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Migrants Hold onto Their Religious Identities for Emotional Support and to Build Networks Crucial to Their Journeys

The researchers approached this study with limited information on the nationalities, ethnicities, and religious identities of migrants moving through Costa Rica. We knew in advance that they hailed from countries in Africa and Asia and had crossed several South American countries, but little else. The ebb and flow of their migration varied, and predicting arrivals from specific countries proved impossible for border security agencies.

Unexpectedly, interviews often transformed into the site for performative religious acts. As we elaborate in this short essay, during the course of the interviews, migrants sang hymns, shared Biblical parables, and spoke of miracles on the ocean or in the jungle. The act of fasting during Ramadan by both some migrants and some researchers contributed in a small, but significant, way to a shared religious identity that helped break down some initial suspicion about us. We soon found that religious identities and various expressions of faith played important roles for many migrants.

Writings on why religion is of significance to individual migrants has explored themes of religion as a reason for migration, religion as a means of sustenance in difficult circumstances, religion as an identity marker in new socio-cultural contexts, and religion as a source of reconciliation and healing.¹ In this essay, we explore some of these same themes, basing our insights on interviews with trans-continental migrants traveling through Costa Rica and bound for the north.

¹ Robert Schreier, "Spaces for Religion and Migrants Religious Identity," *Forum Mission* 5 (2009): 155-171. Cited in Martha Frederiks, "Religion, Migration and Identity: A Conceptual and Theoretical Exploration," pages 9-29 in *Theology and Mission in World Christianity*, Volume 2, (eds.) Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy, 2016.

A. Migrants have often fled their home countries because their religious identities were not accepted.

In Pakistan, Christians are treated as third class citizens. They make us do the least desirable work, such as cleaning drains. We were also charged with blasphemy. We had to put “Masi” in front of our name to identify as Christians and because of this we do not get any jobs.

—Salah, Christian migrant from Pakistan

Salah was one in a group of three migrants from Pakistan who had spent more than a month in the North CATEM (temporary shelter). He and his friends belonged to the minority Christian community in Pakistan and had endured discrimination, humiliation, and physical violence for decades. Despite their fluency in English, international work experience, and technical skills, they could only locate jobs with low pay. Their already diminished status among Pakistani citizens was further diminished by their work history. They had worked for a contractor for the United States military in Afghanistan and were perceived as having worked for the *kaafirs* (or infidels). Even though they eventually got jobs at a mobile phone shop, they faced constant discrimination, their coworkers refusing to eat with them at the same table. They continually felt alienated. Eventually they were even accused of blasphemy. The Pakistan Penal Code contains some of the most stringent punishments for blasphemy. In an attempt to impress upon us the severity of their situation, they recounted other instances where Christians were targeted, accused of blasphemy, and then killed in various towns in Pakistan. Salah remembered cases in Faisalabad and in Gujrat where a “young fifteen-year-old was killed, the only son of his mother.” Conditions for these Pakistani men had worsened to the point where they feared for their lives and believed there was no option but to escape the country.

Across the border in Haryana, India, two childhood friends faced a similar fate. Not because they were Christian but because they had been associated with a leading spiritual and religious group known as the *Dera Sacha Sauda*. They were targeted and persecuted after their spiritual leader, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, was convicted of sexual assault.

In interviews with migrants from certain West African countries like Ghana, respondents revealed that they had fled their homes in a desperate attempt to hold onto their religious identities. For example, a migrant from the Ashanti region in Ghana who belonged to a tribe that performed animal sacrifice felt forced to leave his family behind when locals pressured him to take on preordained priestly duties. He had embraced Christianity as a child and found performing animal rituals to be incompatible, indeed repugnant, to his faith. Other migrants from Ghana said the religious tension between Muslims, Christians, and those practicing tribal religions was an important deciding factor in their escape. One observed that this tension resulted in secret inter-religious marriages and that such couples often flee the country to escape honor killings at the hands of their families. Another migrant, a Muslim male, had grown wary of religious tensions in Ghana, which had percolated into his local community. Religious conservatives did not accept his classroom teachings on human rights violations, in particular with regard to homosexuality. He was attacked and forced to flee the country.

B. Migrants have used religion to construe meaning in dangerous and extraordinary circumstances.

Thank God we were all together, and we had the Lord with us too. If God didn't save us, then who did? One time I was leading the prayer under a tree in the forest, and all of these were with me as well. I swear as soon as we finished praying and started walking, the tree that we had been praying under fell right on the spot we were sitting at only two minutes ago. If that's not evidence of God, then what is?

—Sameerjeet, Hindi man from India

Early theories on the subject of religion and migration led to the idea of migration as a “theologizing experience” arising out of the traumatic experiences associated with uprooting, disorientation, and resettlement.² Migrants belonging to different faiths and from different countries attributed their survival through the Darién Gap to God. The journeys through the Darién Gap caused many to experience extremely challenging terrain (steep cliffs, torrential rain, and rivers with strong currents) and the threat of venomous snakes, wild animals, and men who

2 Timothy L. Smith, “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” *American Historical Review* 83, 5 (1978): 1155.

would steal all of their belongings at gunpoint. The migrants used anecdotes similar to 'Sameerjeet's to convince the interviewers that, in fact, a supernatural intervention led them to safety. One migrant recalled, "I think that when God is with you, anything is possible. . . . I had no money to pay the *donkers* [local guides]. Nothing at all. Then out of the blue, another person in another group that I bumped into asked me to carry his bags through the jungle and paid me \$100 for it. . . . I'm telling you that there is a God. I have faith in Him."

To some who had clearly "become" religious after making it through the Darién Gap, the extraordinary turbulence and their subsequent salvation impacted their belief systems.³ While describing the traumatic experience of navigating the river and jungle with groups who were unkind to her because of her slow pace, Queen, a Cameroonian migrant, recalled that she sang her song to God. At this point in her interview and overcome by emotion, Queen sang the hymn "I Really Know You" in its entirety. A Nigerian migrant, disoriented as a result of wading through water and mud for days, remarked that he, unlike others with him, had not suffered physical injuries because he "had walked with God."

Faith has lent these migrants a vocabulary that allowed them to express the remarkable and agonizing nature of their journey through the jungle. At the same time, faith also became an anchor to which they clung when no clear plan was in view. Believer, a Christian migrant from Ghana who had been robbed of all of his money in the Darién Gap, spent most of his time in the North CATEM praying (and believing) that God would show him the way. Believer had no particular destination in mind and was on the move because he wanted to be in a country that accepted his faith and where he understood the language. Another Christian migrant from Ghana who shared similar beliefs was more resourceful: after being issued a refugee permit, he had decided to practice begging at the border. He was using his time in Costa Rica to save money for his journey ahead, which he believed he would undertake with the help of God.

C. Religious identities are a tool in identifying trustworthy relationships.

Our research revealed that individuals travelling from South Asia or Africa into Central and South American countries formed groups at different points in their journey. These "groups" were not rigid in that they took on different shapes and sizes as members moved from one point to the next. While migrants usually moved in small groups as they made their way through Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, or Ecuador, the group size expanded in Capurganá, Colombia, where the journey through the Darién Gap began. A common religion did not necessarily form the basis of such groups. For example, Christian migrants from Pakistan did not necessarily form strong ties with Christians from Ghana even though they shared similar histories of religious persecution.

The nature of the journey and the extent of preparation often dictated the manner in which migrants sought to leverage their religious identity in the formation of networks. Migrants who were more prepared to undertake the journey had identified leaders of churches who would take them under their wing. Salah and his friends were able to use their pastor's transnational network to find a pastor in Brazil who helped them with accommodation. Others continued to rely on their religious support system from the home country to seek advice and gather information on their journey ahead. A Ghanaian Christian migrant recounted how he would continuously seek out his pastor's advice because "it's not everyone you tell your story to." (He lost his phone in the Darién Gap, severing ties with his mentor.) Church leaders were very important figures in the journey of the Pakistani Christian migrants: one in particular had helped them flee the country when they were threatened with prosecution under the blasphemy law. He had continued to act as an advisor as they spent time in the North CATEM, strategizing and preparing for their journey ahead.

Religious identities have on occasion colored or influenced the migrant's perception of the spiritual and cultural beliefs of local communities. This was particularly the case among Indian Hindu migrants, some of whom perceived meat-eating as either taboo

³ While only two Indian migrants admitted becoming believers after their journey through the Darién Gap, other Indian migrants appeared to have become more active believers after this harrowing journey.

or something to be done in moderation. In their communication with a researcher of the same nationality, these migrants used the tenuous link between dietary habits and spirituality to express disdain or suspicion, or in other words, to distinguish themselves from local communities. For example, a group of young Indian migrants remarked disapprovingly that people here (referring to American communities in general) eat meat all the time and that they do not reserve even one day for God. An older group of two childhood friends from India who had originally planned on living in Ecuador found that they could not start a business there because most businesses violated their principle of not eating meat.

The “migrant” is not a monolith—she experiences and relies on her faith in different ways and for different purposes during the course of her journey. Even though literature on this subject typically examines migrants who have settled in certain locations, our research points to similar findings with respect to migrants who are on the move. During the course of our study, we briefly encountered Jehovah’s Witness volunteers from San José who in the few months preceding the study had begun to interact with migrants at the borders or in the CATEMs. An interesting dynamic to further investigate would be the impact that such interventions have on the religious identities of the migrants. While this essay focused on the migrant’s association with her religious identity, it also alludes to the need to investigate how local communities perceive and interact with the religious identities of the migrants.”

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