Narratives of Religion as Lived (Transnationally)

The key questions concern what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds.

(Orsi 2002: 172)

While Chapter 4 considered some of the ways in which Brazilian churches in London adapt to the migration context and function transnationally, Chapter 5 explored the diverse uses of these churches among migrants. With reference to religious institutions, and from the perspectives of religious leaders and migrants, both chapters argued that a broader understanding of religion is required in order to fully engage with the ways in which religion is intertwined with the migration experiences of Brazilians in London. This chapter develops further this more holistic conception of religion and considers the role of religion in the lives of migrants outside the institutional religious realm.

As Ribeiro (2005: 2) suggests, the search for meaning in life that ‘religious experience’ implies is rooted in the everyday lives of individuals and ‘does not necessarily imply participation in a religious community’. It thus follows that it is important to consider how religion, this ‘search for meaning’, is experienced in spaces and through practices that go beyond participation in a religious community. Indeed, just as institutional religious spaces are often used to address everyday concerns – for example, migrants attending church to find a job or a room to rent – so the everyday lives of many migrants and the spaces they inhabit can themselves be imbued with religious and spiritual meanings (McGuire 2007). Moreover, religion often becomes
an important means through which migrants explain, justify, and cope with the physical and emotional aspects of their migration trajectory.

Drawing on interviews with Brazilians who frequented the CEL and St Mary’s, as well as interviews with return migrants and family members of Brazilians in London conducted during fieldwork in Brazil, this chapter considers some of the different ways in which religion – as it is lived and practised in everyday life – can provide important ‘spiritual resources’ throughout the migration experience (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003: 1146). It also draws on some interviews with people who did not participate in a particular religious community, but for whom some form of religious faith played an important part in their everyday existence.

The analysis here is based on what migrants say and do, and how they perceive their experiences, as opposed to what they actually feel spiritually, or indeed how they connect with ‘up there’. But it does point to a broader understanding of religion, one which moves beyond the narratives provided by institutional religion and one which, as Ammerman (2007: 9) suggests, ‘leaves open the possibility’ that the boundaries between ‘“religious” and “secular”’ are ‘permeable’. In the context of migration, this permeability of boundaries and transcendence of scales take on an even greater significance, as migrants forge connections between multiple places and realms of experience, at the same time as creating new ones (Levitt 2007). Yet few scholars have drawn connections between this broader understanding of religion – as lived experience – and the migration process, or considered how religion, beyond the congregational setting, becomes a crucial resource in the everyday lives of migrants and their families at all stages of the migration process. This chapter argues that a ‘lived religion approach’ (Orsi 2002: 174) provides many insights into how religion is closely intertwined in the migration experiences of Brazilians in London and on their return, as well as in the lives of their families whom they leave behind.

A broader understanding of religion among Brazilians

Conceptualising religion through migrants’ narratives

Too often, our concepts for describing and analyzing individuals’ religions simply fail to capture how multifaceted, diverse and malleable are the beliefs, values, and practices that make up many (perhaps most) persons’ own religions.

(McGuire 2008: 5)