

Introduction: Gender, Religion and Migration

LOUISE RYAN AND ELENA VACCHELLI, MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY, LONDON*

This special issue on Gender, Religion and Migration builds on a symposium at Middlesex University held in November 2011 to explore comparisons and contrasts across different religious communities ranging from Muslim, Catholic, Pentecostal to Buddhist. This collection of articles brings together empirical research from different academic disciplines in the social sciences, including sociology, geography and anthropology and uses a range of methods to engage with and research different migrant groups in particular urban contexts. While some papers focus on individual case studies to explore the experiences of specific faith groups, others offer a comparative perspective gathering data from different locations and religions.

When selecting these papers we considered the intersectional dimension of gender, ethnicity and religion where religion, in particular, plays a central role in providing a sense of meaning and belonging for migrants and represents a source of identification during the migratory experience. Focusing on the ways in which gender roles are constructed and reproduced through religion within migrant communities in urban contexts, this special issue brings together leading scholars in the field of migration to explore how geographical mobility contributes to shape gendered religious identities.

Mobilizing religion may serve a range of diverse purposes during the migratory experience and, indeed, migration may in turn shape the different ways in which religion is reproduced on an everyday basis if compared with the country of origin of the worshippers. Religion can also provide a transnational source of identification; for example, it may play a significant role in enabling migrants to imagine themselves within collectivities that span beyond the nation-state. Religious worship may fulfil many functions for migrants, not only spiritual, but also material and social such as civic participation and commitment towards

*Correspondence: Social Policy Research Centre, Middlesex University, Hendon Campus, The Burroughs, NW4 4BT London, E-mail: L.Ryan@mdx.ac.uk; E.Vacchelli@mdx.ac.uk
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)
Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Igitur publishing

the parish for church goers.¹ Moreover, religion allows for a two-way process of integration of migrants in local communities. From a top-down perspective, religious organizations can provide an 'exploratory space for maintaining, reclaiming, and altering aspects of racial and ethnic identity'² and, at the same time, bottom-up attempts to integrate in a community in the host country are legitimized by religion's authoritative and codified significance.³ Hence, for migrants in particular, religion can potentially provide a means for both maintaining and expressing continuity of faith and practice while also negotiating integration within a new environment.

Researching 'religion' in the European context poses particular challenges to social scientists of migration in what has been defined as a post-secular society. For too long, migration studies have paid insufficient attention to the importance of religion in the everyday lives of many migrants.⁴ It has been suggested that migration scholars have tended to ignore the importance of religion in people's lives because these social scientists usually come from a secular tradition.⁵ As Bilge argues, many secular, liberal and feminist scholars have seemed unable to seriously engage with the religious beliefs of their research participants.⁶ The sociologist and migration scholar, Peggy Levitt, has issued a rallying cry to migration researchers: 'it is time we put religion front and centre in our attempts to understand how identity and belonging are redefined in this increasingly global world'.⁷

The pluralization and multiplication of faith and religious practice in the age of migration and global media contributes to 'displace' individuals from the cultural context of their faith and present them with alternatives as well as the need to justify their choices in the new migratory context.⁸ Along the same lines, Levitt highlights that religion is as much about 'individualized, interior, informal practices and beliefs'⁹ as it is about formal, institutional structures and organizations and is therefore difficult to quantify; the incorporeal and intrinsically individual nature of religious life makes it difficult to observe and as a result the analytical tools available to empirically study religious belief and its role in social cohesion are 'undeveloped or undervalued'.¹⁰ Additionally, as Levitt notes, 'religion' is not a fixed entity 'but a dynamic web of shared meanings used in different ways in different contexts' and is therefore mutable and

¹ P. Levitt, 'Religion as a Path to Civic Engagement' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31:4 (2008), 766–791.

² G. Stanczak, 'Strategic Ethnicity: The Construction of Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic Religious Community' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29:5 (2006), 856–881, 857.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Levitt, 'Religion as a Path to Civic Engagement', 768.

⁵ S. Bilge, 'Beyond Subordination Versus Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women' in *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31:1 (2010), 9–28.

⁶ Bilge, *ibid.*

⁷ P. Levitt, 'You Know Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant': Religion and Transnational Migration', in *International Migration Review* 37:3 (2003), 847–873, 870.

⁸ S. Speck, 'Ulrich Beck's Reflecting Faith: Individualization, Religion and the Desecularization of Reflexive Modernity', in *Sociology* 47:1 (2013), 157–172.

⁹ Levitt, 'You Know Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant', 869.

¹⁰ Levitt, 'Religion and Transnational Migration', 851.

difficult to essentialize for the purposes of academic enquiry.¹¹ We have found Levitt's work particularly helpful in compiling this special issue because she shows how religious belief and practices not only help migrants to maintain connections to their country of origin, but also may help to negotiate settlement and a sense of belonging in the destination society. She also demonstrates how these are dynamic processes which may change over time and through the life course of the migrant. These are topics which are addressed by several contributors to this special issue.

However, an acknowledgement of the 'individualized' aspect of religion does not imply that religious structures and institutions are unimportant. Religious identities may be more fully understood through the interplay of personal agency and formal organizational structures.¹² Despite the emphasis on individualized beliefs and practices, in the post-secular context, social actors do not create identities entirely of their own choosing; the ability to position oneself is also 'contingent and provisional' on particular socio-structural contexts.¹³ By focusing on migrants in specific urban contexts, the papers in this special issue explore how religious identities and practices both shape and are shaped by particular socio-structural environments.

In this special issue the theme of intersectionality is explored by Vivienne Jackson who makes use of intersectional frameworks for understanding how religious beliefs intersect with gender and class, reflecting complex and sometimes contradictory orientations to belonging. Vivienne Jackson's paper looks at Filipino Christian domestic workers in Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv Filipino migrants' religious belief works actively against belonging and is disconnected from questions of integration in the religiously defined Israeli context. Nonetheless, Jackson shows how participants draw on religious discourses and other social locations to negotiate a sense of belonging in Israel.

Such a comparative perspective is further developed in the papers by Amy Duffuor/Alana Harris and Marcos de Araújo Silva/Donizete Rodrigues as they provide insights on the life of Pentecostal and Catholic migrants, respectively, in London and Barcelona. Duffuor and Harris article compares and contrasts differing Christian expressions and understandings of 'civic engagement' and gendered articulations of lay social 'ministry' through prayer, religious praxis and local politics. Through community organizing and involvement in third sector organizations, and also through spiritual activities like 'Catholic Prayer Ministry' and 'deliverance', Catholics and Pentecostals are shown to be re-mapping London through contesting 'secularist' distinctions between the public and private/domestic, and the spiritual and political. Silva and Rodrigues present a comparative discussion of how feminized and 'manly' characters, respectively, can define important boundaries between Brazilian Catholic charismatic and Pentecostal groups in Barcelona. This paper further complicates migrant identifications by

¹¹ Ibid., 869.

¹² T. Hadad and E. Schachter, 'Religious-Lite: A Phenomenon and its Relevance to the Debate on Identity Development and Emerging Adulthood' in *Journal of Youth Studies* 14:8 (2011), 853–869.

¹³ C. Dwyer, B. Shah and G. Sanghera, "'From Cricket Lover to Terrorist Suspect": Challenging Representations of Young British Muslim men', in *Gender, Place and Culture* 15:2 (2008), 117–136, 126.

considering the role of nationality in processes of incorporation in the 'host' society. Ethnographic data are used to demonstrate how religious specificities of migrants can act as a source of social differentiation and gender strategies in the context of diaspora.

The discussion of Pentecostalism and the role of spirits is further developed in the paper by Jeanne Rey. Focusing on Congolese and Ghanaian migrants in Geneva she explores how Pentecostal demonology produces several categories of spirits that carry implications for how gender is constructed. These spirits may refer to 'inappropriate' gendered behaviour or evoke problems of persisting sterility or miscarriages. Her paper illustrates that while these spirits are to some extent imported from African contexts, they are also being transformed to reflect the changing gender relations of migrants in European social settings.

While all the papers in this special issue consider different articulations of gender construction, two articles focus on women migrants in particular. Gertrud Huwelmeier examines the migration of Vietnamese women to former East and West Germany in consecutive waves, highlighting the increasing emergence of Buddhist networks among market traders in Berlin. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, she explores the roles and responsibilities of women migrants and how these challenge traditional gender structures. The paper explains the rising popularity of Buddhism among these migrants through an investigation of the interconnections between business, migration and religion. The theme of women adapting to new migratory contexts is also the subject of Ryan and Vacchelli's paper on Muslim mothers in London. This article looks at the obstacles that Muslim migrant women face when they seek to negotiate their religion with contrasting cultural values when raising British-Muslim children in an urban context. The paper draws upon research with mothers of diverse Muslim backgrounds to explore how they use Islamic beliefs and practices to underpin their parenting strategies and offers insights on how religion is used to make sense of diverse experiences and encounters at a time of increasing hostility in the West.

The articles presented in this special issue about migration, globalization and transnational movements highlight an increasingly important role of religious place-making in the gender and ethnic dynamics of contemporary cities. While most of the contributions apply a social science perspective to the study of religion and gender, we hope this growing field will provide a contribution and allow enrichment of the critical and interdisciplinary field of the study of religion and gender more broadly. In the context of migration, the re-negotiation of gender roles is part of the resources that are generated through global networks offering spaces of solidarity and sanctuary for religious subjects in increasingly pluralized and secular contexts. As has been noticed elsewhere¹⁴ it would appear that different levels of engagement generated by these religious spaces are created through the migratory context. On the one hand, it could be that religious and cultural identity is reinforced within the religious community, over and against other pluralized identities. However, as the evidence in the papers in this special issue suggests, there is also a dynamic that encourages an

¹⁴ C. Backer and J. Beaumont, 'Postcolonialism and Religion: New Spaces of Belonging and Becoming in the Postsecular City' in J. Beaumont and C. Backer (eds.), *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*, London: Bloomsbury 2011, 33–49.

expansive sense of belonging and participation that moves beyond religious specificities. The extent to which religion facilitates belonging and participation in the destination society may depend in part upon the opportunities for gender equality and the ways in which women are enabled to develop their full potential as active members of social, cultural, religious, economic and civic arenas.