

## Latino Immigrants and their Perceptions of Religious Institutions: Cubans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans in Phoenix, Arizona

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### RESUMEN

Basado en trabajo de campo cualitativo y entrevistas con 54 inmigrantes, este artículo compara el lugar que ocupan las instituciones religiosas en las vidas de los inmigrantes guatemaltecos, salvadoreños y cubanos en Phoenix, Arizona. La iglesia siempre ha ocupado un lugar destacado en las vidas de los inmigrantes, pero no todos —ni siquiera todos los latinos— comparten las mismas visiones y experiencias. Las diferencias más notables se presentan entre los cubanos, por un lado, y los salvadoreños y guatemaltecos, por otro. Este ensayo muestra que para los inmigrantes el lugar de las instituciones religiosas y sus actividades están íntimamente ligados a los contextos de salida en sus países de origen y de destino en los Estados Unidos.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración internacional, 2. iglesia, 3. religión, 4. América Latina, 5. Phoenix.

### ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative fieldwork and interviews with 54 immigrants, this article compares the place that religious institutions occupy in the lives of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Cuban immigrants in Phoenix, Arizona. The church has always occupied a prominent place in the lives of immigrants, but not all groups —not even all Latinos— share the same views or experiences. The sharpest differences are between the Cubans, on the one hand, and the Salvadorans and Guatemalans, on the other. This article demonstrates that, for immigrants, the place of religious institutions and their activities are intimately linked to the broader contexts of exit from their countries of origin and arrival in the United States.

*Keywords:* 1. international migration, 2. church, 3. religion, 4. Latin America, 5. Phoenix.

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*Introduction\**

In this article I compare the place of religious institutions in the lives of Latino immigrants, focusing on how they view religious activities and attach meaning to their participation in the church. This is important because religious teachings and their institutional structures guide immigrants through different paths in the host society and often help them to achieve their goals (whether these are basic survival, socioeconomic advancement in the United States, or remaining connected to their home communities) and to cope (materially and spiritually) with the difficulties in their lives. Thus, religious institutions may also influence immigrants' long-term objectives in the host society (Menjívar, n.d.).

The church has always occupied a prominent place in the lives of immigrants in the United States through the provision of an intricate welfare system to serve the needs of newcomers.<sup>1</sup> This was the case with turn-of-last-century immigrants, such as Italian, Irish, and Jewish newcomers, as well as with contemporary immigrants, such as Koreans, Vietnamese, Salvadorans, and Cubans. As Warner (1993, p. 1058) observes, the massive migration of Catholics, Jews, and German Lutherans contributed to increase the sociological relevance of religious identity itself. Much of the early research interest in the lives of immigrants focused on whether religious institutions facilitated the immigrants' assimilation in the host society. This early interest gave way to new foci in studies of post-1965 immigration, but religious institutions have remained central in immigrant life, as reflected in a recent resurgence of studies of immigrant religious communities (Kim, 1991; Kim, 1994; Warner and Wittner, 1998; Menjívar, 1999, and Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). Thus, as Herberg (1960) observed in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, religion is a fundamental category of identity and association in society through which immigrants can find a place in American life.

I examine the place of religious institutions in the lives of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Cuban immigrants in Phoenix, Arizona, all "new" groups to a destination that has predominantly received Mexican immigrants. This is not only a new destination for these groups—the overwhelming majority arrived either directly from their countries or from California in the 1990s—but it is a destination where these immigrants, even when their numbers are combined, do not represent the majority of the Latino popu-

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the importance of churches, not of religion—a focus I maintain throughout this article.

lation. I argue that the place of religious institutions in the lives of these immigrants—and what these institutions' activities mean for them—is intimately linked to the broader contexts of exit and arrival. Although the church has been central in the lives of immigrants who arrive in the United States, not all immigrant groups—not even all Latinos—share the same views or experiences. Pulido (1995) observes that different groups, even when they are socioculturally as close as Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, will have different interpretations of religiosity, the sacred, and religious symbols. Also, we know from the work of Dolan and his associates that Latino immigrant Catholics are not all alike. They have arrived at different times, from different societies, and for different reasons, and they have brought with them different resources and skills (Dolan and Figueroa Deck, 1994; Dolan and Hinojosa, 1994, and Dolan and Vidal, 1994). This article builds on this premise and focuses on how these different experiences shape these immigrants' perceptions of institutional religious activities and the church. This examination might prove helpful to ultimately understand immigrant life as well as the place of immigrants in the host society.

A central point of this article is its comparative angle, which offers an opportunity to examine groups that may be similar in some respects but that differ in those key aspects that shape the meaning immigrants attach to religious institutions in their lives. The participants in this study can be grouped into a single category as “Latinos”, “Hispanics”, or “Latino Immigrants”, because they share the same language, generally the same culture, and often the same religious affiliations. However, there are important differences among them that shape their experiences and perceptions of religion and the church. For instance, Cubans leave a sociopolitical system that has placed severe constraints on religious participation, particularly in traditional Christian churches. Salvadorans and Guatemalans, on the other hand, originate in countries where culture and religious traditions often fuse, and religious institutions have been pivotal before, during, and after the turbulent years of civil unrest, when thousands fled their homelands. Also, within these national origin groups, not everyone shares the same views. Men and women, and people of different social classes, ethnicities, and races often have different experiences in the church—both in their homelands and in the United States. Upon arrival in the United States, these groups are received in a vastly dissimilar fashion, even though they could all be classified—not only the Cubans—as political refugees. Thus, the contrasts between the dissimilar sociopolitical and economic systems that Cubans and Salvadorans and Guatemalans leave, and the different contexts of reception that await them, provide a fruitful opportunity to examine how these larger contexts affect their views of and experiences in the church and with religion. These similarities and contrasts strengthen the comparative angle between these groups.

The context of reception is as important as that of exit because the legal

definition of these groups has important consequences for their lives. U.S. reception for the immigrants in this study has varied greatly from the refugee status accorded to the earlier Cuban arrivals, to the regular immigrant status granted to more recent ones, and, in contrast, the unrecognized (undocumented) refugee status accorded to the Salvadorans and Guatemalans. These different statuses place these immigrants in different positions both before U.S. law and in their communities, including religious ones, in the receiving destinations. Whereas the U.S. government has extended a generous hand to Cubans and has provided assistance for their resettlement, it has not done the same for Central Americans. This duality reflects the state of affairs of diplomatic relations between the United States and the immigrants' countries of origin more than it does the immigrants' own plight. I argue that these immigrants' experiences with religious institutions, both in their home countries and in their destination, shape their perceptions of the church and their place in it. This has implications for the immigrants' links to their homelands as well as for their incorporation in the host society.

I focus on how immigrants perceive and attach meaning to religious institutions, and compare the experiences of Cubans with those of Salvadorans and Guatemalans, grouping the last two into a single category. Although I recognize important sociodemographic and cultural differences between Salvadorans and Guatemalans (even within these nationalities, as well),<sup>2</sup> for analytical purposes, I group them together because, as we shall see later, the contexts of exit and of arrival (and the views of these immigrants) are similar enough to warrant a single categorization. Also, despite important differences among the churches that these immigrants join (or, at least, contact), such as Catholic and Evangelical ones (see Menjívar, n.d.), in this article I do not make these distinctions so as not to obfuscate the analysis with more levels of comparison. (However, I do mention differences when appropriate, without fully integrating them analytically.) Catholic and Evangelical churches have assisted newcomers in a variety of ways and following different approaches, with the former focusing on setting up community-level programs, and the latter focusing on individuals and their salvation (see Menjívar, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> I present a general theoretical backdrop first, then a brief description of the contexts of exit and entry, followed by a description of the data and methods. In the empirical section I

<sup>2</sup> The religious landscape in these countries also varies. After undergoing a long process of change in Guatemala, many Guatemalans converted to Evangelicalism--Guatemala now has a higher proportion of Evangelicals than many other Latin American countries, including El Salvador and certainly Cuba. Thus, in countries like Guatemala, Protestants have been accumulating political power at the local and national levels (Gaskill, 1997). However, generally, gaining more converts has not necessarily translated into political power, as these churches still occupy "a subaltern position in the Latin American religious landscape" (Bastian, 1986, p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> Practices and organizational structures in these churches are not static. For instance, according to Courcy (1999), the Catholic parish reflects strategies of adaptation to new forces and realities.

discuss two aspects of the immigrants' views of the place of the church in their lives. Finally, I offer general, though tentative, conclusions about the place of religious institutions in the lives of immigrants.

### *Immigrants and Religion*

Immigration involves not only crossing territorial borders but also physical, social, cultural, and psychological borders that shape and define relations, systems of meaning, membership, and worldviews of everyday experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, and Berger, 1967). Smith (1978) observes that immigration itself is often a "theologizing experience", where religion provides an ethical slant and the resources that nourish the immigrants' outlook and with which they can react to the confusion and alienation that result from their uprooting. Religion (and its institutional expression) offers important psychological comfort to immigrants, but it also plays a critical institutional role, as it provides an anchorage for people resettling in a foreign land (Gleason, 1992, p. 168). Many immigrants are already familiar with the churches they join, and often the church is one of the most supportive and welcoming host institutions, particularly for those who arrive to live in difficult circumstances (Menjívar, n.d.). Churches —mostly the Catholic and mainline Protestant— offer newcomers material and financial support, legal counsel, access to medical care and housing, and they lobby for less stringent immigration policies. Immigrants also create new churches, such as Evangelical congregations, and bring new expressions of the faith to long-established ones. Moreover, in responding to the needs of the new flock, established churches change, so that in the interaction between new immigrants and the host society's religious spaces, transformation occurs both ways.

Immigrants have always maintained ties with their communities of origin while simultaneously attempting to become part of the host society. With wide-ranging innovations in transportation and communication and the increasing global economic interdependence of contemporary capitalism, many of today's immigrants can more easily remain active in their homeland communities through various means, such as remittances, telephone conversations and video conferencing, and continued streams of immigrants (Menjívar, 1999). Immigrants have also remained connected to their communities of origin through religious institutions. Recently, researchers have noted the important place of religious institutional ties with home communities, which provide another arena for immigrants to remain connected to their homelands (Levitt, 1998; Warner and Wittner, 1998, and Menjívar, 1999). Thus, in general, religious institutions not only have helped immigrants settle in the host society but have provided links for the immigrants to remain connected to their homelands.

The immigrants' perceptions of their participation in institutional reli-

gious activities, and what these mean to them, are not independent of the broader context that immigrants leave and into which they arrive. We know that the contexts of exit and arrival are critical in immigrants' lives. The context of exit determines what resources —social, financial, human— immigrants bring with them. Broader forces in the receiving context influence vitally immigrants' everyday lives, as they shape the structure of opportunities available to newcomers (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996, and Menjívar, 2000). Thus, together, the structural conditions in the contexts of exit and reception determine whether immigrants will be eligible to access society's benefits or will become some of the host society's most vulnerable and marginal members. Because these contexts are so critical for the immigrants' incorporation, it is plausible to assume that these broader structures will also affect immigrants' perception of the church and its activities. The place of the institutional expressions of the faith in the immigrants' homelands, and the immigrants' resources in the receiving communities, will shape immigrants' perception of religious institutions and their activities. These religious spaces may assist immigrants to achieve their goals, but this is not a homogenous process in which all groups experience the church's assistance in the same way, even if they belong to the same church or to the same group. Thus, whereas religious institutions guide immigrants in the settlement process in the host society, the end result remains conditioned by the broader contexts within which the particular migratory movement takes place.

### *Contexts of Exit and Reception*

Cubans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans originate in countries with internal political dissension (and intense turmoil at times) aggravated by the same external actors, but the social, political, and economic systems of these societies are highly dissimilar, and the place of religious institutions in them reflects this variation. The Catholic Church was weak in Cuban society, and it never had as profound an impact there as it did on the rest of the Spanish colonies in Latin America (Pérez, 1994, p. 147). The 1959 Cuban revolution diminished the church's social functions and importance even more (Bonome-Moreno, Véliz-Olivares, and Sánchez-Alvisa, 1994), to the point where participation in religious affairs was only merely tolerated if not barred altogether. To make education accessible to all, the revolutionary government nationalized all schools, including the private Catholic ones, which prompted massive emigration of the religious workers running those schools (see Pérez, 1994). Although religious activities in traditional Christian churches were discouraged, the revolution tolerated participation in Afro-Cuban churches. Prejudice against blacks had persisted even after the abolition of slavery (and members of Afro-Cuban reli-

gions were harassed after the establishment of the Republic in 1902), so allowing the blacks' religious expressions was part of an effort to redress race inequalities that had previously disfavored this group (Nodal, 1986). Recently, there has been a revival of different religions in Cuba, but the Catholic Church remains politically and ideologically neutral, and its position in internal affairs is relatively weak. Its relations to the state shape the place of the church in Cuban society. As a socialist state, the Cuban government regulates the lives of its citizens, making the basic necessities—education, health care, and housing—available to all by controlling the distribution of food, jobs, and other goods in society. This context diminishes the place of institutions—such as the church—which in other contexts would attempt to fill a void and provide basic necessities to people in need.

Salvadorans and Guatemalans hail from a vastly different context, where church and state have had a different relationship. The church, historically, has played a key role in the political and social life of Guatemala and El Salvador, and before, during, and after the civil wars and political turmoil of recent decades, the church has continued to play a pivotal role. Catholic and Evangelical churches, among others—actively engage in the political and ideological life of these societies, with certain religious groups supporting those seeking to promote social change and others backing those fighting to maintain the status quo. In the 1980s branches of the Catholic Church condemned the repression of the indigenous population of Guatemala and fought for the rights of the poor in El Salvador (Jerez, 1997), while others supported the governments in power. Importantly, in contrast to the Cuban case, the church has not remained politically neutral. Moreover, one's place in a rigid social structure determines access to health care, education, housing, and to other goods and benefits of society. Consequently, the distribution of goods is highly unequal, and the government does not engage in redressing these inequalities. In this sociopolitical system, nongovernmental organizations (often religion-based, and usually having limited resources) frequently step in to assist the poor and others in need.

Although Cubans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans arrive at the same destination, the specific contexts of their reception are as dissimilar as the ones they leave. U.S. immigration law gives differential treatment to Cubans and Central Americans because Cuba has hostile relations with the United States whereas Guatemala and El Salvador have close U.S. links. This differential treatment translates into a well-developed resettlement infrastructure for Cubans (because refugee and, lately, immigrant status has been conferred automatically upon them at entry), and an absence of that infrastructure for Central Americans, who have been considered economic migrants, vulnerable to deportation (see Menjívar, 2000). Cubans arrive in the United States through an institutionalized federal program managed by the Cuban Refugee Resettlement Program. For instance, two

voluntary agencies, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Catholic Social Services, have facilitated their move to Phoenix. As leading agencies responsible for the resettlement of refugees in the United States, Catholic Social Services and the IRC work in partnership with the federal government to determine the location and placement of incoming refugees (Skop, 2001). These agencies have helped resettle more than 2,000 recent Cuban arrivals in the Phoenix area. According to an IRC reception-and-placement coordinator, when refugees arrive, they receive shelter and food for the first 45 days, a week-long orientation, assistance with completing forms necessary to receive welfare and social security cards, medical screening, and, finally, job placement. Other assistance, such as counseling, English courses, and school referrals continue in the three months following a refugee's initial arrival. Refugees are placed in particular Catholic Social Services and IRC-sponsored apartment complexes, usually located near the agency's main office, so there is easy access to the agency (Skop and Menjívar, 2001).

Despite the political strife they left behind in their countries, the U.S. government has never recognized Salvadorans and Guatemalans as refugees because doing so would have contradicted U.S. support to those governments during their decades of civil unrest. Therefore, many of these immigrants were *de facto* refugees who lacked *de jure* recognition (Smith and Tarallo, 1992). Salvadorans and Guatemalans were not only deportable but also ineligible for a battery of assistance that the government makes available to officially recognized refugees. In the absence of state aid, churches have stepped in to fill the void, and they have not only recognized the plight of these immigrants but have actively worked to improve their lot. Thus, the U.S. government has taken responsibility for the Cubans' resettlement (channeling assistance through community organizations, such as Catholic Charities and the IRC, and providing them with a substantial package of assistance), while churches of different denominations have stepped in to assist Guatemalans and Salvadorans. This assistance has included creating sanctuaries throughout the country to protect these immigrants from deportation, providing them with settlement assistance, championing the legal struggle that eventually granted Temporary Protected Status to Salvadorans and an opportunity for both nationalities to resubmit asylum applications,<sup>4</sup> and issuing pastoral calls to remind their flock to welcome immigrants in their communities. Smaller Evangelical churches have not created similar support infrastructures; nonetheless, they have been vital in the lives of many immigrants. To be sure, there have been many secular community organizations that have assisted Central Americans, but religious organizations have been pivotal in coordinating such help or in complementing it.

<sup>4</sup> American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh legislation passed in 1990 accomplished this.



*Data and Methods*

The data for this article come from a multiple-year study of new Latino immigration to the Phoenix metropolitan area.<sup>5</sup> In the initial stages of the study it was clear that there is not a “Little San Salvador” or “Little Havana” or “Little Any-Other-Latin American Capital City” in the Phoenix Metropolitan area-yet. There are pockets of newcomer settlements throughout the metro area, but these cannot be distinguished along national or ethnic lines. Instead, these concentrations host a mixture of new Latino immigrants. Given their low-paying jobs, these immigrants have gathered where they can find low-income housing, which is accompanied by the usual host of problems, such as crime and drugs. With the exception of seven informants, all study participants live in neighborhoods characterized by high crime rates, dilapidated and abandoned houses, and graffiti-laden walls.

We used a purposive approach to identify potential study participants and contacted them in sports and social clubs, community organizations that aid migrants, and neighborhood shops and restaurants, places where we also conducted participant observation. We selected immigrants according to two general criteria: They must have been at least 18 years old at the time they left their countries, and they must have arrived in Phoenix in the 1990s. Informants chose the location of the interviews-usually their homes, which gave us the opportunity to gain valuable insights into their lives. We conducted all interviews in Spanish. These lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours, and except for four, all were tape-recorded. These methods cannot produce statistically generalizable results, but they are best in accessing hard-to-reach populations, and they also generate immensely rich information about these immigrants’ lives. Thus, our data provide a rare glimpse into the rich amalgam of Latin American-origin immigrants in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Since 1998, we have interviewed 14 Guatemalans, 20 Cubans, and 20 Salvadorans, at least half of whom have been re-interviewed one or more times.<sup>6</sup> Fifty-seven percent are women, and the average age is 27.2 years. More than half of the Central Americans arrived from California and the rest from their respective countries. The Cubans all arrived to Phoenix directly from Cuba, and the majority arrived in the second half of the 1990s. Their occupations in their homelands varied widely, from veterinarians, civil engineers, professors, teachers, instructors, beauticians, black-market dealers-mostly among the Cubans-to electricians, plumbers, agricultural workers, market vendors, students, soldiers, and factory and maq-

<sup>5</sup> I conducted the research for this study with the assistance of five doctoral students. Thus, in the methods and data section, I use the plural pronoun to refer to the fieldwork, since data collection occurred with their collaboration. I have recognized them by name in the acknowledgments.

<sup>6</sup> The larger group also includes Mexicans, Hondurans, and Colombians.

uiladora workers—mostly among the Central Americans. In contrast, their U.S. occupations are strikingly homogeneous. With the exception of three Salvadorans and one Guatemalan who own businesses, the rest of the study participants—including the Cubans—held jobs in the low end of the service sector, such as hotel chambermaids, cafeteria servers, janitors, baby-sitters, laundromat attendants, painters, and workers at neighborhood McDonald’s restaurants.

*The Church and Immigrants’ Participation  
in Receiving Communities*

Two aspects of religious views emerged in this study to help to understand the immigrants’ perceptions of the religious institutions in their lives. The first is linked to how the context of exit shapes the immigrants’ views of their participation in religious institutions and church activities. The other aspect is related to how the context of arrival influences the immigrants’ perceptions of church activities. Together, these two aspects demonstrate how the exit and arrival contexts influence immigrants’ perceptions, and how the frameworks developed within those social milieus help the immigrants to make sense of religious institutions (and of their own worlds, more generally) in the host society.

*Participation in Religious Institutions*

To understand the relationship between churches and immigrants, one must look at their response to and participation in religious activities and church worship. The immigrants in this study differ in their views of the place of religious institutions in their lives, but one of the most striking (and consistent) differences is between the views of Cubans and those of Salvadorans and Guatemalans. Generally, Cubans separated the spiritual from the institutional expressions of religion, while the Central Americans did not tend to do so. This separation seems to have its roots in the place of the church in their country of origin. In a study of a shrine in Miami in honor of *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, patroness of Cuba), Tweed (1997) notes that Cubans had a somewhat underdeveloped interest in institutional religion, while, at the same time, they described themselves as Catholics. In the Phoenix study, although most Cubans pointed out that they believed in God, they also said that they were simply “unaccustomed” to participating in institutional expressions of these beliefs because the government in their homeland discouraged such activities.

Cubans tended to explain their lack of participation in institutional expressions of religion in terms of their secular lives back in Cuba. Ismaris,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I use pseudonyms instead of the study participants’ real names. To give a sense of the partici-

a 33-year-old accountant who now works as a housekeeper at a local hotel, explained why she “did not have any religion”:

I'm telling you, no religion, I have no religion. Let me explain. When I say no religion, I don't mean that we don't believe in God. We do. Do you understand me? But we believe [in God], as we say, in a more vulgar way, our own way. Look, you can see over there [on a table in the living room] a votive candle for St. Jude. But what happens is that we don't have a religion. We don't go to church because, back in Cuba, if you went to church or said that you were religious, you couldn't study, and you would have been [negatively] affected. You couldn't inculcate that in your children, or else they would have suffered consequences, like not being able to go to the university. Now it's different [in Cuba], but I still don't understand how Fidel thought of the Pope's visit to Cuba. He's just too smart. There's a reason for why he allowed it now, because this was completely unheard of before.

Federico, a 24-year-old veterinarian who was also a police officer in Cuba and now works as an electrician, shared the same view: “I don't go to church, but I believe in God and think that I should not harm anyone. I try to be good to others. That's it. That's my religion. I don't believe in the church or in going to church or in the saints. You know, I wasn't brought up that way at all”. And Julia, a 50-year-old technician and black-market dealer who now works replastering pools, explained:

*Chica*, until recently, I didn't believe in anything. But since a few years ago, miraculous things have happened to me. So, I have started to believe in God. But I don't profess any religion. Well, I don't go to church, that's what I mean. I believe in my own way, like a Cuban Catholic would. You believe [in God], but you don't have to attend a church, since we don't have that tradition.

Over and over again, Cubans mentioned that they were believers, who had believed in God even back in Cuba, but they talked about “believing in God” in their “own way”. This attitude seems to be related to the place of the church (and of religion) in socialist countries, where, following Marxist doctrine, religion (and its institutional expression) is linked to social oppression and private ownership. The eradication of these obstacles through scientific planning, as well as the active cultivation of an atheist worldview, are seen as ways to correct past social evils.

Cubans were also quick to explain why they separated a belief in God from its institutional expression, sometimes making use of sophisticated frameworks to contextualize their explication. In the words of Carmen a 50-year-old civil engineer who now works as a cafeteria server:

The Cuban people went to church before the revolution because they were afraid of what might happen in the afterlife. They had to be religious because they had no secu-

pants' social location before and after migration, whenever I quote them, in addition to age and gender, I also include a profession or, when the person does not have a professional or technical degree, the number of years of schooling they have completed.

rity in this life. With the revolution this changed. Now they're Catholic [religious] again because they were oppressed for many years. You couldn't even go to church. But now the people are going back to the church as a form of protest against the state. You know that the state doesn't support religion, so people go to church. It's also a form of escape from the oppression that the Cuban people suffer. They are seeking all sorts of religions now to escape their reality.

When asked about her own religious participation, Carmen simply said:

My daughter believes in God; she was very involved in the church. But I think she realized that those are normal people with their virtues and defects, and she understood that she could communicate with God directly, that she didn't have to attend church. So she doesn't go to church, but she prays every night. But me, no, I never participated in any church because I have doubts. I don't know if God exists. If there were a supernatural being, people like Fidel or Saddam Hussein wouldn't exist. I remain skeptical about God. That's what you learn in a Communist country [laughs], to doubt the existence of God and other supernatural beings.

As in Carmen's words above, the Cubans' explanations were usually cast within the political and ideological environment that shaped life in their homeland, explanations that also demonstrated a good intellectual grasp of how such conditions affected their views. Rufino, a 62-year-old with a technical education who now works as a maitre d' at a local restaurant, echoes Carmen:

Yes, I'm a Christian, I believe in Christ, but I defend all religious and sects because I saw how they were persecuted in Cuba. Fidel persecuted not only Catholics, but also all who believed in any divine manifestation; he tried to eradicate religion from the country. But these days people are returning to church because the Cuban people want those human and spiritual values that are missing in Cuban society. So, in my family, now there are Catholics, Baptists, and other Protestants.

Otto, a 48-year-old former physical education instructor who now works at a bicycle repair shop, explained that Cubans might hesitate to participate in religious activities in the United States because their experiences with these activities back home may still be fresh in their minds:

You know, Cubans are still reluctant to approach the church because, as you know, this was prohibited in Cuba. They may say, if I go there, me busco un lío, tú sabes, (I'll get in trouble, you know). If you are religious in Cuba, you're discriminated against. In religious matters, the Cuban people are illiterate because the government didn't give us the opportunity to learn about what the church does.

Sometimes the Cubans would inadvertently say that they did not have a religion and then, immediately, correct themselves by providing an explanation that evinced the separation between the spiritual and the institutional expressions of their beliefs. Javier, a 39-year-old former physical education instructor who is currently unemployed, explained:

No, I have no religion now. Well, I was a Jehovah's Witness for some time, but at the moment, I'm not practicing. You know, in Cuba there are people who go to church, to churches with African roots, with Hispanic roots, all sorts of churches. But, what can I tell you? It's like a habit that we lost. People were accustomed to going [to church] on Sundays, but we lost this habit. First, education came, we became educated, and then [there was] the system, since you had to work on weekends. But even though religion was not discussed, beliefs were passed on in families. So, for instance, poor people in rural areas didn't go to church, but at home they had their saints, their virgins, their statues, and what have you.<sup>8</sup> What I'm telling you is that this all happened inside a home, but the habit of attending church was not there.<sup>9</sup> This issue of religion becomes a philosophical question for us.

Also, as in Javier's words, the explanations of the Cubans seemed more intellectualized, reflecting not only their higher educational levels but also their secular upbringing. As Leonardo, a 40-year-old former biochemistry professor who now works as a janitor at a local hotel, explained:

Look, we Cubans believe in God, and we have our, well, we believe in la Caridad del Cobre and other Catholic images. But we also have African influences; we have a mix. The Spaniards forced the black slaves to believe in their images and saints, in the Catholic religion. So the blacks created a mix, so for each Spanish saint or deity, the blacks had an African one. That's how we have our religion. So we have our [religious] beliefs, but they are our creation. Like religion itself, it's our creation, do you understand me? If you examine the question analytically, this is how it is.

For the Central Americans, on the other hand, spiritual beliefs and institutional expressions went hand in hand, and they would often speak of them interchangeably. When asked if they had religious beliefs, they would include in their answer how frequently (or infrequently) they attended church, or whether they went to mass on Sundays (among the Catholics), thus entangling the spiritual and institutional expressions of their religious beliefs. In their answers, they would mention a belief in God; however, they were more likely than the Cubans to link that belief to religious activities. When asked about their religion, instead of separating beliefs and institutional expressions of the faith (which the Cubans commonly did), Guatemalans and Salvadorans would focus almost exclusively on the institutional expression, as if a belief in God and its institutional expression were synonymous. For instance, I asked Josefina, a 50-year-old Salvadoran with a fourth grade education who now works at a factory making steering-wheel covers, about her religion. She simply responded: "I don't go to

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank one of my reviewers for reminding me that Cubans have engaged in non-institutional or "private" religious practices even before the revolution, as these constitute popular expressions of religiosity in Cuba. However, in the context of the current political system, more public or institutionalized expressions of the faith are discouraged and, thus, private expressions have taken on a different, perhaps more central, character for those who seek to practice a religion.

<sup>9</sup> Importantly, this "private" practice of the faith is not linked only to the current political system in Cuba. Syncretic elements of Santería and Catholicism are important elements of popular religiosity in Cuba, as are Mayan and Catholic elements among Catholic Guatemalan Mayans.

church because I don't trust what priests do. Even back in El Salvador, I didn't like going to church, so I have no religious beliefs". Similarly, her husband, Armando, explained that in lieu of going to church, he had found a "church" in his Alcoholic Anonymous group because they believed in God and were "practicing" by attending the group everyday and praying together "just like you do at church". Verónica, a 29-year-old former elementary-school teacher in Guatemala who now works at a flower shop, said that since she has been living in the United States she has "no religion any more". When I inquired what she meant, she explained that she no longer attended church regularly, and, thus, she considered herself to "be out of the church because to me, attending church means to have a relationship with God. You're supposed to go to church, to visit God in His home. Since I don't go [to church], I should not say that I have a religion".

Also in contrast with the Cubans, the Central Americans did not have the same intellectual grasp of the place of religion in their lives. Since, back in their homelands, religion and cultural traditions intertwined, and religious expressions and practices were thus omnipresent in everyday life, Guatemalans and Salvadorans were more likely to accept unquestioningly institutional religious expressions as almost "natural". For instance, Manuel, a 24-year-old Salvadoran with a ninth-grade education who sells ice-cream from a van and works at a brick factory, explained that, although he did not always agree with priests and what the church does, that he grew up "religious":

Back there [in El Salvador], everyone goes to church, even if they don't go all the time. It's our way of life, I think. I don't know, that's what we are taught from the time we're little. Look at me, even if I don't consider myself religious, I was forced to go to processions, to go to church during Holy Week, to do all those things that everyone does. Stores and everything closes on Friday [during Holy Week] so everyone is forced to observe the religious festivities, and you also get a chance to eat special dishes prepared during those days. These things are part of life there. Even now, I don't go to church at all; I only pray on my own if I'm in trouble [laughs]. But for some reason, I would like to baptize my children, to marry in the church some day, I don't know why [laughs]. You don't even ask yourself why you do these things. You do what everyone does and you're expected to do.

When I asked Verónica, she echoed Manuel's words:

It's almost automatic. You don't question anything, never ask yourself Why am I going to church? Is this the right thing to do? Can you imagine having time to raise these questions? Who does this? People will think, this one is either crazy or in sin [laughs]. You go to church because that's what you're supposed to do, period. I think it's tradition. One follows tradition. That's why we go to church.

The Cubans, in contrast, viewed such activities in a more critical light, questioning why certain activities take or do not happen within the con-

finer of the church and using their heightened understanding of the place of the church to make sense of the institutional expressions of the faith.

Even though the perceptions of the church in their lives differed between the Cubans and the Central Americans, members of both groups participated in the religious activities of various churches in Phoenix. When asked if they participated in such activities or if they attended church, there was one answer common to all, and it is related to the context in which these immigrants now live. Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Cubans alike spoke of various constraints, such as tight work schedules and geographical distances, which sometimes prevented them from attending the church of their preference or attending church altogether. For instance, Nora, a 19-year-old Guatemalan with a second-grade education who works at a McDonald's, explained that she would very much like to attend the Lutheran church where she has felt welcome, but her work schedule does not allow her to do so. "I work on weekends, so I can't ever make it to the services, but when I'm off, I go, and it's beautiful". Leonardo, the Cuban man introduced earlier, echoed her words and explained that when he arrived, he sought the church, particularly when he was depressed, but now his work schedule is too tight, and he can no longer attend church on Sundays.

Sometimes it was geographical distance that prevented people from attending church, as they would rather attend a church that they "knew", perhaps where a friend or a family member attended, than go to an unfamiliar one, or to their parish church, even if it was closer to home. This was the case of Isabel, a 40-year-old Guatemalan with a high-school education who works at a dry-cleaning. In her answer, she not only brings up the issue of distance, but also the link between her religious beliefs and their institutional expressions: "I am Catholic, well, mas o menos (more or less) Catholic. Why more or less? Because I don't follow what it takes to be a true Catholic. I don't go to mass. I don't live near a church. No, that one [a church located about three blocks from her house], I don't know it. I don't know anyone there. So, I don't go to mass on Sundays". Given the constraints on their ability to attend a particular church, the study participants would sometimes attend a church to which they did not belong, simply out of convenience, without necessarily integrating syncretic elements in this practice. For María Elena, a 45-year-old illiterate woman from El Salvador, the Catholic church she would have liked to attend was too far away, even by bus, so she switched to a Lutheran one, much closer to home. She explained:

I used to be Catholic back in my country. But since I've been here, I've been going to the pastor's [Lutheran] church. No, I haven't changed my beliefs; I'm not a Lutheran now. No, I haven't changed religions or feel that in my heart I belong to both. The only reason I go to the Lutheran [church] and not the Catholic [church] is because this church is close by, and since I don't have a car, I can walk there.

This observation parallels what Garelli (1999) describes as the territorial mobility of religious believers, where people chose not only whether to believe but also when, and where, to express their faith, which makes churches “compete” for followers.

### *Help from the Church*

The Catholic church and mainline Protestant churches in the United States have developed intricate systems to serve the needs of newcomers, and Evangelical churches, often smaller in size, have also provided immigrants with vital support, even in the absence of the wide-ranging networks of the larger churches. Although the approach to providing immigrants with support varies and may have different implications for the lives of the immigrants, a point I make elsewhere (Menjívar, n.d.), here I will not separate them, since, analytically, I am interested in how immigrants perceive help from churches more generally. Thus, given that churches of different denominations have provided immigrant newcomers with a wide range of support, I asked the study participants for their views about such assistance. In this respect, once again there was a striking contrast between the responses of the Cubans and those of the Guatemalans and Salvadorans, which is indicative of how the context of reception shapes the different roles the church has in the lives of these immigrants, and in turn, how the immigrants perceive the church’s assistance.

Immigrants in all three groups mentioned that they had received help from a church, but the kinds of help differed. For instance, whereas Cubans said that they had received more spiritual help and moral support, the Central Americans had received, in addition to this kind of help, material and financial support as well. For Leonardo, a Cuban, this is how attending a Lutheran church has helped:

When I arrived here, I sought the church. When I was depressed, I would go to mass. Yes, I have found support in the church, but it’s been mostly spiritual support. The pastor has been nice to me, he’s been very patient, and he’s even visited me here at home. We have talked a lot. Having a person who listens is sometimes what you need the most. So, yes, you can find a lot of support by going to church.

Here is how the same church has helped Eugenia, a 21-year-old Guatemalan former student who now helps her mother cleaning houses:

I think that the church is in a position to help people in need. [It helps] with clothes, things like that, but also through prayer. I have received help, lots of help, because the pastor and his son call us just to ask how we are. Sometimes they give us beans, rice, clothes for the children, a toy [for the children] here and there, like that. Other times they just call us on the phone, and we talk. So, yes, I find support in my church.



Some Central Americans even frequented churches of different denominations, simply because they had found support in both. For instance, Anabell, a Salvadoran, attended a Catholic and a Lutheran church because in both she had received the help that she could not have obtained elsewhere, such as food, clothing, and loans of money, which allowed her to survive.

When I asked Silvia, a 60-year-old former teacher from Cuba who now baby-sits her granddaughter, in what ways has the church helped her, she also focused on the different kinds of help:

Since I was a child, I've been a Baptist but, now, I'm in the Evangelical church because the pastors preach in Spanish and in English, so it's better for me. And this church has helped me a lot. They have given me lots of emotional help, advice, moral support, you know. Some people I know at church need other things, like rides to a doctor's office or clothing. And people in the church give these to them. I haven't needed that, but if I ever do, I think I can obtain this kind of help from my church, too.

The Guatemalans and Salvadorans also emphasized that help should be not only spiritual or moral but also material and financial because they had no other institutional source for this kind of help. For instance, María Elena observed: "Yes, I think the church should help. If not the church, who else? [laughs] There are many people who need food, clothes; and the church can help those who are in most need because there is no one else we can turn to for help". Alberto, a 29-year-old former soldier from El Salvador who now works for a landscape company, echoed María: "I come to church every week. They help everyone with all sorts of things. Sometimes you don't have money to pay the rent or a bill or you need clothes or shoes, they help you with that here. This is the only place where one can find this kind of help".

Not surprisingly, given the official receptions for Cubans and for Central Americans, they are in need of different types of support, and the church provides accordingly. Leonardo, from Cuba, had one of the most introspective responses that points not only to the two dissimilar receptions for the two groups but also to the more advantageous position of the Cubans with regard to their human-capital potential and how this affects the types of assistance they need and can obtain from a church:

Look, the church tries to help a lot of immigrants, like the Mexicans and other Latin Americans who are true believers. Over there on 7th Street, there's a Catholic church, and many people go there for help. These people seek help in many other churches, too. But not all immigrants can be categorized in the same way. You know, the Mexicans and the other Latinos are not like the Cubans, right? [laughs] No, I'm not discriminating against them, but you've been interviewing them and Cubans, and have you noticed the difference? Don't you think the difference is obvious? I like them, they're kind, but you know, the Mexicans have lower educational levels and are happy to earn \$5.70 per hour even if they've been working for 17 years in the same place. With the Cubans, it is different because we come with higher levels of education and a different outlook and

expectations. So, the church will help in different ways. It won't be the same for Mexicans as for the Cubans, do you understand me? We just don't have the same needs, and, so, the churches cannot help us all in the same way, you know.

The Guatemalans and Salvadorans differed not only in the kinds of assistance they received from the churches but also in their views of such support. For instance, the Central Americans were more likely to view such help as the church's responsibility (mostly among Catholics or those who attended Catholic churches), and they even expected the church to provide such support. In the words of Carolina, a 38-year-old Guatemalan who owned a small business in Guatemala and now works as a janitor:

Yes, the church should help those in need. It should give them support, like give them clothes if that's what they need, or food if they're hungry. The church can't close its doors on people because we're all humans, and if the church ignores them, they would stop being humans. This is the nature of the church, to help anyone in need, regardless of who they are. The church should help those who are weak in their faith; it should organize groups to help them, to converse with them. We know that our faith can move mountains, so everything is possible when one acts from within our faith.

In explaining their views, Guatemalans and Salvadorans (mostly among the Catholics) usually invoked religious teachings that call for the church to help those in need. When asked why she thought the church should be involved in helping immigrants, Claudia, a 28-year-old former teacher from El Salvador who now baby-sits sporadically, responded: "There's a simple reason for that. Our faith tells us that we have to help our *prójimo* (fellow human beings), our brothers and sisters, without trying to find out how or where they come from, and we are all brothers and sisters, and since the church is our leader in our faith, it should take the lead, the responsibility to set the example for the rest of us". And Elvira, a 32-year-old former nurse in El Salvador who now works at a convalescent home, explained: "The church should help everyone because we are all God's children, so the church should be responsible for helping God's children in need". Some Guatemalans and Salvadorans (particularly those who did political work or were active in progressive brands of Catholicism in their home countries) emphasized the church's social engagement, believed that it should be involved in denouncing social injustices, and thought this was one of the main missions of the church.

I do not mean to imply that Guatemalans and Salvadorans have an excessively homogeneous image of religious institutions' activities. A few of the study participants were a bit cynical in their views and did not think churches should be involved in helping immigrants. For instance, Josefina and her son, Manuel, mentioned that they did not trust priests, and, thus, they did not see why these religious workers should be involved in assisting people in need. In Josefina's words: "No, I don't seek out the church for help, and I don't think they should help because they may have their own

programs [agendas], and that's not good. I don't know who would respond to their invitations to seek them". Generally, however, the Central Americans saw help from the church as one of the few resources on which they could count, and such assistance as the church's responsibility, with explanations cast against religious doctrine. Even the individual-centered approach of the Evangelical churches, which emphasizes ritual and prayer, was perceived as important help and as the mission of the church.

The Cubans were not always sure if or how the church should help those in need, given that, in their experience, the U.S. government has set up programs to assist them in their resettlement. Otto and Federico, for instance, when first asked if the church should help immigrants, responded that they were not sure why the church should do so. Also, Cubans did not link religious teachings with the church's mission to help—as the Central Americans repeatedly did—and they had alternative explanations for when or how the church could provide assistance. Carmen explained her views: "I think that immigrants should obtain help from whoever is willing to assist them. I think the churches help some people. But you should remember that when they help people, no matter what religion the people are, [the churches do it] to win over people [converts]. That's how they help those in need". Although Cubans knew that Catholic Charities was involved in helping with their resettlement, they were well aware that these are secular programs, which are independent of the religious activities of the Catholic Church. For instance, Federico, who emphasized that he is not religious and never has been, mentioned that whenever Cubans arrive without family in the United States, the church assists them, "but through their offices, not the chapels. You don't have to go to church or pray [to be helped]". Along these lines, Otto observed: "I received support from the church, but it's not the church that we go to when we get help. I think the help was coming from the government, and the churches were in charge of distributing it. I just don't think the church has the power to help us or to determine what to do with us. There must be someone, the state perhaps, involved in helping us".

Guatemalans and Salvadorans, as well as some Cubans who thought that the church could help, often made a distinction between those who deserved to be helped and those who did not. The Cubans were more likely to make a connection between practicing religion and meriting assistance. As Otto explains: "I don't know. Well, this help [from the church] would be charity. Yes, the church should probably help, but only the religious [individuals], those who attend church. But I don't think the church should help me; the church has no obligation to help us, people who are not religious". Guatemalans and Salvadorans were more likely to link merit to "morally" correct behavior. Lourdes, a 28-year-old Salvadoran with a business-administration degree who now works as a store clerk, explained: "Yes, the church should help immigrants, but one has to earn it. Through our deeds, honesty, and humbleness, we earn the

right to be helped. The church should not reward people who do not abide by certain principles. We should remember that our mission is to help one another, but not if they are not behaving according to God's principles". And Isabel, from Guatemala, observed:

There are some people who have come here because they've done ugly things in their countries, so I'm not sure if the church should help them because they have sinned and don't deserve [the church's] help. But the majority of us are here because we want to help out our families there. I would not have risked my life coming here if it hadn't been for my family. We are not here to harm anyone, so I think the church could give us a hand.

### *Discussion and Concluding Remarks*

A few points can be made regarding the importance of religious institutions in the lives of the immigrants in this study. Even though, generally, the church and religious activities become central in the lives of these individuals after they migrate, this does not happen uniformly for all immigrants. The place of the church, in the contexts of exit and reception, significantly shape immigrants' perceptions and, ultimately, their participation, in religious activities and institutions. For instance, because the immigrants in this study all come from Latin America—where the church, particularly the Catholic Church, has played a critical role historically—we might expect that the meanings they attach to religious institutions would be similar. The cases in this study do not support that assumption. The Cubans in this study (grew up in and) left a society that did not place great value on participation in religious activities, where those who engaged in such practices would sometimes face hostility or retaliation. The Guatemalans and Salvadorans, on the other hand, left societies immersed in religious traditions, where lines of demarcation between cultural and religious practices were often blurred, and religious expressions were also cultural manifestations. Thus, given the very different places of institutionalized religious expressions of faith for the Cubans and the Central Americans in the contexts of exit, their views of the church and its place in their lives also differs. Although they may profess a belief in God, not all have the same views of its institutional expressions. Also, the different educational levels of the two groups (which reflect the societal structures and distribution of resources in their homelands, thus forming part of the context of exit) provide them with different tools to understand and make sense of religious institutions and their activities. Thus, in the popular religion/institutional religion continuum, Cubans appear more “intellectualized” (and less institutionalized), whereas Salvadorans and Guatemalans seem to be more “institutionalized” and less “intellectualized”.<sup>10</sup> Cubans are not the

<sup>10</sup> I thank Luis Rodolfo Morán Quiroz for calling my attention to this difference.

only ones who separate their religious belief from its institutional expressions, as there are many who are “believers” but do not express their faith institutionally. What is noteworthy here is the contrast to more “institutionalized” believers, which sharpens the comparative angle that helps to unearth the factors that might shape such differences.

Once in the United States, Cubans have access to resettlement assistance provided by the U.S. government, which is often channeled through local nonprofit organizations. The U.S. government could have extended the same assistance to Central Americans since they were also leaving situations of extreme danger caused by political turmoil. However, the government has not provided them with any formal assistance for resettlement or protection from deportation, and thus, Central Americans have resorted to community organizations, such as churches, for such help. In the receiving context, therefore, religious institutions take on a more fundamental role for Central Americans, by providing them with the resources that the immigrants themselves deem necessary. This assistance ranges from legal counsel to financial assistance to pay for a month’s rent, from organizational strategies to deal with problems in their neighborhoods to a kind word in a desperate moment. Thus, for immigrants in need, who are without formal sources of financial or material support, the church today, as was the case historically, may continue to provide avenues to improve their lot (Warner, 1993). This does not mean that religious institutions lose importance for immigrants like the Cubans. For them, the church offers not only an important source of emotional and spiritual support, but also an opportunity to fulfill a need in their lives that, in their eyes, their homeland government had denied them. Tweed (1997) notes that the shrine in Miami he studied serves as a center where Cubans construct their national identity in exile, and the rituals that Cuban devotees associate with this shrine mediate a fusion between nationalism and religion. In this sense, some Cubans even conceive of religious participation as a political act and, as with other ideological issues and regulations in Cuba, personalize in Fidel Castro those ideologies that do not support religious engagement. In sum, it is noteworthy that institutional expressions of faith do not have the same meaning for all immigrants, not even for those who tend to be grouped in the same pan-ethnic categories, as are the immigrants in this study.

How might these different perceptions affect the immigrants’ long-term incorporation into the host society or their efforts to maintain ties with their homelands? Some scholars may argue that an all-encompassing institution such as the church, where immigrants, like many Central Americans in this study, can find solace and friendship, spiritual comfort and material support, may stand in the way of their assimilation into the host society. However, as W.I. Thomas (cited in Janowitz, 1966) noted for the Polish immigrants he studied, institutions such as the church, far from isolating newcomers from American life, provide the organizational vehi-

cles that allow them to participate in it. Importantly, however, immigrants' religious participation and its effects on their long-term objectives are not independent of the broader contexts of exit and reception they experience. Whether or not religious participation paves the way for immigrants to realize their objectives (in the host or home countries) is intimately related to the resources of the receiving families and communities and how the body of law reconstitutes each immigrant group. Immigrants "assimilate" only to the environments that their resources-what they bring with them and what they encounter-allow them, and not all may do so at the same rate. Thus, whereas churches assist and guide immigrants in the receiving context, not all immigrants, even in the same churches or from the same group, have the same experiences. The end result remains conditioned largely by the place of religious institutions in the homeland and in the host society, and by the structure of opportunities available to the particular immigrant group, in the context and at the time of their arrival.

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