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**Networks and Religious Communities among  
Salvadoran Immigrants in San Francisco, Phoenix,  
and Washington, D.C.**

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**Networks and Religious Communities Among Salvadoran Immigrants  
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In this paper I seek to examine the place of religious institutions in the lives of Salvadoran immigrants, particularly how these immigrants view their links with and participation in the church in light of the conditions in which they live. Religious rituals infuse with transcendental meaning important events in the immigrants' lives, but religious institutions also respond in practical terms to the immigrants' needs and afflictions. This observation is not exceptional in the cases I present in this piece, however, relative to the importance of religion in the immigrants' lives, contemporary immigration scholars have not focused enough on this aspect of

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current immigration flows. Immigrants' religious participation was a major theme in sociological studies of turn-of-the-century immigration. Scholars' interest in the role of religion in immigrants' experiences stemmed in part from the prominent place that the church occupied in the lives of immigrants, as religious congregations developed an intricate welfare system to serve the needs of Italian, Irish, and Jewish newcomers. Stephenson (1932) observes that the Lutheran church constituted the fundamental institutional nucleus around which Swedish immigrants structured their lives. But the massive migration of Catholics, Jews, and German Lutherans also increased the sociological relevance of religious identity itself (Warner, 1993: 1058).

This earlier research interest in the role religion and religious institutions in the lives of immigrants gave way to new foci in studies of contemporary immigration. Post-1965 immigration studies have tended to concentrate on the ever-increasing diversity that the new immigrants have brought to American soil, addressing issues related to these immigrants' participation in the labor force, the sociodemographic characteristics of the immigrants, the effects of legality and immigration policy on the immigrants' lives, family and gender relations, and social networks among these immigrants (Menjívar 1999).<sup>1</sup> These new foci, however, have not signified that the importance of religion for immigrants has diminished. Religious institutions have remained central in immigrant life, as reflected in a recent resurgence of studies of immigrant religious communities (Kim 1994; Kim 1991; Levitt 1998; Warner and Wittner 1998; Menjívar 1999, 2000; Ebaugh and Charfetz 2000). Throughout the world, religious groups now constitute some of the most important forms of social organization and sources of worldviews (Rudolph 1997). And as Herberg (1960) observed in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, religion is a fundamental category of identity and association in American society, capable of forging solidarities and identities, and through which immigrants could find a place in American life.

Thus, religious institutions provide an important lens to understand immigrant life more generally and, at the same time, the place of immigrants in the host society.

The present work examines the centrality of religious institutions in the lives of Catholic and Evangelical Salvadorans in three locations—San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Phoenix. I examine how the immigrants' church and their religiosity contribute to their settlement in the receiving society across different receiving contexts, an evaluation based on the immigrants' own views. Thus, rather than assessing (with my own lens) whether the church and participation in religious activities are more or less conducive to immigrant assimilation, I focus on what these religious spaces represent in the lives of the immigrants, which of course, may reflect more generally the role of religion in the incorporation of immigrants. Given the importance of the context of arrival for the lives of immigrants I will gauge the place of the church and religious activities in three different receiving contexts for Salvadoran immigrants. San Francisco represents a well-established receiving area for Salvadorans; this city has the longest history of Salvadoran migration to the United States (Menjívar 2000). Washington D.C. is a relatively newer receiving point, with the overwhelming majority of Salvadorans arriving within the past two decades. Yet Washington is the only U.S. city where Salvadorans comprise the majority of the Latino population and are, therefore, highly concentrated in this city. And Phoenix differs from both in that it is one of the newest points of destination for Salvadorans—the majority having arrived in the 1990s—and they are neither the majority of the Latino population nor are they highly concentrated in this locale. This comparison offers a unique opportunity to examine the same immigrant group in different locations, which allows disentangling the effects that contexts of reception and receiving communities may have on the importance of religious institutions in immigrant life.

This study focuses on two different religious teachings—Catholic and Evangelical churches—that allow us to examine the church’s role in the Salvadoran migratory experience. The Catholic Church, following collective approaches, seems more effective in assisting the group in the host society, while the Evangelical church, espousing more individual-centered models, is more geared to providing each individual with support to get ahead. This distinction does not apply to the manner in which these churches do their work; it does not imply that Evangelicals do not undertake their mission collectively. The difference is that the Catholics direct their objectives to working for the collectivity, whereas the Evangelicals focus on the individual. This comparative approach permits us to address some questions raised in classical debates about the role that religious participation plays in immigrants’ assimilation, but at the same time, to depart from such debates in one important aspect. I do not assess whether the church either fosters or hinders immigrant assimilation; instead, I examine how specific religious teachings provide the immigrants with resources to advance their objectives (whether these are geared to assimilation, accommodation or basic survival) in the communities that they enter, which often lead to changes in the conditions in which they live.

The Salvadoran case is particularly fruitful to examine the questions posed in this study due to the centrality of the church in these immigrants’ experience. In their country of origin, religious institutions were pivotal before, during, and after the 12-year conflict during which thousands of Salvadorans emigrated. The comparison between Catholic and Evangelical churches is relevant because these churches have played important roles in the recent political, social, and economic crises of El Salvador (Williams and Peterson 1996). In the United States, the Catholic Church, along with mainstream Protestant denominations, has been actively involved in effecting changes in the lives of Salvadoran immigrants. In the absence of an official

infrastructure for their resettlement, these churches took an active stance in providing Salvadorans with assistance. The churches' help has ranged from creating sanctuaries throughout the country to protect Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees from deportation during the period of political unrest in Central America, to providing settlement assistance, to championing the legal struggle that eventually granted Temporary Protected Status to Salvadorans and an opportunity to resubmit asylum applications (*American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh* legislation). This study demonstrates that the Catholic and Evangelical churches, following distinct religious teachings, provide different avenues for these immigrants to achieve goals—collective and individual—and to effect changes in the immigrants' lives and in the communities in which they live. In what follows I will first present a general theoretical backdrop against which I will discuss the cases in this study, a description of the data and methods, followed by my empirical discussions of first the Catholic and then the evangelical church. In my presentation, I discuss the approaches to deal with immigrant-related issues of the churches' leadership as well as the congregations' views and responses.

### **Immigrants, Religion, and the Host Society.**

In examining the centrality of religion for immigrants, Max Weber's notion of religion as creating a "meaningful cosmos of a world experienced as specifically senseless" (Gerth and Mills 1946: 218) is relevant. Immigration involves crossing territorial borders, but also the physical, social, cultural and psychological borders that shape and define relations, systems of meaning, membership, and worldviews of everyday experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Berger 1967). In fact, Smith (1978) argued that immigration itself is often a "theologizing experience" as religion provides an ethical slant and the resources that nourish the immigrants'

outlook and with which the immigrants can react to the confusion and alienation that result from their uprooting.

Religion therefore offers important individual, psychological comfort to immigrants, but it also plays an important institutional role, providing an anchorage for people undergoing the process of resettlement in a foreign land (Gleason 1992: 168). Immigrants are not only already familiar with the churches they come to join, but the church is perhaps one of the most supportive and welcoming institutions for immigrants, particularly for those who arrive to live in difficult circumstances. Institutionally, churches not only provide spiritual comfort to the immigrants, but they also respond in a variety of ways to the needs of immigrants, offering the newcomers material and financial support, as well as legal counsel, access to medical care and housing, and even lobbying for less stringent immigration policies. Churches have also responded to the newcomers by attending to and incorporating popular religious practices that are culturally essential for the immigrants. In this way, immigrants have infused change and a rich multiplicity of experiences in the churches they have joined in the receiving communities.

Given the centrality of religious institutions and practices in the lives of immigrants—past and present—scholars have examined religious participation in terms of its contribution (or lack thereof) to assimilation, as well as to the ability of immigrants to maintain ties to their communities of origin. Researchers have sought to clarify the role of community institutions, such as the church, in the integration of immigrants, as well as the effects of religious affiliation on the immigrants' socioeconomic success and political integration (Gleason 1968; Nelli 1970; Litt 1970). Some researchers have observed that the ethnic parish has helped the newcomers to retain their cultural heritage in their adopted country (Dolan, 1975; Gleason, 1968), that religious traditions in ethnic parishes serve to hold immigrant groups together (Tomasi, 1970). And

whereas some scholars have observed that a church with close ties to the home country may hinder its assimilation (Mullins 1987), others, such as W.I. Thomas (Janowitz 1966) have noted that institutions such as the church, far from isolating newcomers from American life, actually provide the organizational vehicles that allow them to participate in it.

Many immigrants maintain ties with their communities of origin while simultaneously attempting to become part of the host society. Even those who immigrated a century ago managed to maintain links with their communities of origin. But with rapid and wide-ranging innovations in transportation and communication technology, and the increasing global economic interdependence of contemporary capitalism, however, many of today's immigrants can easily remain active in their homeland communities through travel and/or other means, such as remittances, telephone and video conferencing, and continued streams of immigrants (Menjívar 1999). Immigrant churches have always played an important role linking the immigrants' communities of origin and the new communities they enter. Recently, researchers have noted the important place of religious institutional ties with home communities, which provide another arena for immigrants to remain connected to their homelands (Levitt 1998; Warner and Wittner 1998; Menjívar 1999).

The Catholic and Evangelical churches in this study provide the immigrants with frameworks to interpret and cope with the world around them, doing so in ways that reflect their different teachings. Generally, the Catholic Church relies on collective approaches, often providing a well-developed web of assistance to immigrant newcomers as a group. On the other hand, Evangelical churches foster an individual-centered approach, and views transformation as occurring through individual conversion.<sup>2</sup> Here I do not mean to portray a monolithic image of a Catholic or Evangelical church because they do not adhere to only one particular religious

teaching. There is a more socially engaged Catholic church as well as a more traditional and disengaged and one that in many ways resemble the evangelicals in their emphasis on ritual and prayer (such as the charismatic), to name a few. And the same is true for the evangelical church. When I refer to these churches, I refer to those in my study, which congregate a high proportion of immigrants and therefore may not be “representative” of the rest. Importantly, the churches in this study reflect very different religious teachings and approaches that impact the immigrants differently. However, in spite of different religious teachings and organizational structures of these churches, and the different communities where these immigrants arrive, the centrality of religious institutions in their lives persists.

### **Sources of Data**

The data for this study were gathered in three different locations during the 1990s. In San Francisco I undertook ethnographic fieldwork in the Salvadoran community from late 1989 to 1994, where I conducted fifty in-depth interviews and a survey of 150 respondents. The focus of this study was not specifically on religion but on the general conditions in the lives of Salvadorans, with particular emphasis on their social networks. The data from Phoenix come from an ongoing study I started in 1998 of Latino immigration to the Phoenix metropolitan area, where 22 Salvadoran immigrants have been interviewed. Here again, the focus is not only on religion (although this is a major component of the study) but on the lives of these immigrants in this new receiving context. The focus of the study in Washington D.C. was on religion, where 25 intensive interviews and a survey of 87 respondents were conducted with Salvadoran immigrants from 1996 to 1997 in two Catholic churches with some of the largest Latino membership (many of them Salvadorans) and two Evangelical ones, one of which had an all-

Salvadoran membership. Even if the focus of my research in San Francisco and Phoenix has not been solely on the immigrants' religion, in the course of my research in these localities I have inevitably come to the realization that faith and the church are key ingredients in the lives of these immigrants as they strive to make a home in the new society. Thus in these locations as well I have spoken with pastors, priests, and other religious workers, and have attended services in both Catholic and evangelical churches.

The contexts may differ, but there are important similarities across these locations that strengthen a comparative angle. For instance, in all cases the immigrants had been residing in those locations for no more than five years, and had to be at least 18 years of age at the time they left their countries. The educational background of the immigrants varied highly, but not disproportionably by location. For instance in an almost all-Salvadoran evangelical church in Washington some immigrants had barely completed their elementary schooling, whereas in a different evangelical church in the same location there was a small concentration of white collar workers and office clerks. In Phoenix there were business owners and immigrants who had little more than the clothes they had on. But the majority in all three locales had either finished ninth grade or high school, and a few had a number of years of higher education. The types of work they performed in the three locales were remarkably similar, with more variations within locale than among them: Salvadoran immigrants were primarily involved in low paying jobs in the service and manufacturing industries. The women worked as hotel chambermaids, housekeepers, babysitters, house cleaners, factory and fast-food workers, and nursing home aids; and the men usually held jobs as gardeners, agriculturists, factory, maintenance, and repair shop laborers. And most of the informants in all three cities were either undocumented or in the process of regularizing their status.

In all three locations I asked the same basic questions when inquiring about the role of the church in the immigrants' lives (asking them to refer to concrete examples) and their general view of the church, though only in Washington I expanded on these questions. In the three locations my assistants and I conducted extensive ethnographic observations in evangelical and catholic churches as well as in the neighborhoods and communities where the immigrants lived, which permitted speaking informally with many more individuals than the focal ones interviewed. Additionally, in all locations I interviewed and spoke informally with other "local notables," as Cornelius (1982) refers to key people in the community that facilitate access to difficult-to-reach populations. Local notables in this study included community workers, language school teachers, workers in community clinics, social service agencies, merchants, restaurant owners, and operators of small stores that also serve as courier agencies. Although I took steps to ensure that study participants would represent different sectors of the Salvadoran population in all three locales by contacting them in diverse places, the small number of informants and the absence of strict randomization procedures to select them preclude me from generalizing from these observations to all Salvadoran immigrants in the locations where I have conducted this study or to Salvadorans elsewhere in the United States. However, in the qualitative tradition, these observations illuminate important linkages among local institutions, the broader contexts of reception, and the immigrants' lives.

### **The Church and the Immigrants' Participation in the Receiving Community**

For many Salvadoran immigrants, the church and their faith provide spiritual and moral solace and, at the same time, material help; both are crucial for their settlement in the place of arrival. The church seems to have helped them cope with many of the adversities of the reality

they faced upon arrival. In the words of Isabel, a Catholic in Washington D.C., “[our] faith is very important because without it it’s very difficult to survive here.... One finds many barriers in this country, enormous barriers...the language, customs, legal barriers. So our faith keeps us going. And the church helps us get through all this.” Marcela, a Salvadoran in San Francisco, was concerned that she was probably sinning because she was an active member of a Southern Baptist and of a Catholic church because she had found in both congregations the support (material, financial and moral) she had not found in her own family. María Elena has done the same in Phoenix, and although she considers herself Catholic, she also attends an evangelical church. In her words: “I am Catholic, and since I’m used to go to church on Sundays I do the same at the evangelical church. But [the evangelical church] is different. They want you there not only on Sundays. I like to go because they have helped me a lot. Spiritually, you know, a lot.” And also in Phoenix Manuel, who confessed not to be religious at all, explained: “I am like the majority of human beings, we only remember the church when we have a rope around our neck. When I was coming here [during the trip] I used to pray, Oh God, please let all this turn out well. But when things are fine, I sometimes say, thank you God. But it’s never with the same fervor as when I’m asking Him for help.”

These remarks point to the importance of religious spaces in the immigrants’ lives, regardless of where they eventually settle, or whether they seek spiritual, emotional, financial or material support. However, there are important differences between the Catholic and the Evangelical churches in the approach they take to provide such assistance and the resources they offer that deserves further attention.

### *The Catholic Church*

The Catholic Church in the United States—as well as other mainstream Protestant congregations—has a long history of assisting immigrants with material and financial help as well as moral and spiritual support (Amberg, 1976; Gleason, 1968; Shaw, 1991; Tomasi, 1975), a tradition that has continued to the present, as the experience of Salvadoran immigrants in the past two decades attests. Thus, Catholic workers have created sanctuaries, and provided immigrants with a web of well-organized programs for their settlement that range from housing subsidies to food and clothing distributions, to legal counsel, job referrals, free health clinics and English language classes. Noteworthy, in helping the immigrants, they have often challenge U.S. immigration policies, but their stance has been firmly rooted in religious teachings (Bau, 1985; Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991).

The Catholic Church has created centers that channel assistance to immigrants—whether they are Catholic or not—in the three cities where I conducted this research, which are usually run by a combination of Salvadoran or other Central American immigrants and American workers. In San Francisco, Phoenix and Washington D.C. the Catholic Church also has offered special immigration workshops to assist people with filling out immigration forms, with the complex process of applying and reapplying for Temporary Protected Status, and with the submission of political asylum applications. The church also keeps them informed of the latest developments in the generally intractable and confusing immigration laws that govern their lives and is ready to lobby on their behalf. Thus, the Catholic Church's actions in support of the immigrants have also taken place at the higher levels of the leadership. For instance, in an expression of support to the immigrants, the Cardinal wrote to President Clinton to alert him of the detrimental consequences that the 1996 welfare reform law would have on poor immigrants,

and also asked the archdiocese of Washington to testify before Congress against English-only bills. When asked why the Catholic Church was so actively involved in immigrants' rights, priests and Catholic workers did not hesitate to explain that they viewed these actions as their mission—as “representing the voice of the voiceless,” as one worker put it.

Catholic leaders bring the teachings closer to the members' lives by acknowledging and reaffirming the immigrants' identity in different ways. Priests in all locations always drew parallels either in their homilies, in prayer groups, or in informal conversations between the lives of the immigrants of that of Christ, who, like themselves, faced poverty and exclusion. Invitations to reflect and act on the problems facing the immigrants, however, do not come only from the clergy. At weekly meetings of Bible-reading groups in all locations, the participants read from the scriptures and reflected on their relevance for their immediate problems. For instance, in a Bible group held in Washington, after reading the scriptures and saying a prayer, the leader, a Salvadoran, went on to say: “We are a rural people living in an urbanized world. We have rural images in our minds, and we act in a rural way. We keep on living as if we were in a rural world. But the teachings are the same, we need to apply them to our lives now, to our reality.” In Phoenix, after reading and explaining that David had problems with his children but that one of them ended up building a great temple, the moderator of the group adapted this passage to something closer to the immigrants' world: communication between parents and children to avoid drug use and early pregnancies.

The Catholic leadership also summons the immigrants themselves to actively participate in addressing some of the social problems they face, inviting them to reflect from a spiritual perspective about the political and economic forces that affect their lives. For instance, in a Sunday mass before the 6<sup>th</sup> of August — the day of *El Salvador del Mundo* (Savior of the

World), the patron saint of El Salvador — a Salvadoran priest in Washington, standing between the Salvadoran flag and an image of Christ the Savior delivered a homily charged with sociopolitical content. A few days later, President Clinton was to sign the welfare reform bill into law, so the priest took that opportunity to speak to the congregation in the manner that religious leaders have been long advocating in parts of Latin America: a combination of spiritual formation with social action and reflection. In the priest's words:

Although we're celebrating the day of Christ the Savior and we're rejoicing in this festivity, it's been a tough week for us. President Clinton will sign the law of social (welfare) reform, and when this law passes, there will be great hunger and poverty in our streets. The Catholic Church categorically opposes the passage of this law (with a closed fist slightly hitting the podium) ... the way it's written. Our Cardinal wrote to the President because this law will affect all immigrants, legal and illegal, the women, the poor.... What do we say to all these? Jesus provides us with examples of compassion, of love. For instance, one day the disciples wanted to get rid of all the poor people because Jesus was tired, but Jesus had a mandate for them: feed them. The disciples had to respond to these people.... Jesus did not let them abandon the hungry. Jesus doesn't abandon us, but politicians do. Politicians want your vote, Jesus doesn't. He's with us, in the Eucharist, accessible to all. Jesus gives us an example of conscientization. Our Lord calls us to respond, to help others, to have compassion for our neighbors, and importantly, to do something, to act."

The call to action in this priest's words has found expression in the Church's community work. In addition to introspective teachings that invite parishioners to reflect on the conditions they face, Catholic leaders (as well as the leaders of other large, mainline denominations) have been involved in providing tools to their parishioners for social mobilization and action and have

participated in protesting certain policies that affect negatively the immigrants. In all three cities they have not only denounced unjust policies but have also participated in openly opposing them. For instance, during the Mount Pleasant riots in Washington, D.C. in 1991—when a largely Latino crowd clashed with the police to protest police brutality—a Catholic priest and other church leaders tried to ease the tensions by organizing community meetings in the basement of one of the largest churches in the area. One Catholic priest led a peaceful march to where the police were deployed, and called upon the officers to avoid violent acts. The meetings held at this church as a result of the riots led to the formation of an interfaith coalition that currently works on different issues of concern to the Hispanic community, including police abuse, political leadership, and immigration issues. In San Francisco some Catholic workers have been actively involved in broad coalition building so that the immigrants can “find a voice to be able to make changes in their conditions,” as a young priest put it. And in Phoenix Catholic workers have to “organize and work fast” as one leader said, because so many Latinos of different nationalities have moved to the city recently that the church is doing what it can to accommodate them.

*The Congregation.* Whereas the church’s institutional actions are key in the lives of the immigrants, so is the immigrants’ own understanding of such actions and how they perceive them. Most informants who participated in Bible-reading groups were quick to observe the importance of these reflections for their daily lives, and for the practical use to which they could be put. For instance Blanca, from Washington, often reflected on biblical readings when she felt she could not go on anymore, particularly when she had to get up to start working at four in the morning. She also noted that through her faith she could work on changing the conditions in the environment around her, such as improving the situation of her deteriorating neighborhood. Through church initiatives to work with youth groups and to write to President Clinton to explain

the deleterious effects of immigration laws and welfare reforms, she believes she can act to change the conditions in which she, as well as other immigrants she cares about, lives. In her words: “We must do something about this, but at the same time, pray. These two things go together. If we only do one of them, [shaking her head] we better don’t do anything at all. And in that case, we’re lost.”

Immigrants in the three locales were well aware of the church’s leadership response to the problems they faced and the tools that their church provided them to approach these issues more efficiently. For instance, when asked if they thought the church responded *in concrete ways* to the needs of the community, 84 percent of the survey respondents in Washington D.C. answered affirmatively. In Phoenix, Alberto, who explained that he had “no religion” but believes in God and assiduously reads the Bible and attends church on holidays, said that he has seen the work of the church in his everyday life: “I had never seen this, I had never imagined that the church could help so much. Here [in Phoenix and in California] I have seen with my own eyes what the church can do.” In all these locales informants indicated that in addition to creating programs to assist them with immigration-related issues (i.e., immigration workshops, job referrals, etc.), their church had also developed community initiatives to deal with the problem of gangs and drugs in their neighborhoods—at the top of their most serious concerns.

Underscoring the importance of religious spaces in the immigrants’ lives, informants in all locations expected, or at least believed, that it was the church’s mission to help them and be there for them when in need. Claudia, in Phoenix, thought that the church should be involved in many projects, from opening up alternatives for youngsters to avoid being in the streets, to food collections and legal assistance. She thought that the church has credibility and that if it sets out to undertake a project many people will be involved, both as providers and as receivers. Mario,

an informant in San Francisco explained: “Because the church is a mother, right? The Mother Church, you know? I guess one expects good things to come from it. We want the church to protect us and to guide us here, in an unknown place where we face many difficulties. Wouldn’t you also go to your mom for something like that? Same thing with the church.” Some informants also believed that it was the church’s responsibility to take the ministry, the work of the church, to the community, instead of waiting for the people to show up at the church’s door.

Some immigrants recognized the church’s social engagement and its important role in supporting their efforts and objectives.<sup>3</sup> When asked if the church should be involved in denouncing social injustice, they generally responded affirmatively, as they thought that this was one of the main missions of the church. In the words of Ramón: “It is only natural that the church should denounce injustices. Christ taught us to do so. If we don’t, then we’re not following Jesus’ teachings, and if that happens, we’re no longer a church.” In fact, according to Julio, to become actively involved in helping the marginalized should be the church’s priority. As Saint Paul says, ‘it is necessary to feed the hungry before you teach him the scriptures. It is necessary to start with the basics. You can’t expect that the hungry will respond to your message if they haven’t eaten, right?’ A Salvadoran priest thought that addressing issues of social justice was an integral part of his work; he said, “We need to develop a new faith, one that responds to the needs of our people here. And inevitably, this will have to be linked to issues of social justice. No doubt about that.”

The immigrants’ views of their church’s involvement with social issues were intimately related to religious teachings. For instance, informants believed that the church has a mandate to help those who are in need; often they cited biblical parables to support their views. Carlos, from Washington, explained how a Catholic should live as follows: “The true work of a [Catholic]

person is to live a life with and for others, not only in the [rituals of the] church. Remember? When the apostles went up the mountain and told Jesus, ‘Oh look how pretty it is up here, we can build a couple of huts and stay here.’ And Jesus told them no, ‘You need to come down, you need to be down here, in the world, doing your work.’ To me that means that we need to imitate Jesus in everything, but we need to do it in our daily lives, not only in the rituals of the church.” And Claudia, in Phoenix, when asked why she thought the church should be involved in helping immigrants, responded: “Of course, in many ways. You see, there’s a simple reason for that. Our faith tells us that we have to help our neighbor, our brothers and sisters, and we are all brothers and sisters, and since the church is our leader in our faith, they should take the lead, the responsibility to set the example for the rest of us.”

I do not mean to paint an excessively positive image of religious institutions in the immigrants’ lives, for there were also a few who did not feel particularly attracted to participate in religious institutional activities, and were a bit cynical in their view of the church’s activities in the community. When asked if he thought the church should be involved in helping the immigrants, Manuel, in Phoenix, responded: “Of course they should. With all the money they take from the people, at least they should give something back.” Manuel’s mother held a similar view. When asked if the church should be involved in helping the immigrants she was among a small minority, present in all three locations, who disagreed. In her words: “I don’t think the church should be mingling with any of these things. Priests should do what they’re assigned to do. They should only dedicate themselves to their churches and that’s it. But if they do have the means to help, then I guess they could do a little bit more, to provide mostly economic help, which we all need, especially at the beginning. But no, I don’t have an inclination to trust the church (smiles).”

*A Collective Approach.* Importantly, calls to action on the part of the Catholic leadership are interpreted as collective and directed to the group. As some of their leaders, members of the congregation believed that the most effective way to reach their goals was through different forms of collective action (though they did not term their efforts as such). A priest in Washington invoked his religion's "communitarian ethic" (Greeley 1989: 486), to explain this view. "I see our work as being truly, fundamentally community-oriented, so we have to encourage and to create community. We only do that when we recognize the origins of our congregation, where they come from, and at the same time, unite them in Christ, which is our mission."

The parishioners who were more actively involved in the church (which across locales is not the majority, since these Catholics often do not register in their parishes and do not attend church often) often mentioned a personal relationship with God or with Christ; they also understood their mission as part of a collective effort. They referred to their work and themselves as part of a community or a group, which was reflected in the language that these Catholics employed to describe their experiences. When they used biblical passages to describe their mission, for instance, they would often identify with the apostles' work, which was carried out collectively. Jorge, from Washington, explained that his church had been effective in reaching youngsters in a program to combat drugs because it had been organized as a group effort. And according to Ramón, another immigrant in Washington, and Maria, from Phoenix, the church could do much better in addressing community problems if it encouraged even more collective endeavors. In Ramón's words: "So we are the church of the poor, of the needy, consequently, the church does not have the economic resources to carry out its mission fully. We need to be congregated as a community to be able to solve our problems. If we live in community and try to solve our problems as a community, we'll do much better."

An important exception to this pattern among active Catholics is the charismatic groups. For instance, instead of the community-action approaches that prevailed among other Catholics, those in charismatic groups viewed their mission as mostly contained within the confines of the church. They were more prone to emphasize prayer and church rituals as viable measures to combat problems in the neighborhood (and even those that afflict these immigrants personally, such as their uncertain legal status) over the community actions often mentioned by non-charismatics. They were also more likely to mention individual responses and recommend similar measures to deal with issues about how they should live their faith. But even the less collectively oriented charismatics agreed that the best way to live their lives was by trying to make a difference in the world. In the words of Elizabeth, in Washington: “To be able to reach the Kingdom of God one has to make a difference in this life, to be able to do something so that when I present myself to God I can say that I did something.”

### *Evangelical Churches*

The approach of the Evangelical churches in this study, in many respects, seemed to be the opposite to the Catholics'. Rather than emphasizing the efforts of the collectivity to attempt to change their situation, the Evangelicals promoted individual spiritual discovery that led to Christian growth. In contrast to the Catholic churches, the absolute leadership in the Evangelical churches rested on the pastor. In the Catholic churches in the studies I conducted, the role of the priests was that of guides; in the Evangelical churches the pastors assumed many other responsibilities, which made them vital figures in the members' lives. I do not mean to underplay the importance of the participatory nature of the Evangelical churches—an organizationally less hierarchical church than the Catholic—where members refer to each other as “brothers and

sisters.” However, the pastor’s authority and his centrality in the lives of the members are unmatched. The Evangelical pastor often served as a counselor, spiritual guide and confidante; he dealt with concerns on a case-by-case basis, and took an active stance to counsel their members, often times like a father figure. For instance, the services were infused with admonishments to the members to keep from “bad company” that could entice them to sin, particularly drinking and infidelity among the men, and coquettish behavior and “unladylike” manners among women. The pastors seemed to be “on-call” at all hours of the day to tend to their flocks’ concerns, and always stressed the benefits that those who accept Christ as their savior could obtain.

A pastor in Washington was there to comfort a woman who called him in the middle of the night because of a dispute with her husband. He was also there to console a church member whose relative had been detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and he even took a collection in church to pay for this person’ bail. He had helped some church members with immigration applications and had referred a family who lacked medical insurance to a community clinic. This pastor stressed that he was there to help his congregation, but that he had no “programs” set up to assist them; he took each case one at a time because he was familiar with each person’s special circumstances and individual problems.<sup>4</sup> This was possible in part because these Evangelical churches were much smaller than the Catholic ones.<sup>5</sup> The fact that he personally knew most of the church’s members, he believed, qualified him to provide personal and, therefore, more effective solutions. As a church’s member put it: “It is a wonderful thing ... but very tough on our pastor because he has to deal with everything, from the personality of the people to everything that happens to them. He takes care of everything ... he visits hospitals, he

has to give advice, and if he's called in the middle of the night, even if he's tired, he has to go where he's needed. But when a person has God's calling, the person has to be ready to respond."

*Accepting Christ as Your Savior.* Similar to the Catholics, the Evangelical churches' teachings helped their members to make sense of the world around them. In the Evangelicals' case, however, this was tied to the idea that the individual, through deeds that glorify God, could find his or her own spiritual salvation. For instance, when Cleotilde, in Phoenix, was asked about her decision to migrate, she recounted:

God revealed everything to me in a dream many years before I left. I knew everything, even what happened at the American Embassy in San Salvador before I even went there. God had a purpose for me to come here because He wanted me to serve Him.... He has enriched my life because through the experiences I have had here I have served Him. I am very happy because there is so much need here, there are a lot of Hispanics to whom I can take the good news, and I can do that because of the language. I can talk about the Lord's Word to them because we speak the same [Spanish] language. There is a lot of work to do here.

Because most Evangelicals in the three locales where I conducted this study were converts, events related to their conversion were some of the most important in their lives (as opposed to the Catholics who cited marriages, births, deaths, and the separation from a loved one—usually through migration). Evangelicals often referred to having accepted Christ (meaning their conversion) as the most consequential episode in their lives, and were quick to recount the conditions under which this happened, usually after a major tragedy. Along these lines, they also mentioned that their faith could help those, who like themselves, "had fallen to the temptation and vices of the [non-convert] world."

An important difference with the Catholics' expression of their faith and participation in religious activities is that when a person decides to accept Christ, meaning convert, they are encouraged (sometimes required) to attend religious services at least once, but more often several times, per week. The services that I attended in the evangelical churches were on average three times as long as a regular (even a Sunday) mass, and these were usually family affairs, which everyone, even the smallest children, attended. Participants were required to read the Bible and bring it with them to the services, where they would all read passages and chant along with the pastor. Thus, the religious activities and the expression of faith in the evangelical churches were more conducive to greater individual involvement in the institutional structure of the church than among the Catholics. Marcela from San Francisco explained this difference in the following words: "Look, I see it like this. If you're a Catholic, you can say that you're a Catholic even if you never go to church. Then one day you're in need or something happens, and you start going again. But then you get a job or move to a different place and you don't go to church for a long time, but you're still the same Catholic. If you're an evangelical no, you can't say today I have time I'll go to church and tomorrow say I'm tired or I have to work, I can't go today. You go all the time, or else you're not in the church." One may wonder whether the success of the evangelical churches in helping people straighten their ways (e.g., keeping the men from alcohol and infidelity, and both the men and the women from going to parties, which, the pastors argued, simply open opportunities to sin) rests precisely on this high demand for time of the members, which requires people to spend many hours a week in church, particularly on weekend evenings.

*Individual Solutions?* These congregations generally were not inclined to speak of collective solutions for their problems. For instance, the members often mentioned that the best way to deal with the problems that afflicted their neighborhoods, and even the country, was to pray, and to

convince people to accept Christ. In the words of Ernesto, a pastor and one of the founders of a church in Washington: “We are united in prayer, all of us pray for everyone, for our (political) leaders, those who govern, so that one day they can be saved and if they want a special, personal prayer, we’ll say it. But even if they don’t request them, we’ll pray anyway, because we pray for our environment, for our race, every week.” Some of these immigrants thought that one of today’s major problems is spiritual decadence, which leads to drug use and other social problems. Thus, a logical solution is to save people through conversion; if more people accept Christ, there would be fewer social problems. Bernarda, a church member, echoed Ernesto’s words adding: “What we need to do is to accept that we cannot live without God. We need to accept Him because without Him we cannot do anything.”

Interestingly, however, in spite of their concentration on the individual and on personal conversion as means to combat all problems, social and personal, it seemed that in the end, a large portion of their activities are geared to the community. In fact, an Evangelical pastor in Washington pointed out that their work is indeed community-oriented. In his words: “If the government would let us go out and spread the Gospel around more publicly, it would need fewer ambulances, fewer policemen, and fewer hospitals because Christ can save many more people than authorities can.” However, in doing this work they do not engage in strategies directed to the group but rather on the individual and their conversion. Thus, in contrast to the Catholics’ views, neither the pastor nor the congregation believed that they should be engaged in the collective solutions or strategies that so often emerged in the conversations of the Catholics because achieving the higher goal of personal conversion would take care of the rest. When asked if his church should be involved in denouncing injustices, a pastor in Phoenix responded:

“The church should not get involved in any of those things directly; the [non-convert] world can do as it pleases. What we need to do is to work hard so that people accept Christ as their savior.”

*The Congregation.* When asked if their church should be engaged in seeking solutions to social problems, evangelicals in all three locations answered negatively, as they did not readily see how these actions could be of more benefit than a conversion, which guarantees not only salvation but also better people in general. Lucía from Phoenix, explained:

I think that we as Christians should not denounce things, it is better that we seek God and let Him take care of things. We are peregrines here on earth, we’re only here temporarily, and the days that we’re allowed to spend here, we should spend them seeking our objective, which is to find Christ. Instead of talking about all those problems and getting involved in those things, we need to put all those things, all problems before God because the Word tells us ‘there is nothing impossible for God.’ But if we start dealing with these problems ourselves, we’ll never get anything done because only God’s magnanimity can solve it all.

Elsy, from Washington, was not even interested in discussing social problems and similar issues because she deemed them “political” and, therefore, beyond human capabilities. She explained that she could not address those questions because she was not competent in, nor attracted to, those areas. When asked if the church should be engaged in community organizing to deal with social problems, she replied:

You see, the church is only in charge of that which deals with the diffusion of the Word, the Lord’s Word. The church does not get involved in other problems because only God is our judge. We first must recognize that He is just, our only justice, and justice for us will come when He deems it’s time to. But no, I don’t think we should get involved in trying to change things that only God can. Look, for instance, our church shouldn’t participate in a protest or a

movement or that kind of thing, you know, like people do with problems of immigration.

Yes, our church can do something for Salvadorans, for immigrants. What it can do is preach the Gospel to them, to gain more souls for our Lord and pray for our leaders. But not to go out in the streets shouting political things, no, that's not for us.

Evangelicals did not interpret their teachings in ways that justified collective solutions or actions, nor did they believe that their mission was to be engaged in any action that could be interpreted as political. For instance, when issues with political content—particularly linked to experiences in El Salvador because they were still very much alive in the minds of many of the churches' members—would come up, the Evangelical pastors attempted to devoid the political overtones in the immigrants' concerns. One afternoon during a service in Washington, a woman recounted a terrifying nightmare from which she had woken up crying and very shaken. She described how in her dreams she saw military trucks passing by her town and forcibly taking people from their homes at night, only to be found tortured and dead later on. Even though this woman's nightmare might have been based on real events in her hometown in eastern El Salvador—where she personally knew people who had been abducted—the pastor, a Salvadoran who originated in the same small town as most in the congregation, chose a very different interpretation. To him, this was a sign to alert the congregation about a danger emanating from some members who were not true believers, and that these members should stop sinning and “accept Christ in their hearts fully,” or else they could bring disaster to their church.

When asked if their church has helped them to effect changes in the conditions in which they lived, the evangelicals overwhelmingly responded affirmatively. For instance, Virginia in San Francisco, intimated that she has been able to carry on in spite of the infinite difficulties she has encountered in the United States because her “brothers and sisters in Christ” have been there to

help her even more than her own family. Elizabeth from Washington is convinced that her faith has helped her to cope with many problems in her life in the United States. In her words: “My faith has helped me get through in my life. God, through the Holy Spirit, has given me everything I have in my life now. The enemy tried to get in my way, so that I wouldn’t have a home, for instance. But God, in His infinite mercy, has been with me.” And María and her husband Esteban in Phoenix maintained that their church had saved their lives. They invited me to a service so I could witness, according to them, the miracles that their church works on people, but also to encourage me to contemplate the possibility of my own conversion, which other evangelicals I came to know had already asked me to consider.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

There are a few points that can be made regarding the relevance of religious institutions in the lives of these Salvadoran immigrants. In general, based on the observations I gathered in San Francisco, Washington, D.C. and Phoenix, religious institutions serve as focal points in the lives of Salvadoran immigrants, regardless of the particular configurations of the communities to which they arrive. It is entirely plausible that the church and religious activities have become more central among these immigrants after migration (a salient point among the evangelicals, among whom there have been many conversions after migration), as they have experienced much dislocation and instability in their lives, and therefore, have sought consolation and support in the church. This observation simply underscores the importance that the church and its activities take on for immigrants. Thus, as has been the case historically, religious involvement may continue to provide avenues for groups to improve their lot (Warner, 1993: 1068). Moreover, within the social milieu of the church, Salvadoran immigrants have been able to forge

social networks that provide them with some of the most important forms of support, particularly in the absence of an official infrastructure for their resettlement (Menjívar 2000). Therefore, for these immigrants, as Andrew Greely (1997: 592-3) has observed generally, religion can be a powerful resource of desirable social capital.

Both Catholic and Evangelical churches in this study render important social support that helps the immigrants to cope with the difficulty of living in the new environment, and both provide vital material resources for the immigrants' incorporation into the host society, but they do so in different ways. The Catholic churches encourage collective actions to transform the conditions in which the immigrants live, and generally provide a space where immigrants can express socially engaged versions of the Christian faith, as well as tools for community mobilization. This church calls upon the congregation to reflect and act on the social problems that they face, fostering models for community action. This may be due in part to more community- or socially-oriented teachings, but also to an effort on the part of the church to become more pertinent to its ethnically diverse membership. In doing so the Catholic church allows for specific cultural expressions of the faith without compromising the unity that it is attempting to infuse so as to more effectively help the immigrants in their efforts to change the conditions in which they live.

In contrast, the Evangelical church emphasizes the comfort of individual salvation that brings along hopes for material improvement. Concentrating on the individual and his or her conversion and salvation, the Evangelical church renders a critical form of support for these immigrants. The congregation becomes a family for the members and the pastor provides them with great spiritual, moral, emotional (and individualized), and often material and financial support of the kind that would be available to these immigrants if they had access to an adequate infrastructure

for resettlement available to legally recognized (refugee) immigrants coming from politically volatile regions. This does not imply that agencies in charge of providing such resources should ignore these immigrants merely because they can access their pastor. The point here is that these immigrants find in their church an invaluable source of support that helps them to carry on with their lives. Although the Evangelicals concentrate on individual strategies for salvation, in doing so, indirectly effect community-level changes.

Both churches furnish the immigrants with important alternatives to cope with the adversities in their daily lives without advocating—nor necessarily standing in the way of—assimilation. Importantly, religious institutions provide the immigrants the resources and tools that the immigrants themselves deem necessary, from legal counsel to English language lessons, from institutional links to their communities of origin to organizational strategies to deal with problems in their neighborhoods, from financial support to pay for a month's rent to a kind word in a desperate moment. All of this, in the eyes of the newcomers, is vital for their efforts to fulfill their projects and to cope with the new environment, whether or not the immigrants' projects are geared to assimilation.

The very provision of help to the newcomers effects important transformations in religious congregations as well, at the same time that the newcomers act to transform these religious spaces. Also, the immigrants themselves create new religious spaces, new churches and congregations, such as storefront evangelical congregations, and bring new expressions of faith to long-established churches. And in their efforts to become relevant to the newcomers, established churches, such as the Catholic and other mainline congregations, do not remain static. Thus, in responding to needs of new flock, churches themselves are changing and others

are being created, so that in the interaction between new immigrants and the host society's religious spaces, transformation occurs both ways.

Some scholars may argue that an all-encompassing institution such as the church, where immigrants can find solace and friendship, spiritual comfort and material support, may stand in the way of their assimilation in the host society. Others, as W.I. Thomas (Janowitz 1966) noted among the Polish immigrants he studied, institutions such as the church, far from isolating newcomers from American life, actually provide the organizational vehicles that allow them to participate in it. Although it was not my intention to assess the likelihood of these outcomes among the immigrants in my study, I would like to suggest that whether religious institutions are more or less conducive to immigrant assimilation may be contingent on the religious teachings and organizational structure of the churches the immigrants join. These structures may allow immigrants to participate in the receiving societies, and perhaps even to "assimilate," but only to the environments their resources allow them to enter, and not all at the same rate.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> There have been several explanations for the paucity of studies of religion among recent immigrants, which Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000: 15) discuss at length.

<sup>2</sup> Recently a small but growing literature has begun to observe important complexities in Evangelicalism, which tempers the stark contrast between political activism among Catholics and Evangelicals. This new literature steers away from portraying Evangelicalism as uniformly conservative in its political and social views, and focuses on instances where Evangelical churches have been a force behind social change. Brusco's work (1995) on Evangelicalism altering women's position in Colombia and Smith and Haas's (1997) analysis of the participation of Evangelicals in revolutionary politics in Nicaragua illustrate this more nuanced view.

<sup>3</sup> This is particularly the case among those who did political work or were active in progressive brands of Catholicism in El Salvador who believed that the Catholic church they encountered in the United States in many ways resembles the more conservative church in El Salvador. In fact, an informant argued that those Salvadoran Catholics who were used to progressive—or even radical—forms of Catholicism have joined other, mostly mainstream Protestant, churches where they have found more support for their views.

<sup>4</sup> This pastor was so familiar with each person in the congregation that he knew who was working and who was not, and if they were employed what their approximate income was. When it came time for tithe, the pastor knew how much each person should give.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, one of the Evangelical churches in Washington had approximately 400 members, but this church later split into two. It is difficult to estimate the size of the congregations in the Catholic churches, since many do not register in the Parish. The priests would calculate an approximate number by extrapolating the number of people in the different committees and church groups, as well as those who had requested sacraments.