from globalizing center to passive periphery, with as he puts it, «religion a neocolonial form of cultural imperialism.» The alternative is to recognize that, once global channels are open, the flow of religious phenomena (e.g. symbols, ideas, practices, moods, motivations) can be bi-directional or even multi-directional in terms of flows across multiple borders.

The concept of «global religion,» as put forth in Handbook of Global Religions (Juergensmeyer 2006), points to the fact that the world’s religions are becoming less and less tied to specific geographical regions but, through global migration, are being carried across the world where they are adapted to local beliefs and practices. A global religion approach tends to compare one or more faith traditions in different parts of the world to show the increasing diversity that exists within the world’s religions.

I suggest another approach to the study of global religion, based specifically on the increased international migration that I talked about earlier, and that is focus upon the beliefs, values, lived spirituality, rituals, practices that are carried by migrants, adapted to a new setting and then eventually transported and communicated to non-migrants in the home country. Besides influencing religion back home, some of the home country family and friends subsequently themselves migrate, not only to one receiving country but around the world, thus impacting religious systems globally.

While the notion of globalization is an abstract, overarching conceptual framework, that of transnational ties and immigrant networks across borders challenges the researcher to build research designs that capture ways in which international migration is changing how religion is practiced and how religious institutions are adapting to local political and cultural contexts. Specifically, I am suggesting that we use abstract notions such as globalization and global community as orienting ideas but that, as sociologists dedicated to the empirical study of social reality, we develop research projects that are grounded in describing religious practices as they are carried by migrants
across national borders and faith traditions, resulting in another way to look at global religion.

Note

While not uniformly accepted in the literature, a number of scholars differentiate the terms, globalization and transnationalism (see Kearney 1995; Glick Schiller 1999; Levitt 2007). Levitt, for example, criticizes what she calls «globalist» scholarship for treating all kinds of cross-border relationships and phenomena as identical without making important distinctions in their structure and processes, as well as the tendency to treat them as unconnected to any territory. She uses «transnationalism» to indicate a perspective that focuses on all layers of social life simultaneously and one that recognizes that some social processes happen inside nations while many others, though rooted in nations, also cross their borders.

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