MIGRATION AND SPIRITUAL LIFE: THE EXPERIENCE OF MOBILITY IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE RELIGIOSITY OF MEXICAN MIGRANTS

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The mobility experience leaves deep impressions on the emotional realms of those who depart from their place of birth. Among many things, identities referential are transformed and practical references of everyday life are modified. In this article, the author shows how the experience of mobility – specially, emigration to the United States – also involves Mexicans´ religious practices and beliefs for those who emigrate. This impact is reflected, among other aspects, in the transnational traditional religious practices, in certain conversion processes, and the influence of ethnic groups in religious diversity representation.
Keywords: Religion; Transnationalism; Mexico

A experiência da mobilidade deixa uma profunda impressão no âmbito emocional daqueles que deixam o seu local de origem. Entre outras coisas, os referenciais identitários são transformados e as referências práticas da vida cotidiana são modificadas. Nesse artigo, a autora mostra como a experiência da mobilidade – particularmente a emigração para os Estados Unidos – também envolve as práticas religiosas e crenças dos mexicanos que migram. O impacto é refletido, entre outros aspectos, na transnacionalização de práticas religiosas tradicionais, certos processos de conversão e a influência da etnia na representação da diversidade religiosa.
Palavras-chave*: Religião; Transnacionalismo; México*

Introduction

In recent decades, both communities of origin and destination communities in migratory flows have seen events that have drawn our attention to the existing relationship between human mobilization and

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the transformation of the religious realm. As example, let us consider the worship of saints, identified as "protectors of immigrants" in the amount of collective remittances assigned to religious celebrations, the role that certain religious associations have played in the struggle for respect to immigrants' rights and the increasingly visible coexistence of religious diversity in cities that receive immigrants from all continents.

Although this, obviously, does not mean that the existing relationship between migration and religious change is a new phenomenon, or that it has not been previously analyzed, the specific situations of these inter-relationships display new characteristics and have acquired a hitherto unknown scope and visibility.

Thus, within the breadth of the field of study that comprises the relationship between migration and religion, in this work we shall consider the impact of human mobility – particularly of Mexico-US migration, in religious change.[1]

First of all, one should note that although it is true that religious conversion processes constitute one of the most visible expressions of religious change – as will be seen further on – these processes are just one of the many transformations of the religious realm worth highlighting. The concept of religious change, as understood in this study, is broader and more inclusive. Among other aspects, it is essential to consider the transformation of the relationship individuals establish with religious institutions, the modification of the religious practice of a particular denomination, and even the transformation of the meaning that believers themselves attribute to traditional religious practices.

At the same time, one should recall that all processes of religious change are due to a variety of causes. That is why it is pointless to attempt to establish a relationship of direct, univocal causality between mobility and religious change. In fact, what this document seeks to prove is that the experience of mobility helps create a context that fosters religious change – in its various expressions – both among those who leave, and among those who remain in communities with a high migratory rate.

The article begins with an overview of the trends in religious change in Mexico (first section) followed by some of the aspects that make human mobility a factor of religious change (second section). It ends by pointing out some of the specific situations caused by the impact of Mexico-US migration on the Mexican religious sphere realm (third section).

1. Trends in Religious Change in Mexico

As part of its colonial heritage, Mexico has been a traditionally Catholic country since the early years of independence. And although Protestant elites may have played a key role during specific episodes of national history,[2] Mexican religious diversity has mainly been the result of expressions of popular religiosity characterized by a syncretic Catholicism and only marginally by adherence to other religions throughout the country's history.

Despite the fact that the majority of Mexicans continue professing Catholicism, the past five years have seen major transformations in the country's religious panorama. One of the clearest expressions of these changes, albeit not the only one, is reflected in the slow but steady decline in the percentage of Catholic population recorded in the national population censuses. As one can see from the graph 1, the 2000 census reported nearly 12% of non-Catholic population, meaning a nearly 10% increase in just four decades.[3] The proportional decrease in Catholicism corresponds both to the proportional increase in those that do not profess any religion (29% of the non-Catholic population) and to the growth of other religions, mainly "Protestants and Evangelicals" (44%) and "Non-Evangelical Biblical" (17%).[4] There have also been other major changes in the Mexican religious panorama that are not reflected in the figures. These include the change of the relationship between State and Church and, in broader terms, the place that religious practices and identifications occupy in the public sphere. It is also worth noting the change in the relationship believers establish with their respective religious institutions, where one of the most striking aspects is the growing distinction believers themselves make between religious beliefs, practices and institutions. Another group of major changes is related to the change in religious practice within the same denomination. An expression of this process is provided by the charismatic renewal movement – to quote one of the best known – or more generally, what has been known as the Pentecostalization of certain currents among Protestants.

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[2] BASTIAN, Jean-Pierre. *Protestantismos y modernidad latinoamericana*. Historia de unas minorías religiosas activas en América Latina.

[3] Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática INEGI, *Censos generales de población y vivienda, 1960-2000*. Unless indicated, all figures on religious adherence in Mexico are taken from the National Population Censuses.

[4] The classification used in the 12th General Population Census on Population and Housing (2000) was used, according to which the category "Protestants and Evangelicals" includes the following subcategories: Historical Protestantism, Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals, Church of the Living God, Column and Support of Truth, Light of the World and other evangelicals. The category "Non-evangelical Biblical" consists of Jehovah's witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons). A critical reflection of the categories used in the census may be consulted in DE LA TORRE y ODGERS, *Cartografías del cambio religioso en México*.

Graph 1:
Religious Denomination of Non-Catholic Mexicans (1960-2000)

Percentage Distribution of Non-Catholics (1960-2000)
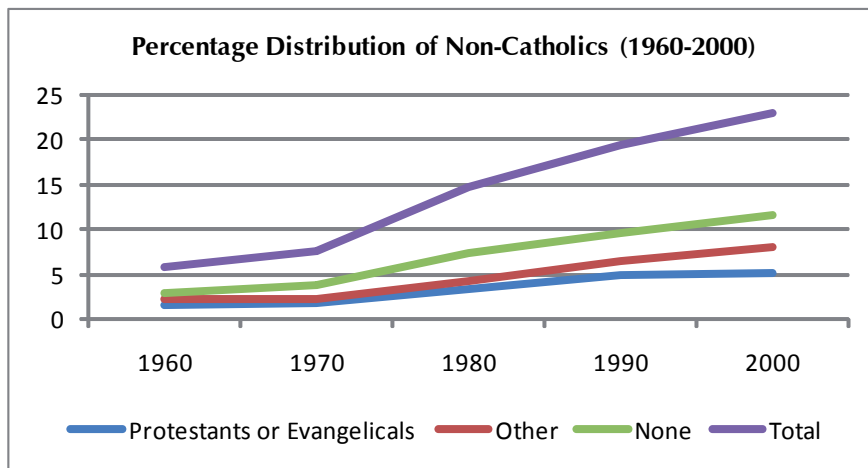
Source: National Population Censuses. Author's own graphs.

In this respect, in addition to change in traditional religious practices, it is important to note the consolidation of other new ones, as well as the "export"[5] of expressions of popular Mexican religiosity to Mexican communities established in the United States, which sometimes creates transnational religious practices.

Although these processes of change are due to a myriad of factors, this study attempts to show that, among these, it is essential to consider human mobility, regarding both communities of origin and destination, since it also affects those that do not remain in their places of origin.

2. Mobility as a Factor of Religious Change

Why is human mobility – particularly international migration – regarded as a factor of religious change? The question is undoubtedly complex, yet there are, in the case of Mexico-US migration, at least four elements that can be clearly identified.

These include. 1) exposure to a context of greater religious diversity, 2) distancing from traditional mechanisms of social control,

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[5] As we will see further on, this process is not limited to the mere "export" of specific religious prac-tices.

3) the vulnerability associated with the migratory condition, 4) the process of redefining identity referents associated with the processes of integration into the destination societies. Each of these is explained in greater detail below.

Exposure to Religious Diversity

Despite the fact that in recent decades, Mexicans' religious affiliations have become increasingly pluralistic, Catholicism continues to be the main religious denomination and the hegemonic system of belief in this country. In addition to the fact that 88% of Mexicans identify themselves as Catholics, the culture that accompanies the everyday lives of Mexicans is closely linked to Catholicism. The hegemony of Catholicism is even more accentuated in regions that have traditionally displayed greater participation in migratory flows. Thus, for example, in states that have, such as Guanajuato or Zacatecas, extremely high rates of migratory intensity,[6] nearly 100% of the population identify with the Catholic religion (See Graph 2). This marked hegemony of Catholicism in the communities of origin contrasts sharply with the religious diversity that prevails in the places of destination. According to the *General Social Survey,* undertaken by the *National Opinion Research Center,* by 2004, approximately half the US population was Protestant, whereas a quarter declared that they were Catholic and, approximately, 14% failed to express any religious preference. It is also worth noting that religious diversity in the United States is not only more marked but also more visible in the public sphere, due to the particular way in which the relationship between Church and State developed throughout its history.[7] Thus, the contact Mexican immigrants establish with other religious beliefs and practices acquires its specific expression in the everyday interaction with neighbors, colleagues at work and employers, and it is not generally reduced to Evangelical and Protestant denominations.

Although, it is true that mere exposure to religious diversity does not necessarily lead to conversion, it is also true that a diverse context favors critical reflection on belief systems interiorized during the primary process

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[6] In this study, we take up the "migratory intensity index" proposed by the National Population Council, based on census information from 2000. This index has the advantage of considering both displacements as such and the impact of these displacements on the households of communities of origin, since it includes variables such as the reception of remittances and the proportion of households with immigrants. The methodology used to construct this index may be consulted in TUIRÁN, Fuentes y AVILA, *Indices de intensidad migratoria México-Estados Unidos*.

[7] WARNER, Stephen. *Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States.*

of socialization. As we shall see later on, contact with a different religious context will be an important factor of religious change, but these changes will not necessarily crystallize into processes of religious conversion.

Graph 2:

Religious Diversity and Migratory Intensity (States, 2000)

Percentage of Non-Catholic Population
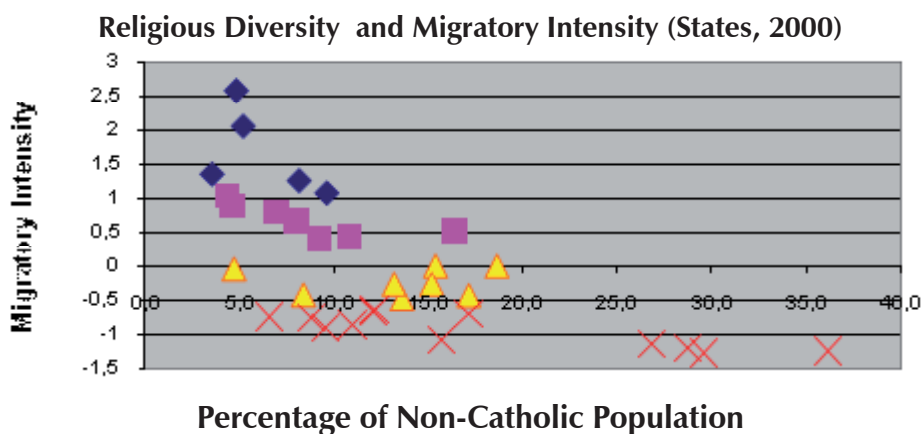
Source: XII National Population and Housing Census, and Tuirán, Fuentes and Avila (op cit), author's own graphs.

Distancing from Traditional Social Control Mechanisms

Greater exposure to religious diversity takes place in a context where traditional mechanisms of social control - from the (most) subtlest to the most explicit – become ineffective or no longer operate.

Thus, for example, Miguel Hernández, who analyzes the case of immigrant women that become Jehovah's Witnesses on their return from the United States, points out that:

> Those that go to the United States have the opportunity to move into spaces where they can read the Bible without the conditioning and taboos that operate on their homeland, but they can also do so in places where the large number of inhabitants and activities guarantee anonymity, and the dissolution of surveillance or censure because of interacting with "others".[8]

Another example of the loss of effectiveness of traditional conditioning is reflected in the young men that join transnational labor markets, where they work exhausting shifts. Unlike in their communities of origin, they are forced to spend their limited free time on activities other than traditional religious activities, such as going to mass. This situation is exacerbated in contexts where it is difficult – if not impossible – for them to go to places where they would be able to attend religious services in Spanish.

[8] HERNÁNDEZ MADRID, Miguel. *El proceso de convertirse en creyentes*, p. 82.

The new life contexts obviously create new forms of conditioning and social control mechanisms. The creation of the latter constitutes yet another expression of religious change and comprises a broad research topic.

The Vulnerability of the Migrant's Condition

The condition of migrants, particularly those newly arrived, is profoundly marked by vulnerability: the growing need to acquire (the) material elements and necessary information to be able to adapt to their new life context, makes them extremely dependent.

In these circumstances, particularly in the case of illegal immigrants, although there are very few organizations to which they can resort to find solutions to their most pressing needs, within this narrow universe, the broad spectrum of religious associations with various denominations occupies an important place. Several religious associations offer some health services and, within the framework of activities organized by religious organizations, such as masses, various celebrations, picnics, etc, it is possible to find socialization spaces of socialization, while the visits of those going from door to door offering Bible studies provide relief from loneliness. Thus, then, the loneliness derived from the migratory condition is often the cause and context in which immigrants first come into contact with other religious options.

These initial contacts obviously do not necessarily lead to a process of conversion and, in some cases, serve to reaffirm people's faith[9]. However, these encounters with religious diversity will constitute significant elements in the construction of a different image from otherness and, above all, constitute important incentives for critical reflection on religious beliefs and in general, all belief systems that had thitherto managed to give them the practical orientation for coping with their everyday life.

The Redefinition of Identity

The experience of migration implies continuous interaction with new forms of otherness and requires constant efforts to redefine identity. Within this process, the redefinition of religious identities plays a key role, enabling one to create new identifications or to re-structure previous ones. This is the case, for example, of inhabitants of a particular village who, outside their original context, acknowledge that they worship the same patron saint.

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[9] This aspect is dealt with in ODGERS, Olga. *La práctica religiosa entre los mexicanos residentes en el condado de San Diego.*

Yet beyond these specific expressions of the redefinition of their relationship with others, it is essential to recall that religions are also belief systems through which believers attempt to lend meaning to their daily existence and future. The extraordinary contrast between the specific living conditions of the newly arrived, which are often more precarious than those they left – especially for those living with the stigma of illegality – and the new horizon of often illusory expectations – that opens up ahead of them, create a context of tension, for which individuals must find – or construct – new meanings. The transformation of everyday life and the expectations of the future therefore constitute a favorable context for reflection on the imaginary constructions that shape religious systems.

In short, the journey to the north provides an occasion to come into contact with other religious options. Yet, at the same time, this approach occurs precisely at a time in individuals' lives when they are immersed in the search for new explanations and new meanings for their lives, which are also new. Consequently, because of the profound implications of the everyday life experiences of those that move out of their places of origin, the migratory experience itself also creates a favorable context for religious change although not necessarily for conversion – due to the fact that belief systems are powerfully mobilized and reinterpreted in the search for new meanings for existence itself, for the representation of their origin and the construction of their future hopes.

3. Some traces of change

By way of a conclusion, this section contains an "inventory" of some of the specific expressions of religious change that have been identified in the experience of Mexicans' migration to the United States. These have been classified into three main groups: 1) Conversion processes, 2) The trans-nationalization of religious practices and 3) the influence of a person's ethnic group on the perception of religious diversity.

Conversion Processes

The recent literature on migration and religious change contains various case studies showing the way the experience of migration gave rise to religious conversion processes.[10] These studies show the way the return of converted immigrants to their communities of origin may also contribute to the conversion of relatives and friends that have never crossed the border.[11] Thus, the literature clearly shows that religious conversion processes derived

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[10] *Ibidem.*
[11] ODGERS ORTIZ, Olga. *Movilidades geográficas y espirituales*

from migration to the United States both exist and are significant. It is important, however, to attempt to estimate the scope of this very particular expression of the migration impact on the religious domain, since the actual dimension of this process tends to be overestimated due to the fact that conversion processes are phenomena that become extremely visible due to the confrontation entailed by the questioning of the universality of the practices, norms and values of communities of origin.

In other words, despite exposure to religious diversity, distancing from traditional control mechanisms and immigrants' vulnerability obviously help to build a favorable context for religious change, this does not necessarily mean that these elements are sufficient for conversion processes to take place. At the same time, it is also necessary to determine the extent to which this factor of religious change is significant in understanding the diversification of religious options nationwide.

In order to advance in this respect, it is useful to review the statistical data available. Although it is impossible to know exactly what proportion of those who migrate abandon their grandparents' faith, recent studies provide an approximate idea of these processes. Thus, for example, Espinosa and Elizondo[12] found that, approximately, 70% of Hispanics living in the United States consider themselves Catholics. These data, however, vary across generations. Among those that emigrated, at least 74% are practicing Catholics, whereas among their offspring, this percentage falls to 72%, dropping to 62% for the grandchildren's generation. At the same time, adherence to Protestantism rises from just under 15% in the migrant generation to 20% in the second generation and almost 29% in the third. Despite this process of change, the percentage of Catholic Hispanics appears to remain relatively stable at 70% due to the fact that new Catholic immigrants continuously join this contingent (Graph 3).

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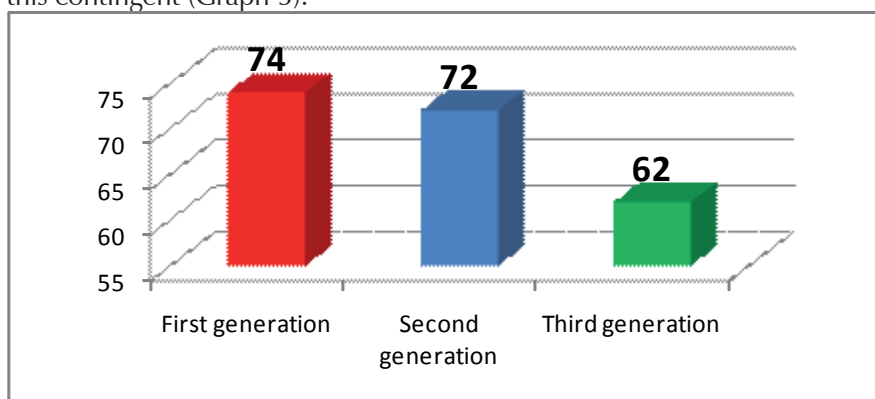
[12] ESPINOSA and ELIZONDO. *Hispanic Churches in American Public Life.*

As for the scope of the impact of conversion processes on communities of origin, in the first instance, one can see that the Mexican states where adherence to Catholicism has fallen most quickly have not significantly participated in migratory flows. Likewise, states with the greatest migratory participation to the United States have nearly 100% adherence to Catholicism. This same ratio can be observed by comparing the rates of migratory intensity[13] and the spatial distribution of the growth of religious options other than Catholicism. As Table 1 shows, it is precisely the region that has traditionally sent the largest contingent of emigrants to the United States that remains most closely linked to Catholicism. At the same time, the southeast of the country, which concentrates the most marked processes of change – with a decrease in adherence to Catholicism of up to 33% in recent decades, has been virtually absent from the migratory flow to the north.

In order to identify those places where significant participation in international migration and religious change might coincide, a graph was plotted of the link between the percentage of non-Catholic population and the rate of migratory intensity, for each Mexican municipality. Thus, it was found that, with the exception of ten cases – the most striking of which belong to the state of Oaxaca – the municipalities with high rates of migration coincide with those that also have a high percentage of adherence to Catholicism, whereas those with more pronounced religious diversity contain the lowest rates of migratory intensity.

Does this mean that migration does not constitute a significant factor of religious change? Obviously not. What the empirical evidence shows is that the migratory experience is crucial to understanding the trajectory of immigrant converts: however, the transformation of the Mexican religious realm has different regional characteristic, and in regions with the swiftest religious change, migration to the United States does not constitute an explanatory factor of the phenomenon.

The Trans-nationalization of Religious Practices

Religion, understood as a belief system that contributes to the construction of the meaning of the believer's existence and future, which also provides him with practical orientation in everyday experience, must necessarily adapt to the new living conditions of those who profess it.[14]

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[13] We took the concept of migratory intensity and the corresponding indices from TUIRAN, Rodolfo *et al. Indices de intensidad migratoria México – Estados Unidos*.

[14] The problem of the definition of what is religion is -or is not- has been present throughout the history of the sociology of religions. In both the "substantialist" approaches and those based on the "functions" of religious systems, there is agreement over the relevance of these belief systems as bearers of "mean-

And while it is true that religious institutions – particularly the Catholic Church – have always operated as supranational institutions, on each occasion, they have adapted to the local contexts where they must crystallize into specific norms and rites.[15] Thus, for example, without underestimating the supranational dimension of the Catholic church, as an institution, it is possible to identify the specific forms of popular religiosity characterizing "Mexican-style Catholicism" which would, for example, include the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe which, in turn, would be develop into various ways of "being Catholic" at regional, local and individual level.

This perspective provides a better understanding of the importance certain specific religious practices have acquired in certain "transnational communities" that have managed to recreate new ways of defining "us" while doing without the referents of adherence to a national state – or relativizing them – and conferring the nucleus of community identity to adherence to a religious referent. The most obvious, although undoubtedly not the only case, is the importance acquired by the worship of patron saints from people's communities of origin. Intimate worship of a saint enables an individual to revitalize the links of identity with his fellow countrymen, wherever he is and to renew the links with his forebears. Religious celebrations organized in destination communities enable new links to be forged with fellow countrymen in exile. Immigrants' participation in the celebrations held in their places of origin -whether this involves "virtual" participation by sending donations and promises or simultaneously holding a celebration in the place of destination, makes it possible to create new bridges and revitalize the identities of those that stayed behind. Thus, rather than involving the mere "export" of local religious processes, these specific forms of devotion reflect the construction of transnational religious practices capable of structuring a new construction of collective identity, thereby lending a new meaning to everyday transnational existence. This type of celebrations also shows the way in which significant religious referents in the transnational social space can contribute with practical guidance, by telling individuals what the community – in its multiple locations – expects of them, as well as giving them elements to redefine themselves in the destination society multi-ethnic, multi-religious context.

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ing". In this study, assuming that the definition is a problematic issue, for operational purposes, we regard "religious representations as the set of imaginary constructions through which society, the groups in this society and the individuals in these groups try to lend meaning to their everyday existence and represent their origin and future to themselves." (HERVIEU-LÉGER, Danièle. *Por una sociología de las nuevas formas de religiosidad:* algunas cuestiones teóricas previas). From this position, we understand believers as a social subject that interpret and transform the belief system and the norms derived from it.

[15] KURTZ, Lester. *Gods in the Global Village.*

Ethnic Representation of Religions

Immigrants often find that within the context of Catholicism of their destinations, they lack the spaces required to reproduce some of the popular Catholicism practices that are significant to them. On occasions, this may produces a certain type of segregation within the Catholic community as well as the feeling of forming part of a minority within Catholicism. The importance of ethnic groups within religious affiliations therefore constitutes an additional element that Catholic immigrants must deal with. That is why tensions often arise within Catholic parishes themselves that are sometimes "reconquered" by establishing certain services in Spanish, the emergence of new images for worship within the church etc.[16]

Popular religious practices therefore begin to acquire new meanings within an atmosphere of ethnic differentiation. Thus, for example, celebrating the patron saint's feast or a girl's fifteenth birthday in the United States may have several external similarities with these same celebrations held in the place of origin. Their meaning, however, usually has subtle yet significant differences. Although in the place of origin these celebrations made those that engage in them part of a majority, hegemonic tradition, in the places of destination, these same practices mark their presence as a minority and sometimes, stigmatized group.

This is reflected in "intimate and personal" aspects such as praying – in Spanish, obviously; yet, it is far more evident in celebrations held in public spaces, and, therefore, more noticeable – as in the case of processions.

It is not surprising, then, that within this context of ethnic groups, beliefs and religious practices, Mexican immigrants themselves perceive the religious diversity of the United States as a "natural" consequence of migration. The fact that each ethnic group professes its religion of origin is "natural" and therefore respected. Nevertheless, this openness towards "others" is not maintained towards Mexicans that have decided to change religion. In these cases, in addition to believing that conversion is due to material interests, converts are implicitly reproached for having betrayed their loyalty to the ethnic group and broken the links on which the basis of group solidarity is constructed.

In some cases, naturally enough, the representation of religious diversity as the result of ethnic diversity is also applied on their return home. This reproduction of the ethnic representation of religious identities may lead to increased intolerance towards those professing religions other

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[16] Cf. MORAN, Rodolfo. *Barrios mexicanos en Chicago.*

than Catholicism.[17] This is the case of immigrants returning home for the patron saint's festivities, who proudly tell their US-born children that unlike in the United States, in their home town, there is no place for other religions. Apparently, in their eyes, the village would lose its original purity if other religions began to expand. This position is even shared by those that declare that they have friends of – other nationalities – that profess religions other than Catholicism; once again, religious diversity is tolerated and even valued provided that it is expressed in "others" far from home.

It is worth recalling, however, that the religious practices associated with a national/local identity become instruments of choice for restructuring relationships between fellow countrymen in places of destination, constructing or reinforcing solidarity networks and creating spaces conducive to the redefinition of identity referents. Moreover, these religious practices, which acquire a new significance due to their association with a particular ethnic representation, constitute extremely valuable tools for redefining links with communities of origin.

Thus, the ethnic representation of religious referents enables a section of the Mexican immigrant population to construct an *identity trench*[18], which may prove extremely useful in a discriminatory context Paradoxically, this new tool, built to revindicate cultural difference, becomes a vector of intolerance towards the inside of the community of reference.

Moreover, when exported to the communities of origin, this new perception of diversity is magnified by the asymmetrical power relationship between those that migrate and those that remain. The intolerance "imported" from communities of origin appears to be greater precisely among those that suffer discrimination most directly, and does not necessarily correspond to those that participated most actively in local parishes before they emigrated.

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[17] Cf. ODGERS ORTIZ, Olga. *Migración e (in)tolerancia religiosa*.
[18] Cf. ODGERS ORTIZ, Olga. *Identités frontalieres.*

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