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# *Calling Upon the Sacred: Migrants' Use of Religion in the Migration Process*

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The role of religion in the stages of the migration process has been overlooked by both immigration and sociology of religion scholars. This article draws on the migratory and religious history of a transnational Maya community with members in the western highlands of Guatemala and Houston, Texas. Drawing on field research of Mayas in both the sending and receiving areas, we show how migrants use religion in the following stages of the migration process: 1) decisionmaking; 2) preparing for the trip; 3) the journey; 4) the arrival; 5) the role of the ethnic church in immigrant settlement; and 6) the development of transnational linkages.

Despite the diversity and prominence of religious beliefs and practices among contemporary immigrants in the United States, scholars of both immigration and religion have tended to neglect the role of religion and spirituality in the process of international migration. With the exception of historical (Dolan, 1975; Bodnar, 1985; Dolan, 1985) and recent case studies (*e.g.*, Orsi, 1985; Mullins, 1988; Hurh and Kim, 1990; Leonard, 1992; Min, 1992; Waugh, 1994; Lin, 1996; Numrich, 1996; Warner and Wittner, 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000) that focus on the functions of the church in immigrant settlement and the emergent literature on the role of religion in the development of transnational activities (Casanova, 1997; Levitt, 1997; Rudolph and Piscatori, 1997; Levitt, 1998a, b), the role of religion in other stages of the migration process, especially in decision-making and the journey, has been generally overlooked by social scientists and policymakers alike.

In their review and appraisal of theories of international migration, Massey and his colleagues (1993) show that, by and large, most contemporary theories of international migration focus upon the origins of international migration and the persistence of transnational flows. Most theories that seek to explain why the decision to migrate is made in the first place rely on some combination of economic variables operating at different levels of analysis to predict migration, for example, neoclassical theories (Todaro, 1976), the "new economics of migration" (Stark and Bloom, 1985; Taylor,

1986) or dual labor market theory (Piore, 1979). Migration theorists also argue that the conditions that trigger international migration are quite different from those that sustain it (Massey *et al.*, 1987). The persistence of international movements is largely explained by the development of new conditions during the course of migration, such as migrants' personal networks that reduce the cost of migration for others in the home community (Massey *et al.*, 1987; Hagan 1998) or the development of institutions that support transnational movement (Massey *et al.*, 1993).

By relying on economic considerations in driving the decision to migrate and social explanations for sustaining the process, theories on international migration have overlooked the cultural context of migration. More specifically, they have not addressed the role of religion in the migration process, especially the spiritual resources it provides for some immigrant populations in the decision to migrate and the psychological effects of this on migrants' commitment to endure the hardship of the migration.

There is some field evidence, however, that support from religious institutions is an important resource for prospective migrants. Congregations in communities of origin may well be aware of the spiritual needs of prospective migrants and their families and cater to them, and migrants who cross international borders without papers may locate religious leaders and use religious practices for protection in their often perilous journey. Studies of present-day Ghanaian Pentecostalism, for example, find that prospective migrants often turn to the healing and deliverance rituals of prayer camps in Ghana for spiritual counsel and protection in their travel (Van Dijk, 1997). The role of religion in international migration is also etched in Mexican *retablos* – small votive paintings expressing thanks that are left by migrants and their families at religious shrines. An analysis of a sample of *retablos* produced by U.S.-bound Mexican migrants showed that migrants often prayed and gave thanks to the saints of the Catholic church for a successful journey (Durand and Massey, 1995). In both of these accounts of contemporary international movements, migrants drew on the spiritual resources of the Church to derive meaning for the decision to migrate and to seek spiritual guidance and protection during the process of international travel. As the human costs associated with contemporary undocumented migration to the United States rise and increasing numbers of unauthorized migrants are exposed to a dangerous – sometimes fatal – journey associated with beefed up enforcement operations along the U.S.-Mexico border (Eschbach *et al.*, 1999), it is reasonable to expect that reliance on the church for spiritual counsel and protection may

assume greater importance, especially for migrants coming from traditional religious communities.

In this article, we draw on the migratory and religious history of one transnational community to highlight the important role religious and spiritual beliefs and practices play in the process of contemporary undocumented migration. Specifically, we examine the "agency" component of the migration process to stress the creative ways in which migrants use the institution of religion and its beliefs and practices to organize the entire migration process, from decision-making to the development of transnational activities. The analysis is based on fieldwork within a transnational Maya community, which encompasses one municipality in the department of Totonicapan in the western highlands of Guatemala and several neighborhoods of settlement in Houston, Texas.

### *RESEARCH METHODS*

Data in this study are part of a larger project that focuses on religion and the new immigrants in the United States (RENIR). In the first phase of RENIR, researchers conducted field research in thirteen immigrant congregations in Houston, Texas, including both ethnic and multi-ethnic Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Zoroastrian religious institutions (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). In the course of studying the role that religion plays in the settlement and incorporation processes of new immigrants, we discovered the importance of transnational religious ties, both at the organizational and individual levels. Interviews with immigrants and observations within their religious settings, both formal congregations and domestic rituals, showed the impact of home country beliefs and customs on the ways in which the immigrants practice religion. We also learned that the process is two-way. Not only do immigrants import religious practices from their home country and incorporate them into American ways of "doing religion," but, in turn, they introduce new religious ways into the old country religion.

In order to understand the circular process of religious change in home and host communities and to understand the transnational religious communities that evolve in the process of immigration, in the second phase of the RENIR project we selected six religious communities from the original study to trace back to their homelands for further examination. These included: an Argentine Evangelical church, a Vietnamese Buddhist temple, a Chinese Christian church, a Mexican Evangelical community, a Mexican Catholic church and a Maya Pentecostal community.

The data in this study derive from the second phase of the RENIR study as well as from previous research on immigrant settlement that the senior author conducted among the Maya community in Houston in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Hagan 1994; 1998). In this earlier research, the senior author had limited her examination of religious phenomena to the role of the ethnic Pentecostal church in the settlement of new migrants; she did not examine the church in Guatemala. In the spring of 2000, however, the senior author reentered the community explicitly to study the role that religion plays in the migration process of the Maya. She spent two months conducting observations in their ethnic churches in Houston and then returned to Guatemala, along with two research assistants, for one month of field work in the home community. She explored the development of transnational religious ties, both on an organizational and individual level, between Mayan immigrants in Houston and in their home village in the western highlands of Guatemala. While in the home community, the research team attended daily services and meetings at three Pentecostal churches whose memberships include many congregants who have family in Houston, some of whom were members of these churches prior to migration. The team also interviewed six Pentecostal pastors in the area and a handful of members from each church. There are many advantages to returning to one's original research population; in this case, the clearest advantage was ability to trace the migratory process of one community over time.

### *THE COMMUNITY*

The transnational Maya community that is the focus of this study spans one municipality in the western highlands of Guatemala and several neighborhoods of new immigrant settlement in Houston, Texas. The home village, to which we hereafter refer to by the pseudonym of San Pedro, is nestled high in the Sierra Madre mountains in the Department of Totonicapan, a region often recognized as the birthplace of Protestantism in the Guatemalan highlands (Garrard-Burnett, 1998).

The municipality of San Pedro includes the town center of San Pedro, seven hamlets and three smaller farming settlements. The municipality is home to approximately 28,000 persons, 80 percent of whom are of indigena or Maya origin (Unidad Técnica San Cristobal, 1999). Its people speak a local variety of the Quiche language, although most of the youth also speak Spanish. The majority of the inhabitants own their own *milpas* (corn plots) and supplement their income with artisinal production which they sell in the

highlands' rotating market system. The primary occupations are weaving and tailoring. The town center is home to two Catholic churches and 23 Protestant churches, the majority of which are Pentecostal and were constructed in the last twenty years, especially in the 1980s, a decade when unprecedented numbers of Guatemalan Maya became members of non-mainstream Protestant churches.

The mayor of the municipality estimates that at least 15 percent of the approximately 6,000 households in the municipality have family members in Houston, where they began arriving in the late 1970s. When the senior author studied the Maya settlement process in Houston in the late 1980s, the size of the community had mushroomed to about 2,000, largely as a result of the social networks which directed a growing stream towards Houston. We now estimate that the Houston Maya community from the San Pedro area surpasses 3,000. Since their arrival they have developed strong community organizations, including at least three ethnic Pentecostal churches with counterpart churches in the home community.

The Maya community in Houston has also maintained strong social ties with the home community. Many migrants with legal status in the United States make a yearly visit to San Pedro to celebrate the fiesta of the patron saint. In fact, many make the trip home several times a year. Some of the migrants have invested in homes and businesses in Guatemala. In many ways, the first generation of migrant families in this community have become transnational in their behavior. Indeed, interviews with the three major couriers who travel regularly between Guatemala and Houston provided an estimate that in some months as much as a half million dollars in goods, cash and money orders flow from the Houston area to the home community.

Drawing on ethnographic findings from our field research, we show how migrants use religion in the following stages of the migration process: 1) decision-making; 2) preparing for the trip; 3) the journey; 4) the arrival; 5) becoming a member of an ethnic church in the United States; and 6) the development of transnational linkages.

### *STAGES OF THE MIGRATION PROCESS*

#### *Stage One: Deciding Whether or Not to Migrate*

The economic context for understanding the migration from San Pedro to Houston can be traced to the late 1970s, when political conflict in the western highlands, especially the government's counterinsurgency campaigns, constrained the ability of many Maya residents to participate in the regional

marketing system. This, along with increased inflation in the area, forced many households in San Pedro to seek other sources of income, one of which was wage labor in Houston. The costs of migration were high for the pioneers in the community, but over time the development of migrant social networks facilitated migration for future flows from the home community, as new migrants relied increasingly on these networks to cover the financial burden of migration and to assist in initial settlement (Hagan 1994; 1998).

Although migration from San Pedro to Houston persists and in some ways has become self-perpetuating, most prospective migrants now recognize that there are new and escalating costs and risks associated with undocumented travel to the United States. First and foremost, the cost of securing a "coyote" to traverse two heavily guarded international borders has more than tripled in the last decade, reaching as much as \$4,000 per migrant today. To pay the coyote, families of prospective migrants often put up their homes for collateral. Even with a coyote, the journey is fraught with the unexpected dangers of rough terrain and often poor weather conditions.

In this context of increased costs and dangers, prospective migrants from San Pedro now find themselves turning to the Pentecostal church to help them make their decision. To assist them in making the difficult decision whether to risk the migration, pastors of particular churches and independent ministries are contacted, and their advice and prayer in the matter of migration is requested. At these initial meetings between the potential migrant and the pastor, migrants are advised to pray and are challenged about their true motivations behind the journey. They are also urged to contemplate the necessity of their migration and to think about the potential ramifications for family left behind.

Migrants also seek divine counsel through formal religious services, but especially and most importantly, they attend *ayunos*, which are fasting and informal prayer services, followed by extensive prophesizing. In the Guatemalan highlands, *ayunos* are held in the homes of independent pastors or on designated Maya sacred grounds. In traditional highland Maya culture, mountaintops are among the most sacred of all grounds because they are home to many Maya religious shrines used by calendar diviners, dream interpreters and curers (Tedlock, 1992; Green, 1999). These religious locations have been adopted by contemporary Pentecostal pastors as sites for their services. Like the shaman-priests of earlier Maya religious practices, the Pentecostal pastors who lead *ayunos* are believed to have the power to hear the will of God for other people, and the attendees have steadfast faith in the predictions and prophecies spoken by the pastors.

In Totonicapan, the most celebrated *ayuno* for migration counseling is held on a mountaintop about ten miles from the town center of San Pedro. The mountaintop, which is accessible only by foot, is the meeting place for Wednesday morning *ayunos*, which draw about 100 people on a weekly basis. It is also the location for monthly vigils, which can last up to 48 hours and draw as many as 200 people from a variety of Pentecostal churches and highland communities. Every other month, persons make the long trek to attend *ayunos completos* which last several days and draw as many as 400 persons from nearby villages and faraway cities such as Guatemala City. According to area residents and pastors, the mountaintop, *Xe Cacal Xiquin*, is considered sacred to the local Maya.

On the Wednesday morning we attended the *ayuno*, several dozen people climbed the mountain to hear the minister. The service began with an *oracion* (conversation with God), followed by *Alabanzas con Dios* (a time of praise and worship during which the spirit of God is experienced by the attendees). The pastor then spoke to the group through God. With Bible in hand, he spoke in tongues, then translated into Quiche.

We were unable to communicate directly with the largely Quiche-speaking attendees during the *ayuno*, but had the opportunity later to interview the presiding pastor. The pastor, an indigena resident of the highlands, told us that although *ayuno* attendees seek counseling on a variety of matters, including health and family issues, an increasing number come for migration counseling. For example, one of the attendees on that particular morning, a woman from a nearby village, had come to pray for the safety of her son, from whom she had not heard since his departure some weeks earlier. Another attendee, the father of a young migrant who had left for the United States several months earlier, came to pray for his son's continued success in the United States. According to the presiding pastor, migration counseling has become more central to the *ayunos* because the security of the migrant is increasingly in question. Another pastor of an independent ministry told us, "... because the investment is so high, the risk so much, and crossing the borders imply uncertainty, the majority of those in our community who make this voyage are focused on seeking divine intervention in their undertaking." Indeed, one pastor we interviewed estimates that as many as 50 percent of the prospective migrants in the area seek migration counseling.

Moreover, for some, the pastor's prophecies at these *ayunos* constitute the final decision to migrate. Following the *ayuno*, the presiding pastor told us:



Lots of young people attend months in advance of contemplating a journey north. When God tells me that the journey will be a safe one, they proceed with their plans. If God tells me their journey will not be a safe one, they postpone or cancel their migration plans.

Indeed an interview with a regular *ayuno* attendee told us that “those who are counseled and predicted a safe journey are more likely to make the journey safely.”

In sum, for many of the Pentecostal Maya in the western highlands of Guatemala, the decision to migrate, though driven by economic considerations, can ultimately be based on the advice or premonitions of Pentecostal pastors. The prayer support provided by the *ayunos*, vigils and spiritual retreats appears to help the migrants and their families feel more comfortable with whatever decision is made.

### *Stage Two: Preparing for the Journey*

Once a decision to migrate to the United States has been made with the consent of the pastor, the involvement and influence of the church continues. As preparations for the journey are made, migrants continue to look to the church for support and guidance. Religious activities, such as attending *ayunos*, conferring with pastors, and individual prayer, continue, if not heighten. Further, the migrant's family becomes increasingly involved in these religious activities, as they also seek counsel with the pastor and church. As travel documents are prepared and money is secured, migrants look to religious leaders to pray for their success and to interpret the will of God by examining the way arrangements fall together.

The second *ayuno* we attended while in San Pedro was held early in the morning in a pastor's home in a small farming settlement outside the town center. When we arrived, we encountered about 50 persons, both men and women, sitting on the floor facing the pastor who stood in front of a crude table propped up by brightly bound bundles of clothes. The pastor, an older Maya woman who had been leading an independent ministry in her home for several decades, showed us that the bundles actually contained the anticipated traveling clothes of ten prospective migrants who were attending the *ayuno*. The migrants, some of whom were willing to speak with us, went on to tell us they had already received the consent of the Pentecostal church to make the voyage, but had come for additional prayer and guidance to prepare for their journey. These young men, who were first time migrants, were placing total trust in the coyote and the will of God. For this reason, we were told, pastors often meet the coyote that a migrant has secured to determine whether the coyote is honest.

The final blessings by Pentecostal pastors that we observed were not isolated cases. The pastor of a weekly *ayuno* told us that she is visited regularly by departing migrants and their families. The day before we spoke with her, for example, she had been visited by 35 migrants en route to the United States. The young migrants, all men, had visited her with their families on several occasions before but had come en masse for a final blessing before setting off with the coyotes they had hired. Interviews with some migrants in Houston and migrant family members in San Pedro also told us about this type of migration counseling, and they acknowledged the presence of at least four area *ayunos* attended specifically for this purpose.

At any time during the preparation for the journey, the church has the spiritual power to withdraw its consent and advise against the trip. If the migrant's pastor feels that travel arrangements are not falling into place as expected, or if the emotional hardship for the family is perceived as being greater than the potential economic benefits of migration, the pastor will reverse his decision and advise the migrant to postpone or cancel the trip. If, on the other hand, the travel arrangements come together easily, one pastor told us "this is indicative of the will of God that the journey be prosperous."

The reality, of course, is that prophecies do not always come true. We learned of many cases of unsuccessful voyages by migrants whose migrations had been prophesized to be successful. In one illustrative case, which we learned of some months later from a San Pedro pastor, a prospective migrant we had met at an *ayuno* had been apprehended in Texas, detained and eventually deported to Guatemala. Upon returning to the village, we were told, he showed up almost immediately at a local *ayuno* seeking protection on his next voyage north. As the pastor explained to the senior author by phone, "the outcome is not necessarily that important. The poverty in this area is so great that people have no other alternative but to seek out God's miracles, regardless of the outcome."

### *Stage Three: The Journey*

Once a migrant has embarked on the journey north, reliance on the church for counsel and guidance often continues. The long trek from the highlands of Guatemala to Houston is a difficult and often dangerous one, stretching across two borders and over a thousand miles of open land. Death along the voyage is not uncommon. Indeed, while we were in the village news of the deaths of 27 Guatemalan migrants in Mexico reached San Pedro via the local newspaper.

The trip from San Pedro to Houston can take several weeks, and throughout this period, the migrant's family and pastor are on call. During the journey, the migrant's family continues to conduct prayer meetings at home and attend, in some cases, several *ayunos* a week in addition to formal church services. At the *ayunos* we attended were parents of migrants who had not heard from their children in some time. Fearing an unsafe arrival or perilous journey, the parents brought pictures or personal items of their children and the ministry prayed over them. In one case, a father had not heard from his son in several months. Not knowing whether he had arrived safely or not in the United States, he asked the pastor to ask God if his son and companions were lost. To the observable relief of the weeping father, the pastor informed the father that they had not yet arrived in the United States, but were safe in Mexico.

Perhaps most surprising was the crucial role the pastor assumes if a migrant is apprehended during his or her journey north. In this capacity, the pastor serves as a spiritual guide but also helps in more practical matters, if possible. The pastor may try to reach the migrant's kin in the United States or solicit outside help from someone like the senior author, who has contacts with the legal system, to help detained migrants. In two cases, the senior author was called by telephone in the United States by pastors from Guatemala to assist stranded or apprehended migrants. In the first case, a young Guatemalan woman was stranded near the border, unable to proceed because of INS checkpoints. She had called her pastor in Guatemala for religious counseling and they had prayed together over the phone. The pastor also told me about another young migrant from the village, who had passed the last two months in detention in Laredo. The young man had called the pastor for counsel; they too prayed together at length on the phone. The pastor went on to tell the senior author that he had spent the bulk of the last few days with the two would-be migrants' families, counseling and praying with them. Both children were the subjects of much prayer at the daily *ayunos* and more formal prayer services. The pastor went on to talk about the increasing dangers and costs of migrating north. He feared for his congregation, whom he said had no other choice at this point but to put their fate in the hands of God. Two other pastors also told of instances where they had prayed at length over the phone with apprehended migrants. Following the phone calls, the pastors then counseled the family at length. On rare occasions, such as a failed trip, the pastor will lend economic support to the destitute family, which in some cases has put their home up as collateral for the costly coyote fee.

### *Stage Four: The Arrival*

Once the migrant is successful in reaching the U.S. destination, he or she often maintains contact with the pastor in Guatemala, either directly or indirectly through family. News of a safe arrival takes several forms. Sometimes, calls are made directly to the pastor. In many cases, however, successful migrants send back pictures of themselves to document their safe and successful arrival. The family then brings these pictures to the *ayunos*, and the ministry continues to pray for the continued success and well being of the migrants. At one *ayuno* we attended, the presiding pastor showed us hundreds of photographs she had received from arriving migrants over the years. The numerous pictures are testimony to the continued interaction between the home religious community and the migrant, even as he or she is forging a new life in the United States. Indeed, at one of the churches we visited in the home community, the pastor asked his congregants to request pictures of their recently arrived family members in the United States so that the congregation could post them on one of the interior church walls.

In addition to keeping the pastor and religious community updated on one's progress in the United States, migrants and their families may continue to turn to the pastor for counseling. The family seeks counseling if the migration has adverse effects on the migrant's family situation. Several of the pastors gave accounts of wives of migrants who sought counseling after they learned that their husbands were involved or cohabiting with other women in the United States. In one dramatic case, the pastor presiding over a vigil told his congregation that the spouses of three of the attending women were in trouble. According to other attendees at the vigil with whom we spoke, at that moment three women stepped forward and told all present that their husbands were involved with other women in the United States. The pastor asked the women to come forward and receive the spirit of God. All present cried in prayer. According to this particular pastor, the primary goal of the church in times of family hardship such as this is to keep the well being of the family at the center of the spouse's focus.

### *Stage Five: The Role of the Ethnic Church in Immigrant Settlement*

The first organizational structure most Protestant San Pedro Maya migrants encounter in their new life in Houston is a Mayan Pentecostal church, of which there are three. Each of these Pentecostal churches also has an established counterpart in the home township of San Pedro, although no formal linkages have been developed between the home and receiving churches. As

in Guatemala, the Maya congregants in Houston bear the financial costs of maintaining the community churches, including the rent and charges for electricity. Funds to maintain the churches are gathered through regular fundraising activities. The pastors of two of the Houston Pentecostal churches are Guatemalan Maya, one of whom is from the home community of San Pedro. The remaining Pentecostal church is led by a Mexican American. The church members are overwhelmingly Maya and come from several highland municipalities.

Although no formal programs have been developed to ease the settlement of new migrants, the Pentecostal churches in Houston perform a series of important functions for newcomers. Because the churches provide for regular interaction between newcomers and the more established residents through multiple weekly services, newcomers are quickly linked to the various Maya social networks that can assist in finding housing, jobs, etc. The churches are so important in the initial settlement process that many Mayan Catholic newcomers convert to Pentecostal Protestantism soon after their arrival.

The churches also function to reproduce Maya culture and evangelical religious practices in the United States. Except for the noticeable absence of *ayunos*, the number and type of religious activities organized by the Maya Pentecostal churches in Houston closely resemble those held in the churches in the home community, including Sunday worship service, Bible classes, women's and men's group meetings, and youth group meetings. The committee structure of the church is also similar to that found in the home community, with members serving on maintenance committees, construction committees, band committees, etc. Indeed, except for the urban environment outside the churches, there is little to distinguish them from their Guatemalan counterparts. Members would agree, however, that they are less involved in religious activities in Houston than in Guatemala, reflecting their busy work schedules and the long distances from their homes at which churches are located. Although they try to make up for this by holding prayer services in their homes, they cannot recreate the collective involvement that they enjoyed in the home community.

Membership in one of the Houston Pentecostal churches does not preclude continued involvement with a Pentecostal church and pastor back home. Migrants continue to communicate with their pastors in Guatemala and to transmit updates to the religious community there through letters, goods and monies sent home via co-ethnic transnational couriers.

*Stage Six: The Development of Transnational Religious Linkages*

As the career of the migrant develops, and individuals and families in the Houston migrant community develop sufficient economic and legal resources, their behaviors and practices become increasingly transnational in nature, a pattern that is also demonstrated in studies of other immigrant groups, such as U.S. migrants from Grenada, St. Vincent, Haiti and the Philippines (Basch *et al.*, 1994) and those from the Dominican Republic (Levitt, 1998a). The transnational nature of the Maya community manifests itself in the Pentecostal church in several ways. Migrants and nonmigrants alike begin to distribute the celebration of family and community lifecycle events across churches in both Guatemala and Houston. For instance, migrants in Houston collect funds from other migrants and then reach out to churches in the home community to organize *quinzeneras* (fifteenth birthday celebrations for girls) for nonmigrant family members, or for funerals for deceased migrants who are sent back home for burial. Similarly, weddings celebrated in Houston are increasingly accompanied by visits from kin, friends, and *padrinos* (godparents) from back home. On several occasions, pastors from Houston have accompanied returning migrants to the home community to celebrate an event, such as the blessing of a newly constructed home. More recently, family, friends and members of church committees in the home community of San Pedro have begun to reach out to Houston family and friends for the reproduction and development of religious practices and institutions back home.

In each of the three Pentecostal churches in San Pedro in which we interviewed a substantial number of the members had family and friends in Houston. Interviews with pastors, committee members and parishioners in two of the smaller and more impoverished churches spoke of the enormous financial contributions family and friends in the Pentecostal churches in Houston had made to their churches. The techniques developed by members of each of the two churches to recruit financial help from the Houston community varied, but in both cases, the members themselves and their families, not the clergy, organized the remittance activities.

The first case involved a split in membership in a Pentecostal church in San Pedro. Half of the members wanted a new pastor, while the other half wanted to retain the same one. The current pastor and his remaining flock were eventually forced out of the church and temporarily set up services in the pastor's home. News of these events was relayed to migrants in Houston and other U.S. cities in early 1997, and a group of 80 migrants from the

home community organized a fundraising campaign. It took the group a little over two years to purchase the land and construct a new church. According to the pastor of this church, 79 percent of the Q135,000 (\$20,000) it cost to buy the land for the new church came directly from migrants. Most of the money was sent via Western Union directly to members of the construction committee of the church. The cost of the construction of the church itself was twice the cost of the land, almost Q245,000 (\$35,000). We were told that 35 percent of the cost for the building was sent directly by migrants, while the families of migrants provided another 60 percent. Thus, the combined direct and indirect migrant contribution totaled 95 percent of the cost of the new church. We were also told by the father of a migrant and member of the church that when his son last visited Guatemala, he had donated Q15,000 (\$2,000) to cover the cost of purchasing chairs and windows to be installed in time for the church's inauguration.

Another case involves a small Pentecostal church located in one of the farming settlements just outside the town center. The members of the church number about 200, and most are destitute. Their goal is to construct a home above the church for their pastor. In this case, it was members of the Construction Committee in the church who developed the strategy for securing funds from migrants in Houston. First, they began by writing the pastors of the churches in Houston, but were unsuccessful. As they explained it, "they have their own needs, so we weren't expecting much." They then approached two members of the Guatemalan church, who are also couriers of goods and money between Houston and San Pedro, and requested their help. On the next trip, the couriers separately visited the various Guatemalan Pentecostal churches in Houston soliciting funds. They also requested funds from families who were using their services to send goods back home. They were modestly successful. On their first trip, which was about two years ago, they collected about Q3,000 (\$400). Although the amounts collected in each trip are modest, the pot for the pastor's home is growing. The couriers continue their fundraising activities and anticipate that the pastor's home will be completed in the next year. Again, it is the members of the church and their families in Houston who drive the remittances. As one of the members of the committee told us, "Pastors come and go, sometimes as often as every two years. We do not. We can't depend on their strategies but must depend on our own. This is our church."

In summary, our data show that religious beliefs, practices and institutions are important in each of the six stages in the migration process. To

ignore religion is to ignore a major factor that impacts immigrants' decision to migrate as well as providing an important resource on their journey and in the settlement process.

### *CONCLUSION*

The findings of this study suggest that we must include religion in theories of contemporary international migration. The ways in which migrants actively make use of existing cultural institutions, such as the church and religious practices, throughout the various stages of the migration process, from the decision to migrate to the development of transnational communities, are critical to understanding contemporary international migration. Most immigration scholars have focused exclusively on economic motivations and social networks to explain the decision to migrate, while most religious scholars have limited their immigration concerns to the role of religious institutions in immigrant settlement. This case study of the migratory process of one Maya community illuminates the presence of religion in many stages of the migration process. As this study has shown, migrants innovatively employ religion to assist in the decision to migrate, to endure the perils of the voyage and to build transnational community structures.

Our findings are based on one case study – a Pentecostal Protestant group of undocumented Maya who face a difficult and often perilous trip north. There is some evidence that other undocumented groups facing similar dangers in their international journeys also make use of religion to endure the hardship. For example, undocumented Mexicans also rely on holy images to make sense of their migration north (Durand and Massey, 1995). Additional studies need to be conducted of other undocumented groups facing related risks in the process of migration, such as Haitians and Chinese who face the dangers of the high seas in their migration journeys, to see the extent to which they also rely on spiritual resources and religious practices. The hypothesis suggested here is that migrants make more use of, or rely more strongly on, religion when they feel little control over the situations they confront; when risks are extremely high. If this is indeed the case, then we should expect to find that religion is a substantial resource used by many undocumented migrant groups as a source of support for enduring the hardship of the journey.

It is also plausible that the particular religious beliefs and practices of Pentecostalism can explain our findings. Van Dijk's documentation of the role of Ghanaian Pentecostalism in the migration of Ghanaians to the Netherlands



(1997) suggests that, indeed, Pentecostalism provides the conditions to foster religion as an important resource in migration. It could be the case that theological differences have impact upon the extent to which migrants make use of religious practices in the migration process. To test this hypothesis, one must examine how migrant groups of different religions, such as Catholics, mainline Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, etc. use religion in their migrations. While we suspect that level of danger and immigrant status in the migration process are the most important conditions under which migrants turn to religion for support, further studies are needed to test the relative importance of immigration status, relative danger of the journey, ethnic origin and theological differences.

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