

***Audio news conference transcript***  
***THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON IMMIGRATION***  
***-- When the Focus Turns From Gateway Cities To Main Street, USA --***

**September 19, 2007**

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for standing by and welcome to the Immigration & Religion conference call. This conference is being recorded. Your speakers for today are Manuel Vasquez, Associate Professor, University of Florida; Peggy Levitt, Chair and Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Wellesley College and Kim Bobo, Executive Director, Interfaith Worker Justice.

I would now like to turn the conference over to Manuel Vasquez, Associate Professor at the University of Florida.

Manuel Vasquez: Well, thank you very much for the opportunity. I wanted to talk about the landscape and then talk a little bit about my own project, the work that we're doing in Atlanta.

I think in terms of the national landscape, we're faced with two trends. One is basically the failure of the federal government to pass comprehensive, rational and balanced immigration law, immigration reform. And as a result, what's happening is that localities have to deal with the problem of immigration on their own. And this dovetails with changes in immigration patterns that are taking place nationally.

Traditionally, immigration had taken place in the so-called gateway cities – New York, L.A., Miami, Los Angeles, Texas – Houston, Texas, for example. And I think what we're seeing now is a shift towards a new destination for immigrants. And that has to do with changes in the national economy.

There have been regions of the country that have shown growth particularly in the South and Southwest, places like Nevada, Georgia, North Carolina, representing growth in the economy. And obviously, immigrants are attracted by the opportunities that growth offers.

So, within that context, we at the University of Florida wanted to study the immigration to new destinations. And we picked Atlanta as a laboratory to begin to see the new patterns that are emerging.

And the reason why we chose Atlanta is because Atlanta offers a very interesting case study, a city that is becoming quickly globalized, a city that has received a large influx of immigrants, not just Latinos but people from Asia and Africa. And also a city that has a diversity of populations, native populations from the conservative suburbs up in the North where we're doing work in Marietta in the area of Cobb County, but also has a large African-American population.

And we are particularly interested in seeing how rapid immigration is changing the racial and ethnic relations in the city because the city has been historically determined by the black-white divide. And those tensions are still very much there.

And the question that we wanted to ask is what happens when you have a large influx of immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants. And within Latino immigrants, Mexican immigrants that are coming in to occupy jobs and to put their children in schools and use some of the health care facilities.

So, that's the key question that's driving our research. And one of the things that we have found is that churches, religious institutions are central to the process of this inter-ethnic relation. Because immigrants in new destinations, one of the first things they do is they form congregations in order to deal with, you know, to form networks, to have places where they can speak their language, where they can meet -- self-help networks.

So, churches become a part of the social fabric that these immigrants construct. And a result, they're coming face-to-face. Churches are in many cases, boundary places where people meet. We have several cases of Anglo Churches that are nesting immigrant churches. They extended the pastoral services to immigrants. And that brings all sorts of problems, tensions. And at the same time, it also opens lines of communication.

So, we are interested in that. And we're interested in particular seeing what happens with African-Americans. There is a – I think a very clear tension in the African-American community vis-à-vis the Latino community.

On the one hand, I think they see the energy and they see the yearning that these immigrants have for social justice. And I think they see that vitality. And that vitality sort of reminds them of the Civil Rights Movements during the '60s and '70s.

And so, a lot of the African-American leadership is kind of energized by that. But on the other hand, there is a little bit of apprehension that Latino immigrants buy too much into the American dream and that they are not as active socially as they should be. And as a result, they're coming in to basically take advantage of the gains that the Civil Rights Movement made without actually contributing to the Civil Rights Movement.

So, there is some ambivalence that we're exploring now as the project goes into its second year of field work.

And now, I'd like to pass the microphone to Professor Peggy Levitt who is Professor and Chair of Sociology at Wellesley College and is also author of the new book "God Needs No Passport."

Peggy Levitt: Thank you very much Manuel and thank you to the reporters that have joined us today. I want to echo Manuel's effort to sort of look at Atlanta as an archetypical case.

I do research in Boston. And I think Boston is both sort of a new destination city and a traditional destination city. And the kinds of people that are coming here are

reflective of the demography, the demographic sort of difference that we see in immigrants all over the country.

So, we have very high-tech professional, bankers and lawyers and doctors coming here from South Asia. And we have very poor immigrants coming here from the Dominican Republic, from Brazil. And so, we have the whole gamut. We also have new Irish coming here that can be – their experience can be compared to different experiences of the Irish that came before.

And so, what we see throughout the country is that immigrants and their children make up one-quarter of the American population. But the debates that we're having about immigration are very much, I think, based on out of date assumptions about what the immigrant experience looks like.

So, for one thing, we tend to think about immigrants as coming here and severing their ties to their sending community. But more and more, what we see is that people keep feet in both worlds. And they buy homes and invest and support political candidates back in their homelands. But they are also buying homes and opening business and joining the PTA here.

And this is a good thing because these are the kinds of people that can be bridge builders and translators and sort of religious diplomats who can tell what it means to be Muslim in America back in Pakistan. And then talk about – and then also translate what it means to be Pakistani here in the United States.

And so, more and more people keep feet in both worlds. And they're using religion to do that. And that means that we have to start thinking of religion if we want to preserve religious pluralism and deepen it. And that's a legacy that this country is founded on. And we should preserve.

We need to start thinking about religion as outside the Christian box, that not all religions are bibles, buildings and boys, meaning that not everyone goes to the same church and prays with the same community, and listens and believes in the same canon and does that in a formal way every week.

And so having said that though, we do see religion, as Manuel said, really helping people become part of this country and staying back connected to their homelands.

So we see Indians of the Swaminarayan and Swadhyaya denominations who really learn a lot about the political context in Lowell [Massachusetts], and health and education, and schooling in their neighborhoods. But also very much stay connected to India through their participation in these religious communities.

Or Pakistanis who have contributed to the building of the biggest mosque in New England who are also volunteering their time to go back to Pakistan on these kinds of health trips where they donate medical care.

Or Brazilians who are very, very much concerned about politically integrating into Framingham and gaining a space in Framingham, Massachusetts and addressing the

need for driver's licenses and things like that. But who are also filling containers of clothing and food that they mobilize through the Pentecostal and Catholic Churches that they're part of.

So, basically, the bottom line here is that immigration is a trans-national or a cross border phenomenon. And trans-national opportunities and challenges need trans-national responses.

And so, when we talk about immigration reform, we need to really see where people come from and where they move to as two sides of the same coin. And that religion is a really big under-utilized resource in addressing some of these concerns.

So now, I'm going to turn the call over to Kim Bobo who is the Executive Director of Interfaith Worker Justice in Chicago.

Kim Bobo:

Good morning. I'm delighted to join my colleagues. I come to this as someone who works around the country with people of faith who have come together around work issues. We have 60 religion labor groups around the county, including 17 of those groups that run worker centers that have become drop-in centers for immigrant workers who are being exploited in the workplace. Generally, the number one issue we see is workers not getting paid for all the hours that they work.

Out of that, our network of groups have realized that at this moment in history in this country, you can't separate worker justice issues from immigration issues. That the conditions are so bad for immigrant workers that we will be unable to address the workplace issues unless we as a nation are engaged in questions around immigration.

And the congregations, the churches, the synagogues, the mosques that we work with around the country are across the board, interested in figuring out what can we do to create a just and fair immigration program.

And they come to this immigration issue from a variety of places. One, they all have principles in their faith traditions that suggest we should welcome the immigrant and that we serve a God who doesn't just care about people in one set of borders.

But they also come to this because of concern of families being torn apart. And they see that regularly in the congregations. They also come to this because they understand the work lives that so many immigrants face in not getting paid and standing on the corner, and being taken advantage of, not getting worker's comp. The whole set of exploitation that we see.

And then they also see that by allowing one group of workers to not be treated fairly, it really undermines conditions for all workers in the society. And so, clergy and religious leaders in congregations that serve non-immigrants are equally struggling with, you know, how do we preserve and improve working conditions in the society.

And so, out of this, we've seen just this outpouring of concern from the religious community and the calling forth for a more equitable and fair and comprehensive immigration program for our federal government.

Now, one of the things that we've done because of this is support and help organize this New Sanctuary Movement. There are now 24 communities that are in the process of creating public sanctuaries for families that do not have proper documentation and housing folks in congregations.

But in addition to sort of that, there is symbolic action. Congregations are looking at how do we define sanctuary even more broadly than just that? How do we create our congregations to be sanctuaries for the day laborers that are on the corner, or sanctuaries for the construction workers that are out in our communities building in the hot sun? So how do we provide sanctuary at this moment in history for immigrants that are throughout or society?

So again, I think this is an important crisis for our country and the religious community is stepping up in many ways. So, let me stop. And why don't we open up our call for questions?

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to register a question, please press the 1 followed by the 4 on your telephone. And you will hear a three-tone prompt to acknowledge your request.

One moment please.

Thank you. The first question that we have is from Mary Lou Pickel from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Please go ahead, your line is now open.

Mary Lou Pickel: I just was wondering about the sanctuary communities that you talked about. What are they? Are there any in Georgia?

Kim Bobo: I think at this point, there are not any in Georgia although, you know, there seem to be congregations popping up all over the place. So, I can't guarantee there won't be one tomorrow. But at this point, we don't have any in Georgia.

Mary Lou Pickel: And can you talk a little bit more when you say a community, do you mean a city or do you mean like a church or what is it that you mean?

Kim Bobo: Well, Mary Lou it's really both. I was literally last week on the phone with – doing a conference call with 17 congregations in Kansas City, for example. And, you know, they are trying to figure out how all 17 of them, these congregations which are, you know, they're Catholic, Protestant, Jewish. And I don't think there were Muslim but they could have been, right?

How they work together to provide sanctuary and, you know, some of them will actually host families in their congregations, others will provide support for that, others will support day laborers on the corner. And so, they are really collectively looking at it. We're seeing that in city after city.

Now again, you do also occasionally, you know, I've gotten a couple of calls just in the last couple of weeks from, you know, random congregations in North Carolina saying we want to do this. So, it's really both at this moment.

Mary Lou Pickel: Thank you.

Operator: The next question that we have comes from the line of David Van Biema from *Time Magazine*. Please go ahead sir, your line is now open.

David Van Biema: Hi. This is foremost directed to Professor Levitt. I wonder if you could give me a little bit – could expand a little bit on the title of your new book. It seems – what is *God Needs No Passport* in opposition to and what is it an affirmation of?

Peggy Levitt: Well, you know how academic – you know how books always have to have semicolons and then, you know, the explanatory second half of the title ...

David Van Biema: Yup.

Peggy Levitt: So the second half of the title is saying how immigrants are changing the American religious landscape. And basically, the argument of the book is that the American religious landscape isn't really American anymore. And that people use religion to belong to many places around the world. And that religion is particularly suited to that because it speaks to your everyday life and your community around you. But it also speaks to transcendence and a universal experience, which is very much part of what it means to live in a global world.

David Van Biema: Does your research or does the direction of your research differ tremendously from the stuff that Diana Eck has been doing? And does it have any – is it specifically in any way attached to – is it just a gradual sort of thing or are you addressing something that you see as a more recent trend?

Peggy Levitt: Well, I would say that my research builds upon what Diana Eck is trying to do, in the sense that I'm also trying to contribute to an enhanced understanding of what real pluralism means. But I think that she misses the point by thinking that you can just understand religious pluralism as a product of forces operating inside our borders. And so, one of my big arguments is that religious life in the United States is as much shaped by forces outside our borders than inside our borders.

And in answer to your second question, I think that, you know, people have lived cross-border lives for many, you know, decades. And that we didn't always recognize that because so much of our American project was making newcomers into Americans.

But now with new technology and new, you know, ease of travel, the ability to get on your computer on Skype and talk to your family members every single day. You know, people can be – actually be involved, you know, they can raise their children across borders in a very intimate and frequent way that they weren't able to do in the past.

And also, sending country governments and sending country religious institutions know that people are going to want to be part of their communities without living there anymore. And in some cases, have become dependent upon them. So, in Central America, you know, you have countries like El Salvador, very much dependent upon the remittances that migrants send home. And so, you see sending countries creating all kinds of ways that immigrants can be long term members without residence, you know, tax breaks, and ex-patriot voting and dual citizenship, and, you know, housing created specifically for people who want to come home on vacation.

And so, I think the institutional underpinnings of this, both on the side of politics and on the side of religion really make it much more enduring and more widespread and more likely to become even more widespread in the future.

David Van Biema: Thanks. Thank you very much.

Peggy Levitt: Thank you.

Operator: And we have a question from Amy Taxin from the *Orange County Register*. Please go ahead, your line is now open.

Amy Taxin: Hi. Thank you. And this is mostly a question for Kim. And I'm curious because out here, I've spoken with a couple of congregations locally, and they have said that while they in theory agree with the principles behind the Sanctuary Movement, they feel it could end up being divisive and sort of a strategy that winds up creating much of a backlash system of the things that they're trying to achieve in terms of supporting immigrants, communities and supporting immigrant rights. Have you found that so far in terms of dealing with the broader community outside of these congregations that are taking on this role in the New Sanctuary Movement? Or what has been your experience so far?

Kim Bobo: Our experience is that congregations are at very different places in terms of what they feel comfortable doing. But that, you know, the vast majority of congregations certainly believe that we need comprehensive immigration reform. I mean, that's certainly where the religious community is by and large.

Although, you know, I have to say I think inside particular congregations, you know, people are very confused about what's the right thing to do. And, you know, I've gotten a fair number of emails about this. So I can attest to some of the, you know, confusion and questioning that people have. But in terms of the religious institutions, I think they are broadly supportive of this.

Now, how best to achieve that, I think there are lots of different opinions on that. And certainly none of our folks are suggesting that sort of the sanctuary in terms of having folks in your congregation is the only way to do it or necessarily even the best. There's a number of various things that are going on. For example, there are lots of meetings being held with elected leaders that people are sharing their concern. We're right now in the midst of pulling together a national religious

leaders meeting with the head of the Social Security Administration over the no-match letters. And, you know, I think there is widespread concern about any implementation of a no-match letter policy as you probably know, this is kind of on hold until October 1<sup>st</sup> but people are deeply concerned.

There are lots of congregations that are responding to the raids and are visiting in detention centers. So, you know, I think that the sanctuary congregation per se is one set of a broad range of responses. And, you know, it may be controversial for some, it's not controversial for others.

And I think, you know, the experience of the '80s Sanctuary Movement was that, you know, it was always a little, you know, a matter of discussion and debate about what was the best approach to our failed policy in Central America. And yet, I think there is no question that the Sanctuary Movement played a role in pushing the national conversation and in pushing our government to change its policies.

And so, I think that the Sanctuary Movement work right now will not be the entire landscape of the religious engagement but it's a piece and will probably play a significant role in pushing the conversation.

Amy Taxin: Thank you.

Operator: Thank you. And we have a follow-up question from the line of Mary Lou Pickel from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Please go ahead, your line is now open.

(Marylou Biggle): Hi, thank you. This is for Manuel Vasquez. I understand what you were saying about African-Americans in Atlanta seeing new Latino immigrants facing similar struggles that they have faced. And I understand, you know, I could see what you were saying there. I didn't understand the other side of that. Could you elaborate on that, you said Latino immigrants buy too much into the American dream? What is the downside again? Can you explain that further?

Manuel Vasquez: Yeah. Well, this comes out of the conversations I've had with African-American leaders. And some African-American leaders have said, you know, that they are reticent to form alliances with Latinos because they feel that Latinos really do not understand – that they don't see themselves really as social actors rather that they want to just make it into America. This is a perspective that some of them take that they basically have bought into the American dream of having, owning a house, you know, and making it and just working hard, and working two jobs. But in terms of like mobilizing them and forming alliances and forming voluntary organizations that will go and fight for their rights, that many African-American leaders feel that Latinos tend to be kind of on the passive side.

But this I think has been challenged by the massive demonstrations that we saw last year. And I think that's one of the things that was a wake up call and not just for the Euro-American community but also for the African-American community.

They saw the numbers and they saw the strength and the vitality of the organization. And they saw the rapidity with which, you know, groups organized. It was a

network – set of networks that was mobilized almost instantly, you know, using the media, radio. And all of a sudden they come out and they're here among us. And so, we need to really pay attention to what they're saying because these guys in many ways can do, you know, some of the stuff that we were doing in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mary Lou Pickel: I see.

Manuel Vasquez: Does that explain?

Mary Lou Pickel: Yeah. I see. And then what is the role in any of that of the church?

Manuel Vasquez: The church is I think, you know, the churches have – African-American churches are just beginning I think to come to terms with this. Whereas I think there – many Euro-American churches are wrestling with the questions of sanctuary. The questions of what happens when you nest, you know, a church. If you bring people who potentially might be undocumented workers into your church and make them part of your congregation. What are the moral responsibilities that you have towards those people that are now your brothers in Christ?

So, I think Euro-American churches are coming to terms with that. African-American churches on the other hand, I think are just now coming to terms with that. I think some leaders are basically saying, you know, we're willing to work with you or willing to find other Latino leaders who can work with us.

And then you have some African-American leaders who are saying, "Look, I'm more interested in my church, I'm more interested in growing my church, I'm more interested in looking inside and therefore, this whole question of immigration is not an interesting question for me."

I know that some of the leaders that we've talk to, that we are talking to in terms of having an inter-religious dialogue. African-American leaders have said that they feel sometimes discouraged by a kind of mainstream African-American clergy approach that sort of says, "You know, Latinos are there, we know they're there, but you know, that's not really our concern right now. Right now, our concern is more with our African-American communities."

Mary Lou Pickel: Got you. Okay. Thank you.

Manuel Vasquez: Sure.

Operator: And it appears we have no further questions at this time. We'd like to thank you all for your participation. Reporters who want arrange interviews or receive additional materials should contact Kate Roberts of Douglas Gould and Company at 914-833-7093.

And this now concludes the audio news conference. Thank you.

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