

Chapter 12

Beyond Home and Return: Negotiating Religious Identity Across Time and Space Through the Prism of the American Experience

Peggy Levitt, Kristen Lucken, and Melissa Barnett

12.1 Introduction

Migration scholars now recognize that many people maintain, and have always maintained, ties to the countries they come from while they become part of the countries where they move. Immigrant incorporation and enduring transnational practices are not antithetical but simultaneous processes that mutually inform each other (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Newcomers and their children often use religious and cultural institutions to make a place for themselves in a new land and maintain homeland ties at the same time (Carnes and Yang 2004; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Freston 2004; Guest 2003; Levitt 2007; Menjívar 2002). Many predict, however, that transnational attachments will not last beyond the first generation (Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz et al. 2008). Transnational parents do not necessarily produce transnational children. Members of the second generation are not likely to participate in their ancestral homes with the same intensity and frequency as their parents, nor will homeland values and practices influence them as strongly.

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P. Levitt (✉)

Department of Sociology Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, USA
e-mail: plevitt@wellesley.edu

K. Lucken

Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA
e-mail: klucken@brandeis.edu

M. Barnett

MIT, Boston, MA, USA

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While we agree that the second generation will not be as active in their ancestral homes as their parents, we argue against dismissing outright the potential impact of growing up in a transnational social field. When children are raised in households, communities and organizations where people, goods, ideas and practices from their parents' countries of origin circulate on a regular basis, they are not only socialized into the rules and institutions of the countries where they live but also into those of the countries their families come from. They acquire social contacts and skills and gain access to social networks that are useful in both settings. They master several cultural repertoires that they can selectively deploy, if and when they want to, in response to the opportunities and challenges that confront them. In fact, a surprising number of children of immigrants 'return' in some way to their ancestral homes.

In this article, we argue for the need to take the parameters of the social fields that the second generation inhabits as an open question – to go beyond simply 'home' and 'return'. To do so, over the last 4 years, we have been studying religious identity construction among Indian American Hindu and Muslim undergraduate and graduate students.

Our study asks three questions. To what extent do these young people create religious identities using ideas, values, and role models from around the world? What are the sites and layers of the social fields they access to do so? Finally, how do the rooted aspects of religious experience influence the circulation of religious elements? In other words, which cultural elements travel easily and which are constrained by the cultural structures in place in the US, where our respondents live? Our goal is to study connections and fluidity across time and space but to also pay close attention to how boundaries and rootedness constrain circulation.

We find that our respondents create religious selves by combining their imaginings of their parents' religious upbringing with their own real and imagined experiences of religious life in the US, India, and other salient places around the world. They transcend false dichotomies like 'home' and 'host' and movement and rootedness. They do so in four broad patterns that we call *American-centric*, *Indian-centric*, *global-secular* and *global-religious*. Each is constructed in various combinations using elements from the different sites (i.e. Gujarat State, Boston, London) and layers (local, regional, national, global) of the transnational social fields that our respondents inhabit. What is inside 'Americanness', 'Islam', or 'Hinduism' is fluid and porous, changing as it moves across time and space.

But while our respondents may adopt an Indian, American, or global stance, they do so from their positions in the US. They construct religious assemblages using religious elements in motion from their firm base in America. Thus, the circulation of religious ideas, practices and objects filters through uniquely American cultural structures and traverses uniquely American organizational channels. These frames and channels allow some values and practices to travel easily while blocking others, creating an American-inflected version of a transnationally constituted global religious experience.

The findings we present are based on interviews with Gujarati-origin Muslim and Hindu undergraduate and graduate students, aged 18–29, living in the Boston metropolitan area. Boston is home to nearly ten colleges and universities, most of

which have South Asian, Hindu, and Muslim student organizations. Postgraduates can join their own cultural and professional organizations. While we recruited many of our respondents through these organizations, we also attempted to find respondents who did not belong to formal groups by posting to general campus email lists and through snowball sampling. To find additional respondents and to observe our respondents' cultural and religious lives in action, we attended holiday celebrations, cultural performances, student conferences, and student organization meetings. So far, we completed 57 interviews with 27 Muslims and 30 Hindus. This paper is based on our analysis of 30 interviews with Gujarati-origin Hindu and Muslim women.

12.2 Theoretical Debates

Methodological nationalism is the tendency to accept the nation-state and its boundaries as a given in social analysis (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). Because much of social science theory takes for granted that the nation-state is the natural, logical container within which social life takes place, researchers often take rootedness and incorporation in the nation as the norm, and social identities and practices enacted across state boundaries as the exception. But while nation-states are still extremely important, social life does not obey national boundaries.

While 'methodological nationalism' was originally coined to critique migration studies, similar weaknesses plague studies of religion. Rather than assuming that religious life stays primarily within contained spaces (be they religious traditions, congregations or nations), we begin with the idea of religious circulation and connection. We see religion not as a packageable, stable set of beliefs and practices rooted in a particular bounded time and space but as a contingent clustering of objects, bodies and beliefs that come together within a changing space laced with power and interests and shaped and reshaped by constant movement and contact. Religion is not a cohesive, rooted whole but a loosely constructed assemblage, created from actors, objects and ideas travelling at different rates and rhythms across the different scales and scopes of the social fields within which it takes shape.

Many aspects of religious life may move. Religious bodies, spirits, deities and souls carry religion; modes of religious organization and social movements travel. Ideas, practices and symbols also circulate. These goods often have multiple carriers: objects and ideas piggyback onto or permeate seemingly non-religious objects and ideas. This is the stuff from which assemblages are made: the contingent encounter between religious actors, practices and objects that come together in loose or tightly-coupled ways (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Marcus and Saka 2006). Assemblages continuously add and shed new elements as they circulate through the social fields' various layers and scales.

The cultural elements from which these assemblages are created are a constrained resource with which actors can construct identities from a limited range of possible materials (Alexander and Smith 2010). From this perspective, culture is

context: a set of discourses and assumptions embedded in institutions or repertoires of meaning that are marshalled to deal with specific dilemmas and purposes. The religious actor appropriates objects and practices from across borders, but these do not necessarily move freely. God may need no passport, but religious beliefs and believers regularly encounter obstacles and roadblocks along their way. The laws, norms and cultures of the geographies they traverse influence their path. We, therefore, look empirically at the actual boundaries and layers of the social fields in which our respondents are embedded (not just at the home and host country), at the elements they use within these fields to construct religious identities, and at how culture shapes and constrains the resulting assemblage.

The geographies that religious actors and objects traverse are not virgin territories. Places become spaces because of their history, politics and culture. They are deeply textured and layered with meaning. They may encompass well-worn networks with long, consistent histories, or uncertain social fields plagued by civil unrest, climatic disaster, or social change. One such geography is the British post-colonial space, where religious followers of South Asian descent carry contemporary Hinduism and Islam to and between Europe, North America, the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa. Believers enact their religious lives against a common meta-cultural frame that is still influenced by British colonial assumptions about law, governance and social cohesion. Thus, a common ethos and set of social dynamics characterizes life in Mumbai, London, Johannesburg and Trinidad. These conceptual threads weave into very different local backdrops where they are vernacularized in different ways. Circulating religious elements and actors end up in terrains that are similar but different, familiar yet strange. This cultural scaffolding enables their journey but also restrains and controls it.

Different ideological and governance structures operate at all scales of transnational social fields. The broadest, most overarching of these structures is what Boli and Thomas (1999) call *world culture*, which includes models for the organization and regulation of religious life, as well as ideologies about religious freedom, pluralism, gender and religion. World culture encompasses notions of rights based on personhood rather than national citizenship. What we call *global religious* and *global secular* identities, which we describe below, are global not only because the young women in our study identify with global religious or global secular communities whose members live around the world, but also because these women draw upon and are restricted by global cultural elements when they create religious identities.

National context and history also strongly influence the geography of the social field and affect what can and cannot travel easily within it (Bramadat and Koenig 2009). Countries have unique philosophies of integration and narratives about what they are and who can belong. They also deploy different regimes of ethnic and religious diversity management. The US, for example, believes it is a country of immigrants, founded on principles of religious pluralism, while in India the religious default category is Hinduism. The US expects its newcomers to be people of faith and assumes their faith will fit within a Judaeo-Christian religious framework. In contrast, many people in India conflate Hinduism with Indianness. What we call *American-centric* and *Indian-centric* religious styles are framed nationally not only

by where our respondents locate themselves in space, but also by how they draw upon and are limited by elements from the national, as well as local and regional, levels of their social fields.

This ‘physical’ geography exists alongside, and sometimes supercedes, imagined and remembered sacred landscapes with topological properties of their own. Some believers think of themselves as living in a religious geography, such as the Kingdom of God or the Muslim *ummah*. They see themselves as religious global citizens abiding by religious and political sets of rights and responsibilities (Levitt 2007). Still others feel part of a historical landscape, a religious chain of memory connecting them to the past, present, and future (Hervieu-Léger 2000). When Cuban-Americans bring their newborns to be baptized into the Cuban nation at the national patron saint shrine they built in Miami, they root themselves in an imagined landscape that links the past, present and future. They induct these infants into a Cuba that existed in Havana in the past, that exists in the present in Miami, and that they hope to reclaim in Cuba in the future (Tweed 2006).

Within both real and imagined geographies, religious assemblages take shape and are transformed as they move. Yet their labels remain static and gloss over the tension and heterogeneity within them (Euben 2006). People use religious categories and geographies because they help them make sense of the world around them. To understand better the real and imagined geographies where our respondents locate themselves, we asked them to spell out what these categorical black boxes contain, where their materials come from, and how they change over time and across space.

12.3 Transnational Moral Geographies?

We found that the young women in our sample did, in fact, construct religious identities using materials from different sites in the social fields where they imagine themselves. They combined elements from places in North America, India, England, Africa and other salient locations where their co-ethnics or co-religionists live. We call this the *geographical axis of religious identification*. Our second axis – *the social axis of religious identification* – brings into focus how women draw upon elements from the various levels of the social fields in which they are embedded. These social fields are both horizontally broad and vertically deep. While they may include locations in India, the US or Africa, they are also comprised of a combination of local, regional, national and global social or political repertoires. When we refer to the ‘local’, we include interactions with family and peers at home or at school, participation in social and cultural organizations, or membership in nearby religious institutions. The ‘regional’ refers to the effect of growing up in parts of the US where there are few Indian families compared to living in New Jersey or New York, where there are large Indian-American communities. By the ‘national’, we mean the national policies, history and cultures in which our subjects are embedded, including the ways in which countries manage religious and ethnic diversity, as

well as their expectations about incorporating newcomers. The ‘global’ refers to circulating ‘global values packages’ concerning youth, gender, rights and religious organization (Levitt and Merry 2009).

We understand that conceptual categories are static by nature while human beings are not. The categories we outline allow us to loosely order the wide range of experiences our respondents described. No individual fits squarely or entirely within any category. Nor do we mean to suggest that the layers that make up transnational social fields are discrete or impermeable.

12.3.1 *American-Centric*

This group of second-generation, Gujarati-origin, Indian American women locate themselves largely in the context of the US: American institutions, culture, diversity management regimes and history exert the strongest influence over how they identify religiously. While they may have visited their ancestral homes or other places where co-ethnics reside, these locations do not exercise the same magnetic pull as the Indian ethnic community in the US. Christianity is also a strong force and a key marker against which they measure themselves. Some among this group we call *American-centric* classify themselves as religious, while others identify thoroughly with the American secular world.

Ekata, our first example, is a 22-year-old Hindu who grew up in Oklahoma during the 1990s surrounded by few other Indian American families. She did not learn to speak Gujarati or perform Indian dances like so many other Indian American friends, but she did learn about Hindu mythology by watching religious videos and reading the comic books that an aunt sent. She also learned about Hinduism and what it meant to be pious by watching her mother do *pujas* (religious rituals and prayers) with family members and friends, listening to her lessons and stories about faith, and observing the priest who came to their home to say blessings on important occasions. Ekata explained, ‘[My] parents raised me to believe Hinduism is a way of life and not [just] a religion. I feel the most stuff I learned was from watching my parents or listening to them say prayers and learning what it meant’.

Her Christian friends and neighbours also strongly shaped her faith. Attending an Episcopal school as a teenager exposed Ekata to Christian theology and values but also pushed her to clarify what Hinduism meant to her.

This prep school was an Episcopalian school. I would go to chapel every day, for years and years. I think that was kind of a good part, figuring out stuff for myself. In some ways, one would think that would be confusing. But kind of having to be surrounded and learning about Christianity is a big thing. The Episcopalian environment helped me realise what I liked about that or what I didn’t like about Christianity and then what I liked about Hinduism. Things I was so unclear on, or unsure of.

Her grandparents living in India were also distant but ever-present role models.

Like any grandkid I wanted to make them proud. For me, it was that I wanted to show them that I was a well-rounded person even though I grew up in America. As far as my grandparents – they were the validation I wanted ... Kind of that identity like you look to your elders sort of thing. You kind of just want to show, ‘Okay, I grew up somewhere else, but ... you just wanted them to [be] proud [of you]’.

When her grandfather passed away, Ekata struggled. ‘That was an important turning point. That was around when I was struggling with my Indian identity... It was just a huge wake-up call’. When she went back to India for her grandfather’s funeral, she watched her grandmother perform religious rituals and rites that she could not do or understand. She felt that she needed to become more practicing and better informed.

But although she has since studied and incorporated more elements from India into her identity and practice, it does not mean, she explains, that she has become more India-focused. She realizes that her relationship to India hinges strongly on her grandparents’ presence there. ‘Sometimes it felt like [India] only existed while I was there. It felt suspended every time I left because I was not physically there’. Although she feels more connected now and has greater access and understanding, she worries that her bonds are tenuous.

We see Ekata as American-centric, although her account also reveals that she is clearly influenced by people and ideas from other sites and layers of the social field she inhabits. While she has begun to incorporate more Hindu elements into her life, she uses them to construct a religious practice that fits with her lifestyle in the US. The social axes of her religious identity are primarily local, be they friends and family members in Oklahoma, in Vadodara in India, or her classmates in Boston. Regional factors also shape her experience. She grew up in the Midwest surrounded by few other Indian Americans in a place with very little religious diversity. Christianity pervades her world as the normative default category and she often measures herself against her real and imagined experience of it. She also selectively draws on global Indian culture, having been exposed to it through the children’s books and videos that circulate widely. Ultimately, however, at least for now, the religious assemblage she creates is primarily about Indian-Americanness.

12.3.2 *Indian-Centric*

A small group of women oriented themselves solely toward their ancestral homeland even though they grew up comfortably in an American setting. Longing to be ‘authentic’ Indians, these young women emulate the behaviour and values modelled by elders and peers they encountered during homeland trips or their imagination of religious life in India. In many cases, their families sent home remittances, supported charitable organizations, or participated in associations connected to India. We label this group *Indian-centric*.

Avanti grew up in an upper-middle-class suburb of Boston. As with Ekata, there were very few other Indian American students attending her high school. While

there was a Hindu temple nearby, her family only went on special occasions to ask for blessings from the priest. Avanti remembers going to the temple before she took her college entrance exams or when her sister first went off to graduate school. Although they were not very religious, Avanti says, her family socialized almost exclusively with other Indian families.

Every three years or so, Avanti's family would go visit her father's parents, who still lived in Gujarat. In this remote, rural village, she watched her grandmother care for the gods and goddesses in her *mandir* (small altar) each morning and listened to her stories about them although, she says, the stories faded as soon as she boarded the plane home. Still, she kept in touch with her Indian cousins, first by phone and then by Skype and e-mail. Over the years, she watched her father raise money to rebuild the elementary school he attended as a young boy. Though she travelled only infrequently to India, she still thought about her experiences there when she imagined the woman she hoped to become.

When she was a sophomore in high school, Avanti's father finally succumbed to his friend's urging to attend meetings of the Swadhyaya community, a religious social movement, with many Gujarati followers. Her father was smitten, and ultimately Avanti was too. The family began attending meetings each week. Eventually, Avanti attended summer camp, joined a Swadhyaya group at a nearby campus, and went back to India to study during her summer vacations. As she grew older, she became increasingly focused on India. It shaped her study plans and her thinking about her future professional life.

From her base in the US, Avanti is India-centric. She uses ideas, practices and material objects from India to construct a religious identity she wants to act upon in India. She belongs to a global religious organization, with members around the world, but rather than feeling part of a community of Indians around the world, she orients herself specifically toward India. It is her inspiration, the source that guides her practice, and the place where she wants to put her beliefs into action.

Her faith is also influenced by regional factors. The Swadhyaya movement takes shape within and, some would argue, is part and parcel of Gujarat state's neo-Hindu turn. Its critics claim it promotes a conservative version of Hindu practice that equates Indianness with Hinduism. The Swadhyaya community has outposts among Indian Americans throughout the US, but migrants in New York and New England founded its first chapters, which have strong organisational ties to India.

12.3.3 *Global-Secular*

We call a third group in our sample *global-secular*. These are young women who grew up in families with relatives living across the globe. Technologies like e-mail and Skype allow them to form close bonds to friends and relatives they rarely see. They also have the financial capability to create an Indian environment literally or virtually filled with friends and family at any time wherever they live. Most

members of this group do not identify as religious, although they do access cultural elements that often have religious associations.

Lakshmi, a 22-year-old Indian American whose relatives migrated from India to East Africa during British colonial rule, exemplifies this global-secular trajectory. Lakshmi's maternal grandparents relocated to Uganda while her paternal grandparents settled in Tanzania. When dictator Idi Amin expelled the South Asian population from Uganda in 1972, her extended family resettled as refugees in England, Canada and the US. As a result, Lakshmi came into regular contact with secular Indians scattered across the globe. Growing up, she says, it was not uncommon to stay completely within this ethnic milieu or to venture out tentatively, always knowing one would return.

Lakshmi reports she is in constant contact with friends and family, phoning, texting or Skyping them regularly. This is a group, she says, that lives, works and studies abroad and is as comfortable in London as they are in Bombay because they have the money and the cultural capital to recreate Indianness anywhere. Although she has only been to India once, she proclaims proudly, 'I identify as an Indian. Even though I might not be super-religious, it's still part of my identity. I think going to college had a huge impact on that... I ended up joining the South Asian society and took a lot of classes and learned more about my culture'.

Now, as a medical resident, Lakshmi wants to put into practice the values her parents taught her by working in global public health. She hopes one day to return to Uganda or India in order to spearhead a long-term public health project. When asked what compels her to give back to others, she explains, 'I do feel a responsibility to do some form of service work. But I wouldn't say I feel it's my responsibility as a Hindu or as the daughter of my parents... I just feel it comes from being a good human being'. She has internalized the values she learned at home and aspires to serve by being a 'good person' rather than a 'good Hindu'. She is also motivated by elements of a widely-circulating neo-liberal global values package that emphasizes development, modernity and progress.

Lakshmi locates herself squarely within a secular, Indian global space, although she lands there in part through her direct and indirect connections to global religious actors. She traverses religious and non-religious channels to arrive at a secular destination. From where she sits, religion and culture often overlap. While some of her cousins associate more strongly with religion, she identifies more closely with Indian culture. Yet both end up feeling connected to other Indians around the world.

Not just the Hindu young women in our sample identified as global secularists. Zahira, like Lakshmi, was also raised in a large Indian family scattered across the globe. She, too, maintains especially close ties to her cousins and wants to feel part of the secular global community. But as an Indian Muslim women, she feels pushed toward religion because the Indian cultural groups she encounters do not make space for those who identify with Islam.

Growing up, Zahira was often mistaken as white because she is light-skinned and does not appear 'typically Indian'. To meet other Indian Americans when she first went to college, she attended meetings of the South Asian Student Club but came away disappointed. She found that because she was Muslim, the members dismissed

her as not ‘authentically Indian’. In response, she gravitated toward Muslim student groups on campus where she found a more comfortable home.

Like so many of her peers, Zahira says, she also conflated ethnicity and religion: she saw this as a normal aspect of Indian life. Both Hindus and Muslims like to watch Bollywood movies and attend Indian festivals. The girls often do Indian dance. So it was not until college that she realized there was tension between culture and religion.

I’ve always identified myself as an Indian. But when I went to college, I actually tried to join the India club, and was thinking, ‘these are people who understand where I come from. They watch Bollywood movies and read everything I do’. I even tried to make myself more Indian than a lot of friends in school, or even my cousins. But the fact is, I don’t look like a typical Indian even though I identify myself as an Indian. So, on the first day of [college], I signed up for the India club. When I went to the line, there was a woman collecting the forms and chatting with people. And she turned to me and she said, ‘I’m so glad you could make it’, as if to say, ‘Thank you for exploring another culture’. It actually pushed me away.

Shocked and disappointed, Zahira sought out students whose religious lives more closely aligned with her own. She explains:

Within the first weeks of classes, I tried to join the India club and the Muslim club. I thought, if I don’t feel accepted at the India club, I could turn to the Muslim club. That’s actually the group I got more involved with. I felt in many ways the reaction of the India club really pushed me into the Muslim group ...

Like Lakshmi, Zahira identifies first and foremost with a global, primarily secular, Indian elite group. She is fluent in the markers of global Indianness, such as Bollywood, Indian fashion, and the diasporic music and literary scene. Her sense of belonging lies not in her attachment to a particular place in India, England or the US, but in her ability to construct Indianness in any context and against any national backdrop. But, unlike Lakshmi, Zahira feels pushed toward greater religiosity. She wants to be part of a global secular Indian community, but she finds she is only partially admitted because of its Hindu dominance. The Muslim members of this group must create their own version of global secularity.

12.3.4 *Global-Religious*

Lakshmi and Zahira identify with a global community that defines itself nationally or culturally. Members of our last group, the *global-religious*, think of themselves as belonging to a global religious community. Unlike Avanti, who also belonged to a transnational religious group but identified primarily with India, these young women embrace membership in a religious community that spans the globe. They feel connected to other members because they have access to the same institutions, literature, lectures, media, and religious teachers and leaders. Some in this group even go so far as to call themselves ‘religious global citizens’. Their religious identities go hand-in-hand with a unique set of rights and responsibilities that co-exist with, complement, and in some cases supercede the rights and responsibilities of

political citizenship. Some religious global citizens are *exclusive*, only feeling responsible for members of their own faith, while *inclusive* religious global citizens hear their faith as a call to care for all humankind (Levitt 2007).

On the surface, Ashna seems a lot like Lakshmi and Zahira. She, too, is part of the global diasporic elite and grew up outside New York City among a close circle of well-educated, affluent Indian families who maintained strong connections to relatives in North America, England, Australasia and Africa. While many members of her family were quite secular, Ashna and her parents were active members of the Swaminarayan Hindu community, another religious movement popular in Gujarat, where religion is the primary social glue.

That religion figures prominently in Ashna's life is not surprising. Both her parents were raised as devout Hindus. As a young girl, Ashna and her siblings attended temple regularly. Her grandparents also visited for long periods and modelled proper religious practice during their stays. As a teenager, Ashna took classes at the nearby Indian cultural association and attended religious summer camp, where she says she got a religious as well as cultural education. At camp, 'they pray and do yoga. They have a class about mythology and folklore. And every student picks an activity that they want to become better at, which usually relates to Indian culture. You could learn to play the sitar or other Indian instruments. You could learn a dance or Bollywood music'.

Although Ashna still considers herself a practising Swaminarayan, she now sees her membership as a stepping-stone into a worldwide faith community. She thinks she became 'so multicultural' because at school she was exposed to many people of many different faiths, especially Judaism. Her moral code emphasizes achievement and harmony: 'I think the biggest thing I've realized is to set goals for a given day and make sure those goals are accomplished. So I feel good about myself and once I feel good about myself, I realize I make others around me happy'. The social and geographic bases of her identity are primarily global. Not only does she identify with a worldwide community of faith rather than one of its national incarnations, she also draws upon universal 'self-help' principles such as harmony, rights and multiculturalism.

Yasmin's experience mirrors aspects of Ashna's. She is part of the Ismaili community, a Shi'a sect with practitioners in 25 countries. The 20 million Ismaili Muslims worldwide have created a dense network of institutions, including seven *Jama'at Khanas* in Houston alone, where Yasmin grew up.

While she strongly identifies as an American, Yasmin is also deeply enmeshed in global Ismaili associations, noting, 'Ismailis have very strong social networks and a system of social supports. There are whole structures set up for religious education, national and international, as well as regional'. Children are taught to volunteer and do service. They attend summer camps, and are strongly encouraged to feel responsible to the Ismaili community everywhere. During his 2008 visit to Texas for his Golden Jubilee year celebration, the Aga Khan, the Ismailis' cosmopolitan religious leader, encouraged his followers to be models of religious tolerance and pluralism.

Yasmin also clearly identifies with a global religious community. In fact, she feels a special sense of kinship to Hinduism. 'I feel a sort of spiritual linkage

between my faith and Hinduism. I like to not only think of the cultural ties but the intermingling of the theological aspects as well. [The two religions] have the same melodies, and the literary figures are the same. Ram and Krishna make an appearance in Ismaili texts'. These shared cultural elements make her feel connected to other Indians on campus. 'Sometimes I feel closer to the Hindu group on campus – I enjoy going to their *pujas* – just because their practices feel more like what I'm used to'. That Ismaili religious practice has its deepest roots in South Asia makes it no surprise that Yasmin feels at home with a Hindu cultural repertoire.

We see Yasmin as a paradigmatic inclusive religious global citizen. She identifies strongly as a member of a worldwide religious community not merely in India or the US, but in all the places where Ismailis live. Moreover, she constructs her religious identity in reference to a wide range of sources, including other practising Muslims around the world and the Hindus in India and the US. The sites and layers from which she fashions her faith traverse the world and extend from the local to the global. She interprets her faith as an invitation to be part of and responsible to the worldwide community.

12.4 Religious Identities in an American Cultural Context

Our cases illustrate the different ways the second generation creates religious identities using models, ideas and objects from diverse sites and layers of social experience that extend way beyond their actual or ancestral homes. But while our respondents' orientations and allegiances move and change as they mature and as they travel physically and virtually around the world, they do so from their rooted position in the US. American cultural frames and organizational arrangements strongly shape how our respondents construct and interpret religious assemblages. They enable and constrain movement by allowing some cultural elements to travel easily while blocking or channeling others. Our respondents' religious identities are rooted in motion, with access to diverse circulating elements that must then fit within particular cultural structures.

How does the American experience uniquely shape religious identities compared to that of England or South Africa? What expectations about religious life, pluralism, or diversity serve to channel the pace and direction of religion on the move? Who are the rule-makers in this national context and who are the rule-takers?

What unites various approaches to US pluralism, argues Bender (2011), is an enduring love affair with the existence, stability and benefits of American religious diversity. New groups arrive who are assumed to be equally capable of adopting Protestant congregational forms (Warner 1993), of competing willingly and readily in the religious market place (Finke and Stark 1992), and of embracing essentialized religious or ethnic identities that enable them to find a place at the country's multi-cultural table. These narratives are so strong and the institutional arrangements that undergird them so deep that we are often blinded as to who they include and who they leave out.

What our study reveals is not only that these different facets of quintessential American religious pluralism are shaped by forces outside the US, but also how much this layered American religious landscape channels and constrains religion in motion. Even when respondents appropriate elements from far away, they must fit them within the prevailing American cultural structures.

For one thing, our respondents grew up during America's multi-racial, interfaith moment. They are not only allowed to be 'religious', 'racial', or 'ethnic', they are encouraged and in some cases expected to be. To find their place within American multiculturalism, minorities are pressured to embrace abiding, unchanging cultural and racial essences (Johnson 2007; Kurien 2007). University life is a microcosm of the broader society. Just as resources and recognition are doled out to social groups that fit particular ethnic and religious labels and are assumed to be internally cohesive, so our respondents become fluent in the language and performance of diversity when they go to college. Even if they never thought about belonging to Swadhyaya or about being a practising Muslim in terms of race or ethnicity, when they go to university they must confront this racial-ethnic-religious triad.

Our respondents talked about this experience as transformative in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, joining the South Asian or Muslim Student Association put them in contact with students with whom they had a lot in common. Away from their parents' supervision, students began to re-evaluate their faith. They talked of learning to specify and formalize their religious beliefs and practices, transforming what were once informal, loosely-clustered assemblages of changing practices not linked to a particular cultural or racial milieu into clearer, more theologically based sets of beliefs. Private, infrequent religious expressions became regular, orchestrated group-based study and prayers. Some of our respondents celebrated these changes. They saw them as a logical part of taking responsibility for their own religious lives outside the context of their families. They felt proud that they had learned about the official trappings of their faith.

Other respondents felt trapped by the expectations of their co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic peers that they would automatically know and care about their ancestral home and faith. They often felt put in the position of being the 'spokesperson' for Hinduism or Islam. If they did not know enough, they felt pushed to learn more. If they did not want to participate in an 'identity-based' group, the way into the broader community was not always clear. Hinduism is not a codified set of practices and beliefs written in stone, one young woman told us. She, like others, resisted the urge to 'put her religion in a box', so it was easier to participate in interfaith activities with other 'boxable' religions. Another respondent talked about the struggles within her Muslim Student organization because young women from the Middle East or Arab-origin families had such different ways of doing things than Muslims from South or Southeast Asia. Arriving at a practice they could all agree upon, or figuring out what position they would take on world events, was not easy. Deciding how to showcase themselves to the broader campus community was harder still. In short, this group felt forced to participate in an organizational setting that privileged ethnicity and religion and used student organizations to categorize and manage

difference. From their perspective, the university should not be allocating resources on the expectation that all students want to participate in some identity group.

These respondents' comments also reflect the overwhelmingly Christian, if not Protestant, bias of the US religious context. Campus relations not only pivot on the assumption of singular, essential racial and ethnic differences, they are also made to fit within Christian-looking packages. Every student religious group is structured in a comparable way and given a comparable set of resources, thus allowing participants to engage in a similar set of internal and interfaith activities. There are generally spiritual advisors, study sessions, prayers and public holiday celebrations during which each group performs and explains itself to the broader community. These activities serve to package ethnic religion for practitioners and observers alike.

Most of our respondents felt that these were good things put in place by well-meaning people. They reflected on the days when only Christian or perhaps Jewish groups were recognized on college campuses. They felt that interfaith activities are by and large positive experiences. Yet some also remarked that there are other ways to do religion. Does the price of admission, of being able to be recognized and participate in a multicultural, interfaith campus, also mean that religious identities always have to look the same? 'For my cousins in India', reflected Sabrina, a 21-year-old Hindu, 'this would be a foreign world. They could never conceive of being Hindu outside the context of their family, of being an individual without the group. They live with their families when they go to college, and there aren't the same kind of student organizations. So the way my religious identity has evolved is very different from theirs'. Respondents also described what we think of as blockages or obstacles. The things they did not talk about indicated impediments or things that had difficulty travelling. For example, very few respondents mentioned caste. Either their parents did not discuss it, or they had difficulty grasping its social implications given their American upbringing. Their comments reflected a sense that there was an 'elephant in the room' that nobody wanted to discuss. Even online dating sites such as *Indiandating.com* avoid the subject of caste in personal profiles. 'I think it's for people who came straight from India', explained Shyama, aged 27. 'I really don't care too much'. Instead, she and her peers had been socialized to mark difference in the US way, by noting race or ethnicity, or by noting, as their parents did, the family names, occupations and places of residence that reveal class status. Social difference still matters, but it is measured using a different metric.

We also heard little about tensions between Hindus and Muslims, which was particularly striking considering their bitterness in Gujarat. Again, this might reflect respondents' somewhat incomplete and compartmentalized exposure to India and their upper-middle-class upbringing, which enables them to see themselves as above these kinds of conflict. They have also been reared on a diet of religious tolerance and ecumenicism that often side-steps head-on involvement with difference. Despite the university's focus on interfaith relations and multiculturalism, our respondents spoke loud and often about the pressure to be politically correct and to leave certain things unsaid. Over time, they became excruciatingly aware of the delicate dance they were expected to do, describing its outlines in elegant detail. 'We're supposed

to come and participate as equal, open partners', one woman said, 'but there are so many old resentments and hurts, it's just a really difficult thing to do'.

Growing up in a post-September 11th world loomed large in our respondents' lives, particularly for Muslims. It prompted many to re-examine what it meant to be a practising member of Islam. 'I think 9/11 really brought my identity into question', 25-year-old Samaa told us. 'People in the media were wondering, "What is Islam?" and making aspersions towards the faith. I started digging in and trying to understand Islam itself'. In response, several of the women with whom we spoke began to study Arabic or to read the Qur'an with renewed interest. Another young woman struggled with whether or not to wear a hijab and ultimately decided against it 'because [the hijab] sets people off'. Instead, she dons Western clothing like her peers and only reveals to people that she is Muslim after getting to know them. 'I can show people what it's like to be Muslim, they see that there are all kinds of [Muslims] in the world and that we're not all the same... I just hope I can serve as an example'.

Hindu respondents brought up September 11th much less frequently. When they did, it was often about its impact on the Indian American community. According to one young woman, before September 11th, common Indian roots transcended religious differences, but the terrorist attacks marked a turning point.

I think I was in seventh grade when 9/11 occurred. When I was in sixth grade, I met my Muslim [Indian] friends. It was cool like, 'Oh, you're brown. You're Indian'. 'Oh, you're Muslim? My family is Hindu'. And then we'd move on with life. I was just Indian. That's what mattered more. But, suddenly after 9/11 – not that I had to defend myself – but suddenly it was Muslims versus Hindus versus any other religion. It was Muslims versus everyone else. Everyone else had to label themselves, I feel. That's when I realised that I was calling myself a Hindu a lot more to people.

12.5 Conclusion

While previous scholarship suggests that transnational ties wane amongst the second generation, our study illustrates that some young people remain connected to people and places around the world, albeit with varying degrees of frequency and strength. They draw upon cultural elements available at the sites and levels of the transnational social fields they inhabit, accessing them through travel, technology and popular media and by participating in a variety of ethnic and religious organizations. Place is not static, nor is movement necessary for connecting to and making use of distant cultural and religious landscapes and communities.

Yet our respondents clearly constructed their identities from their firm base in the US. Religious objects, ideas and practices circulate through American-inflected cultural frames and organizational forms. They came to ground in social settings permeated by US assumptions about religious pluralism and ethnic and racial diversity. Thus, 'religion on the move' has its limits. These culturally-embedded pathways strongly influence the pace and ease of travel, as well as how religious ideas and practices land and take root.

Capturing religion in motion is a difficult business, but analyses that fail to do so are necessarily incomplete. We do not mean to suggest that everything circulates or regularly crosses borders. Indeed, one of our key findings is how cultural structures channel and constrain movement. What we are saying is that starting from an assumption of stasis and boundedness is likely to miss important aspects of the migration experience. Being open to the possibility of motion as opposed to rootedness and isolation, seems to better reflect our respondents' experiences.

Women are often the keepers of the cultural flame. They are charged with the primary responsibility for carrying on cultural traditions and passing them on to children. Indeed, many of our respondents' narratives revealed the central roles that their mothers and grandmothers played in shaping their religious identities. While some research finds an opening up of religious opportunities when religious community members migrate, other studies see immigrant religious communities as sites where hierarchy and patriarchy are reinforced. Women are disciplined and controlled even more when immigrant communities become more conservative. Our future work will look more closely at the experiences of the young men in our sample and examine how their differing roles and status within religious communities shape the nature of their religious assemblage construction. We will also look more closely at the role of class in shaping transnational religious identity construction.

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