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When Faith Travels: Religion in Diaspora and Migration

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Introduction

Faith travels. It crosses oceans with suitcases and memory, it settles into rented rooms and shared kitchens, and it takes root in city sidewalks where languages mingle and fragrances from distant kitchens drift together. This book begins from a simple observation: migration reshapes belief. When people move, practices move with them—but they do not arrive unchanged. Rituals are reinterpreted, institutions are rebuilt, and everyday piety is recalibrated to new rhythms of work, law, and neighborhood. What emerges are hybrid religious forms that express both continuity and invention, knitting together communities across borders while staking claims to belonging in unfamiliar places.

The chapters that follow approach migration and religion as mutually constitutive processes. Rather than treating faith merely as a private refuge from the shocks of displacement, we read it as a social infrastructure that organizes care, circulates resources, and narrates moral worlds. Congregations double as job networks and child-care hubs; pilgrimages become circuits of commerce and return; prayers travel as voice notes and livestreams; offerings ride remittance corridors alongside money and news. In these entanglements, belief is not only sustained—it is re-specified, translated, and sometimes contested.

Our case studies from Latin America, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East ground these claims in lived experience. In Latin American diasporas, we see Catholic continuities entwined with Pentecostal expansions and Afro-Atlantic traditions that sacralize new urban spaces. South Asian migrations illuminate how temples, mosques, gurdwaras, and churches renegotiate authority through language, caste, class, and sect, while youth fashion hybrid theologies that speak to life in multicultural schools and platformed economies. African movements highlight charismatic Christianities, dynamic Islamic networks, and indigenous revivals that travel through music, media, and entrepreneurial ministry. Middle Eastern trajectories—often shaped by conflict and refuge—reveal plural traditions rebuilding under conditions of surveillance and humanitarian governance. Across these regions, migrants sustain cross-border religious ties that bind distant households and re-map the sacred on transnational scales.

Because religion in diaspora is both intimate and institutional, we work across levels of analysis: the home, the street, the congregation, the city, and the network.

Methodologically, the book integrates ethnography, spatial mapping, archival sources, and digital trace analysis to capture how practices are embedded in material objects, urban design, and platform infrastructures. We attend to gendered and generational dynamics, to how legal regimes enable or constrain religious expression, and to the

politics of security that differentially authorize public ritual. Throughout, we foreground migrant voices and leadership, while being attentive to power: whose traditions are recognized, funded, or policed—and why.

This is a resource for practitioners as well as scholars. Social workers will find tools for partnering with faith-based organizations that often provide first-response care, mental health support, and gateways to housing and employment. Urban planners will encounter design principles for multifaith neighborhoods, from festival routes and soundscapes to equitable access to worship space. Educators and community organizers will see how congregations function as civic hubs, where youth programs, language classes, and mutual aid cultivate skills and solidarities that spill beyond religious walls. For researchers, the book synthesizes theories of transnationalism, material religion, and migration studies, offering a comparative frame that bridges regions often studied in isolation.

We also write with ethical commitments. Studying mobile lives demands reflexivity about representation, consent, and risk—especially when participants navigate precarious legal status or politicized identities. We therefore adopt collaborative approaches, sharing analyses with community partners and attending to the afterlives of research in policy debates and media narratives. Our aim is to avoid romanticizing resilience while recognizing the creativity with which migrants make sacred meaning amid uncertainty.

The book is organized to move from concepts to practices to applications and regional depth. Early chapters map core theories and methods; middle chapters track key processes—ritual adaptation, leadership, material culture, digital networks, and securitization; practitioner-oriented chapters translate insights into concrete guidance for social work and planning; concluding regional chapters offer sustained case studies from Latin America, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Readers may follow the sequence or dip into sections aligned with their work.

Ultimately, *When Faith Travels* argues that religion is not an afterthought in migration but one of its central theaters—where belonging is rehearsed, institutions are built, and futures are imagined across borders. To understand contemporary cities, welfare systems, and international ties, we must understand how people carry, transform, and transmit the sacred. The pages ahead invite you into that journey: to trace the routes belief takes, to witness the communities it organizes, and to consider how more just, plural, and welcoming societies can be planned and practiced.

Chapter One: Mapping the Sacred on the Move: Theories and Methods

To truly grasp how faith journeys with people across borders, we need a robust toolkit of theories and methods. This isn't just an academic exercise; it's about making sense of the vibrant, often complex, ways in which migrants live their beliefs, build communities, and maintain connections with their homelands. We're looking for explanations that go beyond simple assumptions, recognizing that migration isn't a one-way street, nor is religion a static entity.

One foundational concept we grapple with is "diaspora." Historically tied to the Jewish experience of dispersal, the term has expanded to describe immigrant communities who feel a connection to their homeland and actively reproduce their cultural and religious traditions in new settings. However, applying the term broadly to any global religion simply because it spans many ethnic groups can muddy the conceptual waters. For our purposes, a religious diaspora requires not only an experience of migration, but also an understanding of "home" in a religious sense, extending beyond a mere patch of land to encompass that which fosters a feeling of belonging for those living elsewhere.

At a macro level, we encounter theories that examine the broad structural conditions influencing migration, often characterized as "push" and "pull" factors. Push factors might include economic hardship, persecution, or conflict in the country of origin, while pull factors are the attractions of a host country, such as economic opportunities or religious freedom. While these theories provide a useful starting point, they can sometimes oversimplify the intricate decision-making processes involved in migration, often overlooking that most migration doesn't originate from the absolute poorest segments of a population.

Moving beyond the macro, "new economics of labor migration" (NELM) and "household theory approaches" shift our focus to the micro-level decisions of families or households, rather than isolated individuals. This perspective views migration as a form of risk-sharing behavior, where families collectively decide to send members abroad, taking into account factors beyond just maximizing income. It acknowledges the social processes involved, such as the crucial role of families and networks in understanding migration.

Then there are theories that attempt to bridge the gap between macro and micro levels. "Migration systems theory" and "social network theory" highlight that migration often occurs within established systems and networks. These networks, formed by

family, friends, and co-ethnics, are vital in assisting migrants with everything from the initial move to settling in and maintaining ties with their home countries. These connections are not simply about practical support; they also play a significant role in identity reconstruction and community building.

A key theoretical lens for understanding religion in migration is "transnationalism." This concept recognizes that migrants often maintain multifaceted ties that span across national borders, engaging simultaneously in social, economic, cultural, and religious life in both their origin and destination countries. Religious transnationalism specifically refers to the cross-border flows of religious practices, beliefs, and identities, connecting migrants with their left-behind families and reshaping spiritual and socio-spatial landscapes. It challenges the traditional view of faith as spatially fixed, highlighting its fluidity and adaptability.

Within transnationalism, the idea of "religious hybridity" is particularly compelling. As people move and settle, their religious practices often undergo transformations, blending with new cultural contexts. This isn't a dilution of faith, but a dynamic process of redefinition, leading to new, syncretic cultural expressions. This hybridity can occur at both individual and communal levels, influenced by globalization, migration, and interfaith dialogue. For example, a Christian church in a host country might adapt its worship to accommodate the diverse forms of ascribing worth to God brought by migrants from various cultures.

To truly capture the nuances of faith on the move, our methodological approach must be equally diverse and dynamic. "Ethnography," with its emphasis on immersive fieldwork and participant observation, remains a cornerstone. It allows researchers to delve into the lived experiences of religious communities, documenting beliefs, practices, and social structures, and understanding how religion shapes identity and relationships. This means spending extended periods living among religious practitioners, engaging in their rituals, and conducting in-depth interviews.

However, in our increasingly interconnected world, traditional ethnography is often complemented by "digital ethnography." This approach adapts ethnographic techniques to the digital realm, studying religious practices and communities as they exist and interact online through social networks, forums, and websites. Digital ethnography allows us to trace transnational religious networks through digital means, recognizing that mobile devices and communication platforms are crucial in sustaining these cross-border connections. It helps us understand how online and offline religious contexts blend within digital culture.

Beyond direct observation and digital immersion, we employ "spatial mapping." Religious buildings are not just places of worship; they are significant nodes in the urban landscape, shaping and being shaped by the city's socio-cultural fabric. Using tools like Geographic Information Systems (GIS), we can analyze the distribution,

density, and architectural characteristics of religious edifices, understanding their interplay with the broader urban matrix. This helps us to see how religious places respond to population mobility and urban socio-spatial differentiation.

Another critical methodological component is the study of "material religion." This approach shifts focus from abstract beliefs to the tangible objects, spaces, and actions through which religion is enacted. It recognizes that the materiality of religious life is not incidental but integral to its constitution. This means examining everything from sacred objects and dress to foodways and the aesthetic dimensions of religious practice. It allows us to understand how rituals are reinterpreted and adapted in new environments, often through the transformation of physical items.

"Archival sources" provide a historical depth that ethnographic and digital methods might miss. By delving into historical records, community newsletters, organizational documents, and personal testimonies, we can trace the evolution of religious communities in diaspora over time. This helps us to understand how current practices are rooted in past experiences and how transnational ties have been sustained across generations. Such sources can reveal the institutional rebuilding efforts and the recalibration of piety to new social and legal rhythms.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, our research integrates various qualitative methods such as case studies, comparative analysis, and in-depth interviews. Case studies allow for a deep dive into specific communities, offering rich, contextualized insights into their unique experiences. Comparative and cross-cultural methods, on the other hand, enable us to identify common patterns and significant variations across different religious traditions and migratory contexts. This dual approach ensures that our findings are both deeply nuanced and broadly applicable.

Interviewing migrants about their experiences is paramount, especially when exploring how transnational activities transform religious life in both sending and receiving countries. We acknowledge that migration can be a disruptive event, potentially alienating individuals from religious practice, but also offering opportunities for new or hybrid religious beliefs. By listening to migrant voices, we gain insight into their spiritual journeys, the challenges they face, and the creative ways they adapt their faith. This includes understanding how religious communities provide support for overcoming existential crises related to economic insecurity, loss of status, and cultural barriers.

Furthermore, recognizing the ethical commitments involved in studying mobile populations, especially those with precarious legal status, shapes our methodological choices. Collaborative approaches, where analyses are shared with community partners, are crucial. This ensures that our research is not extractive but contributes to the well-being and self-understanding of the communities we study. Attending to the afterlives of our research in policy debates and media narratives is also a critical

responsibility, aiming to avoid misrepresentation or unintended negative consequences.

Ultimately, mapping the sacred on the move requires us to be intellectually nimble, drawing from a variety of theoretical perspectives and employing a multi-sited, multi-methodological approach. We must be prepared to see religion not as a rigid set of doctrines, but as a living, breathing phenomenon that adapts, innovates, and reshapes itself in response to human mobility. This journey of understanding promises to reveal the profound ways in which faith continues to be a central, dynamic force in the lives of migrants and in the fabric of global societies.

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