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Immigration, Community Formation, Political Incorporation, and Why Religion Matters: Migration and Settlement Patterns of the Indian Diaspora

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Because of the secularity of sociology, religion remains a relatively marginal field of study and the insights of the sociology of religion are generally ignored or overlooked within other subfields. But religion can be a force that deeply influences personal, community, and national life in nonobvious ways through shaping the social and political structures of society. Consequently, including an analysis of religion as a fundamental factor of social life could greatly enrich and even transform many subfields of sociology. In this essay, I focus on the sociology of migration and immigration, my area of research, and show how religion plays a central role in social, economic, and political processes surrounding migration. Drawing on case studies of migration and immigration of groups from India based on my research and that of others, I discuss how religion, through a variety of indirect and direct mechanisms, shapes migration patterns, remittance use, social incorporation into receiving societies, and forms of political mobilization.

Key words: migration; immigration; Indian diaspora; religion; transnationalism; politics.

Although religion remains a relatively marginal field of study within the discipline of sociology, religion can deeply influence the individual, community, and nation as a fundamental, though often latent, factor of social and political life. In this essay, I focus on the sociology of migration and immigration, my area of research, and show how religion, through a variety of indirect and direct mechanisms, shapes migration patterns, remittance use, social incorporation into receiving societies, and forms of political mobilization.

I write as someone who did not have religion on my radar initially but stumbled into it by accident early in my career. I have subsequently found it springing

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up in all my projects in unexpected ways. As a graduate student, I had no training in the sociology of religion. I specialized in the sociology of development, and my dissertation project focused on the socioeconomic changes brought about by large-scale migration to the Middle East on sending communities in Kerala, India. Since the largest group of migrants from Kerala hailed from the Mappila Muslim community, I planned to focus on rural and urban differences in the impact of the migration on this group. After eight months of fieldwork (1988–1989), however, I discovered to my surprise and dismay that there were no significant rural–urban variations in the impact of migration. By then I had come across a range of direct and indirect evidence suggesting that ethnoreligious differences between the three major migrant communities in Kerala (Mappila Muslims, Ezhava Hindus, and Syrian Christians) were probably more significant than rural–urban differences in shaping the response to migration. Consequently, I changed my research design to focus on these differences and went on to study two more high-migrant rural villages in different parts of Kerala state, this time those that were dominated by Hindus and Christians, respectively.

MIGRATION, SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE IN HOME COMMUNITIES, AND RELIGION

The three ethnoreligious communities manifested striking differences in out-migration patterns and migration-induced social change. Mappila Muslim migrants were almost entirely male, specializing in trade and in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. They migrated through the help of relatives and friends, or illegally on visas granted to make religious pilgrimages such as the Haj. Ezhava Hindu migrants were also largely male, and they obtained jobs as technicians or skilled workers. They migrated using professional agents who charged a hefty fee to procure jobs and visas. Syrian Christian migrants included a large number of female nurses. Other male and female migrants were employed as clerks, semi-professionals, and professionals, and often the immediate family migrated as well. They were recruited directly by companies who arranged for their visas. The "status spending" of migrants also varied across the three communities. Mappila Muslims spent money on charitable and religious giving, Ezhava Hindus on elaborate life-cycle rituals, and Syrian Christians used remittances to provide large dowries for their daughters and for college "donations" to facilitate their children's admission into professional education programs.

Religion did not shape migration patterns directly, through religious dictates or practices, but indirectly, by determining the sociopolitical location of the three groups within colonial and postcolonial Kerala. This sociopolitical location in turn affected the educational and occupational profiles of each of the groups, their family structures, and their social networks, factors that were fundamental in structuring the migration flows. Gender norms and practices, shaped by the social location of each community and local articulations of religion, influenced

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which groups migrated from each community, the organization of remittance flows, and the restructuring of migrant households and communities. Concepts of honor and prestige that were similarly shaped by the social histories and religious frameworks of the three groups determined the types of conspicuous consumption behavior that migrant households engaged in (Kurien 2002).

The discovery that religion could shape migration and the impacts of migration within one geographical region in such profound ways was unexpected, especially since there was nothing in the literature to indicate that this would be the case. Most of the discussions regarding ethnicity and migration focused on differences among migrants from different *countries* in the receiving (largely Western) societies. More specifically, the research on Kerala focused on the economic consequences of the migration and did not indicate that there were any systematic community differences (though a few subsequent studies, such as Zachariah and Rajan 2007, did examine religious differences). By juxtaposing groups from different ethnoreligious backgrounds, my research demonstrated the importance of religious culture, identity, and local religious history in shaping the everyday behavior and decisions of people, including economic activities such as short-term migration, remittance flows, and the use of remittances. Religion became part of my conceptual lens after this study, and I focused on how religion affected migration and settlement patterns, this time in receiving societies.

IMMIGRATION, CONTEXTS OF RECEPTION, AND RELIGION

My postdissertation projects focused on the immigration patterns of a variety of Indian groups (Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Muslims) to the United States, as well as their social and political incorporation. For a long time, migration scholars in the United States did not acknowledge religion as a factor influencing migration. For instance, the classic book on contemporary immigration, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, first published in 1990 by two leading migration scholars, included a chapter on religion (drawing on the research of other scholars) only in its third edition in 2006. Portes and Rumbaut (2006:301) open the chapter on religion and migration by stating categorically, "A first basic point is that religion seldom causes emigration and seldom determines the structural contexts of reception [governmental reception, public reaction toward newcomers, and the preexisting coethnic community] awaiting immigrants in a new land." Referring specifically to religious institutions, they maintain that religion merely plays a "mediating or meliorative role" (301) in the migration process; "it does not create the social context confronted by newcomers, but it seeks to meliorate it by facilitating the integration of immigrants" (304). In other words, they see religion as having a role in migration only through the development of immigrant religious institutions that help to smooth immigrant adjustment to the new society.

Although, as we shall see, religious institutions are certainly significant in shaping immigrant adaptation, focusing on religious institutions alone is

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inadequate if we want to understand the myriad ways in which religion shapes migration and settlement. In the case of Hindu immigrants from India, for instance, the largely upper-caste migration from India in the 1960s and 1970s, with many Hindus arriving as graduate students, can be explained by the traditional educational and social advantages that upper-caste families enjoyed in India. However, Hindu immigrants are actually under-represented among Indian immigrants to the United States, when compared with their proportion in India (over 80 percent). Studies estimate that immigrants of Hindu background constitute only about 59 percent of Indian Americans (Pew Forum 2012a). Christians, on the other hand, are greatly over-represented. In India, Christians are only around 2.3 percent of the population, but they constitute around 18 percent of Indian Americans. Similarly, Sikhs make up less than 2 percent of the population of India, but they are at least 5 percent of the population of Indian Americans (Pew Forum 2012a). Religion, mediated through colonial and postcolonial policies in India, is an important factor accounting for differences in the migration patterns of Indian ethnoreligious groups to the West.

A large proportion of Indian Christians in the United States are Syrian Christians from Kerala, and an overwhelming majority of this group migrated through the sponsorship of female nurses who were recruited to meet the U.S. nursing shortage from the late 1960s (Williams 1996). Even though Christians in Kerala comprised only about one-fifth of the population of the state, female nurses hailed almost entirely from this group until at least the late 1990s (George 2005:39). Religious networks played a critical role in this development and in their migration outside the country. Syrian Christians (an ancient community in Kerala originating from trade connections with the Middle East from the early centuries of the Christian era) were strongly influenced by British Christian missionaries during the colonial period and joined missionary educational and medical institutions in record numbers. Their out-migration to the Middle East, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) began in the early decades of the twentieth century through British missionary contacts. At that time, nursing was considered to be a low-status profession for women in Kerala (very few men went into nursing) since it challenged traditional gender norms of limited male-female interaction, as well as Hindu ideas of pollution stemming from contact with bodily fluids. However, the identification and alliance of Syrian Christians with British missionaries who promoted nursing as a "noble profession" gradually made the community more open to the profession. Still, in the colonial and early postcolonial period, largely lower-middle-class women went for nurse training to take advantage of the stipend that was provided at this time (see also George 2005). As nurses came to be in big demand in the Middle East and the United States, Syrian Christian nurses became primary migrants and were able to sponsor family members and even friends (in the 1970s when immigration rules allowed for this possibility) and also sent remittances back to parents and relatives in Kerala. Their success prompted Christian women from a wider range of classes to turn to nursing.

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My research on a Syrian Christian denomination in the United States showed that the migration of several men was also directly facilitated through Christian networks. These men had arrived for higher education, including Christian theological education, at Christian universities and colleges affiliated with Bible colleges in south India that they were connected with. The religious context of the United States played an additional role in motivating the migration of some Syrian Christians from Kerala. In interviews with me, a few who described themselves as strong Christians told me that they had decided to migrate to the United States since it was a "Christian country" where they could practice their religion freely (unlike the Middle East).

American Sikh organizations estimate that there are more than 500,000 Sikhs in the country. This compares with 1,790,000 Hindus (Pew Forum 2012b). Since there are almost as many Sikhs as Hindus in Canada (2011 Canadian National Household Survey), which had very similar patterns of Sikh migration as the United States, and about half as many Sikhs as Hindus in the UK (2011 UK Census), this estimate is plausible. As in the case of Christians, religion played a complex role in influencing the emigration and incorporation patterns of Sikhs. British colonial policies in rural Punjab, where Sikhs were concentrated, created individual, male property rights and transformed land into a commodity that was divisible and alienable. Land taxes were also fixed for two to three decades at a time (as opposed to earlier annual assessments by native rulers, which had allowed some flexibility in bad years). Consequently, peasants sold or mortgaged their land during lean years and gradually became mired in debt (Oldenburg 2002). Their impoverishment and the British designation of Sikhs as a "martial race" (Dirks 2001:178–80) led Sikhs to turn to employment in British military and police forces. Many Sikh soldiers who served abroad as part of the British army learned about the economic opportunities in the western United States and Canada. Through these networks, 6,800 Indians, mostly Sikh, from the Punjab region arrived in northern California between 1899 and 1914 (Leonard 1992:25–30). Here they faced hostile treatment as "Hindus" (Indians), "the most undesirable, of all the eastern Asiatic races which have come to share our soil" (see Leonard 1992:24). However, their background in agriculture helped them succeed as farmers. The Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 prevented the further immigration of Asians, including Sikhs, into the United States until the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act.

In the contemporary period, a large Sikh out-migration was triggered by the Indian government's economic and political policies in Punjab. High-yielding varieties of wheat introduced into Punjab under the Green Revolution program worsened the position of small peasant farmers (largely Sikh) who could not afford the large inputs of fertilizers and water these crops required. Economic marginalization led to a sharpening of Sikh ethnic and political identity. A Sikh autonomy movement that had been simmering from the end of the colonial period was revitalized into a Khalistan movement for a separate homeland. This movement was brutally repressed by the Indian government, culminating in an attack on the sacred Sikh temple in Punjab in 1984, a pogrom against Sikhs in

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Delhi and other cities later that year, and police brutality against suspected Sikh militants in Punjab for a subsequent decade. Economic and political problems in the Punjab led to a large out-migration of Sikhs to the West.

The events of September 11, 2001, dramatically changed the context of reception for turban-wearing Sikhs, who were mistaken as Osama Bin Laden followers. In my research on Sikh Americans, the events of 1984 as well as 9/11 repeatedly came up as watershed movements in their ethnic consciousness and mobilization. For instance, a young Sikh resident of Richmond Hill, Queens, in New York City, an area with a high concentration of Sikhs, described how a Sikh man was attacked on the evening September 11, 2001, in Richmond Hill by teenagers with baseball bats and said, "That was a shocker to everybody. We thought we were safe in Richmond Hill after India, now this was happening here to us." That young man went on to found an organization, United Sikhs, to advocate for Sikhs who have continued to be the target of hate crimes after September 11, 2001. A survey of Sikh Americans published in 2006 by the Pluralism Project revealed that 83 percent of Sikh respondents had experienced a hate crime or personally knew someone who had in the period after September 11, 2001 (http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/kaur_sidhu/We_Are_Americans_Too.pdf, September 11, 2006). A recent study by the Sikh Coalition, another Sikh advocacy group, found that Sikh children disproportionately experienced bullying in schools around the country. Over 50 percent of Sikh children (compared with 32 percent of all American school children) reported being bullied. The figure for turbaned Sikhs was even higher, 67 percent. Many indicated that they were attacked since they were labeled as "terrorists" (Sikh Coalition 2014). Sikh American advocacy organizations, many of which were formed after the events of 9/11, have mobilized to bring these attacks to the attention of authorities, and in 2013, the FBI finally agreed to track hate crimes against Sikhs (as well as Hindus and Arabs).

In short, while migration scholars like Portes and Rumbaut (2006:301) argue that "religion seldom causes emigration and seldom determines the structural contexts of reception," the examples of Indian Christians and Sikhs show how religion can be intertwined with a variety of factors to play an important role in shaping migration and incorporation patterns.

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY FORMATION AND RELIGION

In contrast to the role of religion in shaping migration patterns, the role of religion in forging community formation among immigrants has been well documented. However, this literature was initially produced by sociologists of religion rather than by sociologists of immigration. Some of the earliest work focusing on contemporary immigrants was published by Stephen Warner (1993), who argued that the rise of "de facto" congregationalism, even among noncongregational religions, meant that religious organizations became the means of maintaining and expressing ethnic identity for immigrant groups. A postdoctoral fellowship from

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the New Ethnic and Immigrant Congregations Project, directed by Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, which included a summer training institute in 1994, introduced me to the sociology of religion, specifically to the literature on religion and migration. The publication of the book *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Warner and Wittner 1998) from this project, one of the first detailed studies of religious institutions among post-1965 immigrants, led to several large studies of immigrants and religion in U.S. gateway cities, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Foley and Hoge 2007; Kniss and Numrich 2007; Stepick et al. 2009). The work by immigration scholars such as Richard Alba et al. (2009), Charles Hirschman (2004), Cecilia Menjivar (2003), and Min Zhou et al. (2002) over the same period was responsible for the inclusion of a chapter on religion in the third edition (2006) of Portes and Rumbaut's *Immigrant America*.

I also found that religion played an important role in sustaining community life in the diaspora, even in a noncongregational religion such as Hinduism. In a chapter in *Gatherings in Diaspora* entitled "Becoming American by Becoming Hindu" (1998), I first laid out the argument, subsequently developed in my 2007 book, *A Place at the Multicultural Table*, that Indian Americans of Hindu background were able to make the transition from sojourners to residents and citizens of the United States by developing a Hindu American community and identity. This was because Hindu American organizations permitted Hindu Indians to adopt particularly American ways of expressing individuality and ethnicity and to take a place "at the multicultural table" while maintaining their cultural and personal integrity. However, in the process, Hinduism was recast and reformulated.

Hinduism in India consists of an extraordinary array of practices, deities, texts, and schools of thought. It is also a religion that stresses orthopraxis over theological belief. Since Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, it is transmitted through informal mechanisms. In the United States, on the other hand, parents realized that they had to make a deliberate effort to teach children what being Hindu or Indian means. Many Hindu immigrants felt the need for community to accomplish these goals and developed congregational forms of worship and learning such as *satsangs* (local worship groups) and *bala vihars* (educational groups for children). Even temples adopted a congregational format, offering special Saturday or Sunday *puja* (Hindu ritual worship) and *bhajan* (Hindu devotional songs) "worship services." Hindu student organizations were another diasporic invention to provide support for Hindu students. Local and national Hindu umbrella organizations also formed, with the goal of uniting, educating, and mobilizing Hindus of different backgrounds in support of Hindu interests. Leaders of all of these organizations worked to simplify, standardize, and codify the religion to make it easier to understand, articulate, and practice. In the process, an encapsulated, intellectualized American Hinduism has been created, very different from the diversity of ritual practices and caste observances that are characteristic of everyday Hinduism in India.

Toward the end of my study of Hindus, I started fieldwork on Indian Christian Americans (Syrian Christians belonging to the Mar Thoma denomination). That

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research showed that the majority/minority religious status of immigrant groups both in homeland and in receiving country played an important role in shaping the reception and the incorporation patterns of groups. Hindus and Christians provided an interesting contrast, since Hindus who are the dominant majority in India became a small religious minority in the United States, while Indian Christians who are a small minority group in India became part of the religious majority group. As religious minorities, Hindus had to combat the ignorance and negative stereotypes about their religion, and had to work hard to obtain recognition for Hinduism and Hindus as contributors to American multicultural fabric. Indian Christians, on the other hand, had to deal with the unfamiliarity of the U.S. population with ancient Christian communities in India, but more important, they faced trouble establishing their "ethnic" church amid the range of Christian options available. An important issue was retaining the allegiance of their American-born children to the distinct liturgical, ritual, and ecclesiastical practices of the traditional denomination. Second-generation Mar Thoma Americans were influenced by nondenominational American evangelicalism, which led them to reject the "ethnic," denominational worship practices of the Mar Thoma, and in many cases leave the Mar Thoma church once they reached adulthood. Although they valued their ethnic identity, they felt that ethnicity should be confined to the home and secular arenas and should not be intertwined with religion. Ironically, then, Indian Hindus, who are a religious and cultural minority in the United States, are able to fuse religion, culture, and ethnicity and are more successful in the intergenerational transmission of ethnic religion than Indian Christians (see also Min 2010).

Research on second-generation Hindu and Christian Indian Americans also showed that race and religion interacted in complex ways to shape identity formation. In the case of Hindus, for instance, many seemed to have turned to religion and religious organizations due to a consciousness of racialization. Consequently, an embrace of an assertive Hindu identity was one way for them to contest racial marginality (Kurien 2005). Religiously oriented second-generation Indian Christians, on the other hand, separated their faith and their sociocultural identity and emphasized that their Christian identity was more important. Most had attended white or multiracial Christian institutions at some period in their lives (usually while in college). Instead of articulating their racial and ethnic difference from members of the wider American society, as did Hindus, they stressed their "American" identity, their comfort with individuals from a variety of racial and ethnic groups, and the importance of opening their parents' ethnic church to the local community (Kurien 2012).

IMMIGRANT POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND RELIGION

Hinduism did not just get reformulated in the United States. It also became politicized, as supporters of the Hindu nationalist Hindutva movement took the

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initiative to found and lead many American Hindu organizations. The role of religion in the United States and the politics of recognition played an important role in bringing about this development. Hindus in the United States have been central actors in Hindutva mobilization, including mobilizing around the 2014 Indian national elections that resulted in a major victory for the Hindu nationalist BJP party in India. Muslim Indian Americans have responded to Hindu nationalism by developing a very different construction of "Indianness" and pattern of homeland-oriented ethnic nationalism (Kurien 2001). Progressive, second-generation Indian Americans, on the other hand, favor a "South Asian" identity that opposes the religious nationalisms of the subcontinent and mobilizes around common domestic concerns (Kurien 2003).

My interest in the way different Indian American groups were coalescing led me to a project examining the variety of identities that Indian Americans have mobilized around in an attempt to influence U.S. policy. Although I planned to include mobilization based on religion in this study, I decided to avoid looking only at religious mobilization, since I wanted to move on from my focus on religion. I was also aware that a common criticism of sociologists of religion was that we were "sampling on the dependent variable" (Bender et al. 2013:8–10), and consequently were probably overestimating the role of religion in society. I tried several frameworks for this project, including one that conceptualized Indian American political mobilization as based on a decentralized and pluralistic model of political mobilization as opposed to the centralized, nation-state advocacy organizations of most other groups. However, none of the frameworks I tried out was satisfactory in explaining the diversity in the patterns of mobilization of Indian Americans.

I finally realized that two important factors that are usually studied separately, race and religion,[1] were interacting to shape the process of political incorporation and mobilization of Indian American groups. Specifically, I found that differing understandings of race, as well as majority/minority religious status both in the United States and in India shaped the variation in their political mobilization patterns. Consequently, religion became the backbone of this project as well, something that I had resisted and did not expect.

For instance, religion and race played an important role in determining the ethnic versus panethnic mobilization of Indian Americans. Those who mobilize as Indian Americans are largely from the immigrant generation, and consequently still operate within the nationalist ideology of India. Since India and Pakistan were formed through a bloody religion-based partition, religious nationalisms are deeply embedded in the South Asian context, and Indian American groups separate themselves from other immigrants from South Asia, particularly Muslims.

[1]In the United States, race and ethnicity have generally been the focus of studies examining the political incorporation of immigrants (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Rogers 2006), while religion has been the focus of similar studies in Europe (AlSayyad and Castells 2002; Fetzer and Soper 2005; Laurence 2012).

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As professionals and members of a U.S. group that has high levels of education and income, immigrant leaders also want to distance themselves from problematic U.S. racial minorities. Consequently, the constant highlighting of the success of Indian Americans and the parallels with Jews are attempts to sidestep racial categorization. Second-generation progressives who mobilize as South Asian Americans, on the other hand, prefer to confront and challenge racialization as well as the religious divides of their parents' generation. As American-born individuals, domestic issues and civil rights activism are of much greater interest to them than issues connected with India. The events of September 11, 2001, constituted a watershed in the activism of both types of groups. Indian American groups mobilized to protest the lumping of India with Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. South Asian groups were also energized, "because to American bigots, Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs all look the same—brown—many victims are deciding they have a lot more in common than they had previously realized" (Madhulika Khandelwal quoted in Wildman 2001). However, in contrast to Indian American groups, they mobilized to present a united front against the hate crimes that followed in the aftermath of 9/11, and to challenge government policies like the special registration required of immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries.

Again, U.S.-based Indian Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh organizations manifested a very different pattern from Indian Christian organizations when it came to activism around domestic issues. Particularly after 9/11, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh organizations led by the second generation mobilized to bring cases of religious discrimination and racial profiling to the attention of lawmakers and the wider public. This is because religious minority groups who are often also visible racial minorities perceive racial and religious discrimination as being intertwined (Joshi 2006). Religious majority groups are not faced with this burden. Second-generation Indian American Christians do not adopt a racialized discourse and have not participated in political activism as Christians to any significant extent. Consequently, Indian American Christian organizations remain first-generation-led and homeland-oriented, focusing on attacks against Christians in India.

My work on the political incorporation of Indian Americans showed me that the U.S. context profoundly shaped the way Indian American organizations defined grievances and developed strategies. This has led me to research that examines how differences in political structures, policies regarding immigrant integration and religion, as well as migration patterns between the United States and Canada shape immigrant political activism. I focus on individuals of Sikh and Hindu background from South Asia (whether or not they mobilize as Sikhs or Hindus) because these two groups manifest interesting differences in political mobilization within Canada and the United States and between the two countries. Although I have told myself that this will be the last project for the time being with religion as a central focus, I am sure I will continue to find religion springing up in unexpected places, as I have done in the past.

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CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have shown how religion can shape migration patterns by determining societal structures such as the social location of groups within society, which in turn influences the fundamental characteristics of groups and gives rise to differential state policies toward them. Religion plays a central role in the incorporation of immigrants not just through personal faith, religious institutions, and communities, but through the intersection of the religiously infused identities and concepts of secularism of the United States and home countries that can profoundly impact the political incorporation of immigrants and their mobilization patterns. Majority/minority religious status in the homeland can affect activism around homeland issues, while majority/minority religious status in the host countries can mold racial attitudes and self-identification in different ways. Consequently, an integration of the contributions provided by the sociology of religion regarding the role of religion in migration and immigrant incorporation will greatly enrich the sociology of migration and immigration.

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