An Introduction to Prophetic Activism

All religious traditions have certain sacred holidays that embody their core narratives. Within Judaism, Passover commemorates the Israelites’ flight from bondage into freedom, while within Christianity, Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. The weeks leading up to the Christmas holiday are an extremely busy time, yet in 2008 nearly 1,000 people gathered at Disneyland in southern California to take part in a *posada*. Posadas are Mexican celebrations of Jesus’ birth in which people go from house to house in remembrance of Mary and Joseph’s search for lodging in Bethlehem. This posada had been organized by Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) in support of workers from the three Disneyland hotels and their children. The hotel workers were members of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union (HERE) who were in contract negotiations with the Disney Corporation.

During the posada, Christmas wish letters written by the workers’ children were left for the managers of each of the hotels. The crowd stopped at the front entrance of one hotel to recite a liturgy written by the clergy active in CLUE, explaining why they were performing the posada at Disneyland. It read in part:

We also are reminded that Christ entered the world in a manger, where animals eat. . . . In the Christian tradition, we see that our King was one that identified fully with the poor and the stranger to teach us of a kingdom marked by holiness, justice, love and peace. . . . Today, as it occurred many centuries ago, there are many people seeking lodging and hospitality, like our sister and brother workers of the Disneyland hotels. . . . We, as religious leaders, will accompany them in this modern day Posada as we stand in solidarity with the workers who are on this long journey.
The liturgy then invited the hotel managers to have a conversion of the heart because “Our workplace should also reflect God’s justice by ensuring that those who are seen as ‘lowly’—janitors, housekeepers, cooks—are lifted up and not sent away hungry.” Afterwards, everyone gathered in a nearby parking lot where the children were given gifts donated by various community and church groups while the adults drank delicious Mexican hot chocolate.

While CLUE reinterpreted the traditional religious meaning of a posada to become a call for Disneyland to treat its workers justly, the Jewish World Watch (JWW) has reinterpreted the Passover seder as a pedagogical tool that highlights the broader concept of all people’s rights to freedom. The Jewish World Watch, which has sixty-four member synagogues in southern California, sees Passover and the Jewish High Holidays as important moments for educating its supporters on the genocides occurring in Darfur and the Congo. As one of Judaism’s most sacred holidays, Passover serves as an ideal forum for Jews to explore present-day cases of genocide. Every year JWW distributes forty thousand pieces of educational material designed to be used at a seder, which normally takes place at a family’s dining room table. At the seder the ritual seder plate contains six food items, which each symbolize the Passover story of suffering, liberation, and renewal. In 2008, JWW created a small fold-out companion brochure that connected each food item to discussion questions designed to provoke small group conversations around the table about the contemporary meaning of the seder in the context of ongoing genocide in Darfur. In this way, the seder guests were invited to participate in a very traditional Jewish method of study based on one-on-one conversations in which participants reflected on how they might be willing to respond in the face of contemporary genocide.

Both CLUE and JWW are creatively drawing upon sacred events in their religious traditions to remind adherents that they ought to commemorate their religious origins as outcasts by embracing the demands of today’s outcasts for freedom and justice. These stories are two examples of an increasingly broad range of progressive religious justice organizing occurring in the United States, which is motivating growing numbers of people to act on behalf of justice for the marginalized. Yet, the extent of these forms of religious activism may come as a surprise to many Americans who have become far more accustomed to religion, especially Christianity, being used to support conservative political causes. Religion is becoming increasingly contested as it is mobilized to lend credibility to very divergent political agendas. This is especially true of Christianity since it is the faith embraced by
the majority of the country’s religious adherents. During George W. Bush’s eight years as president, Christian conservatives gained unprecedented levels of political power by successfully championing what they portrayed as a “Christian” political agenda.

At its most extreme, conservative Christian rhetoric sought to project an image of the United States as a nation uniquely ordained by God to assume the mantle of the world’s hegemonic superpower. Claims that the United States is invested with divine power have a long history, dating back to the nation’s earliest days when British colonialists proclaimed their colony in the Americas to be the New Jerusalem, “the shining city on the hill.” American exceptionalism gained renewed vigor in the early nineteenth century as Euro-Americans pushed into the far western reaches of the continent, displacing the indigenous people they encountered and eventually laying claim to the northern states of Mexico. This territorial appropriation was commonly viewed to be the United States’ “God sanctioned mission to fulfill” its “Manifest Destiny.” Interestingly, this rhetoric reappeared in Sarah Palin’s speeches during the 2008 presidential campaign and was no doubt an animating force behind the new conservative populism that emerged in response to Barack Obama’s presidency. More than thirty-five years ago, the activist theologian William Stringfellow offered a prophetic critique of this worldview.

To interpret the Bible for the convenience of America . . . represents a radical violence to both the character and content of the biblical message. It fosters a fatal vanity that America is a divinely favored nation and makes of it the credo of a civic religion which is directly threatened by, and hence, which is anxious and hostile toward the biblical Word. It arrogantly misappropriates the political images from the Bible and applies them to America, so that America is conceived as Zion: as the righteous nation, as a people of superior morality, as a country and society chosen and especially esteemed by God.3

There have been times in recent years when these triumphalist voices became so loud that it almost appeared as though they were the singular possible construction of the nexus between religion and politics. In reaction, there were calls, both in the United States and abroad, for a return to a purportedly older, liberal secular version of American politics in which all references to religion are banished from public political discourse. Many secularists would prefer that all mention of religion would once again be confined to the private sphere.
This book demonstrates that there is a third option: religion can be and is being used to frame a progressive politics that prophetically calls for justice, peace, and the healing of the world. Indeed, some of the most significant social movements of the twentieth century emerged from exactly such interpretations of ancient religious texts that pointed to the essential dignity and equality of all human beings as rooted in God’s love for all humanity. From Gandhi’s rereading of the sacred Hindu texts to Dr. Martin Luther King’s use of the Sermon on the Mount to construct a nonviolent movement for racial change to the emergence of liberation theology within the Latin American context, religion has served as a powerful motivator for social change among the marginalized.

In offering a far-reaching analysis of contemporary social justice activism in the United States, which emerged out of progressive religious ideals, this book acts as a counternarrative to conservative Christians’ narrow constructions of politics that became the embodiment of religious activism over the past twenty years. While conservative Christians strive to impose their singular set of religious ethics upon a religiously diverse American body politic, progressive religious activists’ interpretations aim to broaden American politics by incorporating people who currently have no voice within the political process.

While conservative religious leaders also often use the word “prophetic” to describe their critiques of the societal status quo, I employ it throughout this book to reference a religious understanding of politics defined by its inclusiveness, its concern for the other, for those who are marginalized. Borrowing a phrase from Howard Thurman, the grandfather of African American theology, it is religion that speaks to those who live with their backs against the wall. In the midst of the chaos and pain of the present, prophetic politics envisions an altered future in which human relationships to one another and the natural world are repaired. Within Judaism, this is known in Hebrew as *tikkun olam*, which means repairing the world. Prophetic approaches allow activists to ground their present actions, no matter how difficult or even life-threatening, in a vision of hope for a transformed future in which justice will be realized, right relations between nations restored, and peace ushered in.

*The Contours of Prophetic Activism*

Contemporary prophetic activism has grown in direct response to the steady reversal of both formal and substantive rights triggered by the shift from national to global capitalism and the accompanying rise to power of conservative free-market politics. In this country, conservatives gained national
political power in part by vilifying the marginalized, including “welfare moms,” young urban black and Latino men, gays and lesbians, undocumented immigrants, and Muslims. Prophetic activism has also expanded in response to the exigencies created by the globalization of capital and production that has contributed to the exacerbation of income inequalities in wealthy countries and the deepening impoverishment of the poorest nations. These conditions have in turn fueled regional violence, especially in parts of Africa and Latin America, as national leaders make use of paramilitaries to engage in acts of genocide against marginalized groups in their own countries. Moreover, the religious peace movement in the United States was reinvigorated in reaction to the aggressive nature of American empire in the wake of 9/11 that left the country mired in two wars.

Present-day practitioners of prophetic politics are characterized by a commitment to nonviolent social change. Their thinking has been heavily influenced by paradigms that emerged over the course of the twentieth century, beginning with Mahatma Gandhi’s powerful example of building a spiritually grounded, nonviolent mass movement capable of driving the British out of India in 1947. This was followed by an equally powerful, spiritually grounded movement to end racial apartheid in the United States that succeeded in contextualizing Gandhi’s concept of satyagraha or active nonviolence to the struggle for African American civil rights. Both of these movements were grounded in the fresh reinterpretations of Hinduism and Protestant Christianity that affirmed the sacred and reciprocal quality of all human life, out of which flowed a call to do justice to the other. Similar processes of reinterpretation have occurred within Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam.

Another commonality of contemporary practitioners of prophetic organizing is their incorporation of aspects of liberation theology into their work. Having first emerged within Latin American Catholicism, elements of liberation theology’s message have now been rearticulated within a variety of American contexts. It is particularly common among Christian activists who are engaging in solidarity work both within the boundaries of the United States and beyond. It is less common among organizations whose primary focus is influencing the national legislative arena. However, when used, it shapes organizations’ moral call to action, and it articulates commitments to give voice to those who are marginalized, to empower those lacking rights to gain the capacity to act on their own behalf, and to stand in solidarity with people in developing countries who are suffering at the hands of regimes allied with the United States.
Although many of the activist organizations whose work is featured in this book remain grounded within the Christian prophetic tradition, in some cases, their self-understandings are expanding to embrace more diverse faith and spiritual practices. This is possible in part because this work exists independently, outside of the strictures imposed by direct denominational control that would be more likely to impose doctrinal limits on such work. Certainly, denominations do still connect and support prophetic activism, yet their priorities lie elsewhere. They tend to be more comfortable drafting position papers, doing educational work, holding press conferences, and engaging in legislative lobbying than directly engaging in prophetic activism. Independence gives present-day prophetic activists—and the organizations and networks they have created—the flexibility to respond to the ever-changing American political landscape, refocusing their religious lenses to respond to newly emerging issues and constituencies. None of the various organizations we examine in subsequent chapters are isolationists. Instead, they all work with a broad array of other religious organizations, secular advocates, and institutions including human rights organizations, legal advocates, unions, schools, health-care institutions, foundations, and even sports clubs. There is also a strong multireligious presence, especially within religious peacemaking, along with a growing Jewish presence in congregational community organizing, and in worker and immigrant rights work.

In this book’s final chapter we discuss a set of global justice organizations that have been birthed since 9/11 and are not overtly religious, yet some members of their staff and volunteer supporters engage with the issues they champion out of their religious convictions. It is probably not a coincidence that two of these organizations have the youngest supporters and staffs of any organization featured in this book, given the Pew Charitable Trust’s findings that eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds are considerably less religious than older adults. Another one has developed a set of religious resource materials for use in four of the world’s major religions, which they make available on their Web site. This pattern may well be the harbinger of an emerging trend: to be simultaneously secular and religious.

Prophetic activism is not a new phenomenon. It has manifested itself in this nation’s long, colorful history of religious activism on behalf of the abolition of slavery, the creation of a national labor union movement, the prevention of war, and most significantly for our present era, on behalf of African Americans’ civil rights. Many current activists are motivated to take action by a strong sense of connection to this historical legacy. So, for example, the Progressive Jewish Alliance organizes against sweatshops in Los Angeles,
in part out of its sense of responsibility to Jews’ own history of immigration to the United States in the early twentieth century. Not only had Jewish immigrants worked in the sweatshops, they also became the leaders of some of the unions that continue to organize immigrant garment workers today. Yet, despite its long presence as an important current in American politics, present-day forms of prophetic activism have remained largely submerged, hidden from widespread public view. For example, while there was considerable media coverage during the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama’s work as a community organizer in the early 1980s, it was rarely if ever mentioned by the mainstream media that Developing Communities Project (DCP), the organization for which he worked, is a congregational-based community organization. In fact, it is affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation, one of the four large national congregational-based organizing networks. Not only did this omission leave the impression that DCP was a secular organization, it also hid an important manifestation of President Obama’s own religious identity.

Many of the contemporary prophetic organizations situate themselves as the descendants of earlier social movements and include participants who were personally involved in the civil rights movement, farmworker organizing, anti–Vietnam War mobilizations, the Nuclear Freeze campaign, and the Central American sanctuary movement to name just a few. As one issue faded, participants moved into new areas of activism. Many of the older organizations now have multiple generations of activists within their ranks, who respond and engage with issues very differently. Still others, faced with the aging of their most loyal members, are struggling to stay alive, let alone attract younger adults. Interestingly, certain organizations’ concerns about membership decline are not unlike those facing the historic Protestant denominations with which they often share overlapping memberships.

The current flourishing of varied forms of prophetic activism is particularly significant because religious commitments create possibilities for people to act in ways that defy the dominant models of rational, self-interested actors found in most current theories of political behavior. Religiously constructed activism certainly has the capacity to sustain marginalized people in the face of great opposition. This brand of activism also has the power to create the ethical foundations for solidarity between the politically marginalized and those with privileged access to political power. By evoking humanity’s sacred bonds with one another, religious organizing can straddle the existing gulf between places of marginalization and places of privilege. Doing so opens up new spaces for broader social change campaigns. In fact,
the last major period of progressive social reform that led to a large-scale expansion of formal and substantive citizenship rights during the mid 1960s was an outgrowth of exactly such broad alliances, albeit tenuous and short lived. Certainly one of the lessons of that earlier period of national reform is the central importance of strong grassroots activism integrally connected to effective advocacy within the national legislative and executive branches.

Prophetic activism is fundamentally concerned with the well-being of the marginalized both within the United States and within poor and violent regions in developing countries. A person’s well-being is fundamentally determined by their access to basic human rights, which rest on a universal understanding of the dignity of all human beings. Much of the activism highlighted in this book should be understood as a struggle for the attainment of basic human rights that are supposedly universally affirmed by the language of the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Thus, religious activism in support of workers’ rights can be conceived of as a struggle for human rights since the declaration claims that access to work is a fundamental prerequisite of human well-being. Article 23 recognizes the right to work, along with the right to equal pay for equal work, and the right to form or join a trade union as fundamental human rights.

Yet, in the United States and elsewhere, those rights are often flagrantly violated. In modern democratic societies, well-being is integrally tied to access to basic legal and substantive citizenship rights. Within the world’s wealthy democracies, there are inherent citizenship rights that people acquire by virtue of their membership in a particular sovereign nation-state. These include positive rights such as the right to vote, the right to work, the right to fair remuneration for work, and the right to form associations, including labor unions, as well as negative ones that protect against unwarranted intrusions by the state. There are also varying sets of substantive rights that citizens have acquired through the exercise of their legal rights. Among these are such publicly provided benefits as access to free public education, health care, old-age pensions, disability, and unemployment benefits. Despite being one of modernity’s first democracies, the extension of full citizenship rights has been a slow and painful process in the United States. After all, the nation was founded on the basis of a constitution that sanctioned African American slavery; it initially restricted voting to white men with property, and denied women’s suffrage until 1921. Asians, who were completely excluded from citizenship, were even denied the right to own property. This denial of citizenship rights ultimately culminated in the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Limitations on suffrage and ongoing prac-
practices of racial discrimination have led to the creation of a more limited set of substantive citizenship rights in the United States than in other economically advanced Western democracies. Even though the nation has slowly purged itself of the worst of its racist past, there are still millions of people living in the United States, many of them people of color, who lack the full complement of legal or substantive citizenship rights.

The Contours of Global Empire

This book situates contemporary prophetic activism within the context of today’s global empire, which following the work of political scientists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is conceived of not as any one singular nation-state but as unbounded, global capitalism taken as a whole. I chose to use the word “empire” as a means of emphasizing the political consequences of economic globalization. Globalization is structuring many of the policy options being weighed by policymakers at all levels of governance, ranging from those managing international institutions down to national and local politicians. The internal and external policies of individual nation-states are now more interconnected than ever before. Simultaneously, religious activism has arisen in direct response to the negative repercussions of globalization upon many of the world’s most vulnerable local populations.

Historically, empires were characterized by highly centralized systems of economic extraction where the flow of goods and tribute from the periphery to the center was enforced by the center’s administrative and military control over the periphery. Today’s much more diffuse form of empire is characterized by the existence of tightly intertwined global capital markets, which have spread their tentacles into virtually every corner of the world. The economically dominant nation-states embedded within this global empire collaborate within one another, while simultaneously vying for increased market advantages in an insistent race for global dominance.

While economic globalization has undoubtedly created tremendous wealth for a few and upward mobility for emerging middle classes in certain rapidly developing countries, it has plunged other parts of the world into deeper poverty. In the 1960s many newly independent nations pursued import substitution policies aimed at industrializing their economies. They did so by erecting high tariff walls to exclude foreign investment and manufactured goods so as to create the space for the growth of domestic manufacturing. By the late 1980s though, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the triumph of capitalism, “free trade” became the new mantra. Countries either
willingly or through outside pressure, lowered their barriers to global trade. Capital began to flow freely across national borders, constantly in search of the highest profit margins, but it drained out of the weakest economies, especially in Africa and Central America. These regions were already beset by violent internal conflicts, weak governments, and increasing levels of unpayable international debt. In too many cases, undemocratic regimes had borrowed from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to finance their militaries and the lifestyles of their political elite rather than investing in strengthening their domestic economies. Recognizing that these countries were at risk of defaulting on their debts, the international financial institutions began imposing a set of strict structural adjustment policies (SAPs) in exchange for refinancing their existing debt load. The SAPs forced countries to offer increased economic incentives to foreign investment, reorient their domestic production to the export market, and reduce public sector expenditures. By the 1990s, such policies were displacing local farmers, while shrinking public sector employment. The rise of religious global justice activism is a direct consequence of the detrimental impact that these dramatic economic shifts have had on the world’s poorest regions.

One of the most significant consequences of globalization has been the freeing of labor from its traditional moorings. Like capital, labor has also become far more mobile than it had been in the past. Not only did it unleash large-scale migration from rural areas into urban centers, it has also precipitated unprecedented global migration. At present it is estimated that there are roughly 200 million migrants scattered across the globe who financially support an equal number of family members back in their places of origin. Although some are refugees, the majority are labor migrants. For these millions, migration has become a family survival strategy as their traditional means of earning a livelihood have been replaced by the penetration of capital intensive production into less-developed economies. Yet, while the richer nation-states support policies that facilitate the free movement of global capital, they are moving in the opposite direction with regard to the free movement of workers. Even as poorer migrant-sending countries are loosening their definitions of citizenship to account for the bi-national lives of many of their citizens, rich countries are militarizing their borders and tightening citizenship requirements. As access to citizenship in richer countries is restricted, millions of labor migrants are at risk of becoming a permanent disenfranchised underclass. The consequence of these twin forces of massive migration accompanied by a tightening of access to citizenship is the creation of vast pools of people living in countries where they have no citizenship.
rights. It fact, the pressures of the contemporary globalized economy have quite possibly created the largest pool of noncitizens since the 1648 treaties of Westphalia established the European system of sovereign nation-states.

In the United States, the resultant surge in undocumented immigrants has become a political flashpoint, with conservative demagogues willing to depict the supposed “immigrant threat” as a major cause of the nation's economic woes and a drain on national resources. Congressional legislators from both political parties embraced demands for stricter border security and the elimination of undocumented labor. By 2010, however, the majority of religious activists and most national religious bodies had embraced a call for just comprehensive immigration reform that would open up an avenue through which the vast numbers of undocumented immigrants could regularize their status. In countless local communities, religious activists, acting out of their religious beliefs, were choosing to stand in solidarity with immigrants who were seeking to empower themselves in their local communities and workplaces.

Following the demise of communism, the United States has asserted itself globally as the singular hegemonic political and military power. Simultaneously, it is locked into fierce competition with the European Union and rising economic powers in Asia and Latin America for dominance of world markets. Even though Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued divergent foreign policy responses to this highly competitive global environment, both political parties remain committed to the maintenance of U.S. global hegemony. In fact, even President Obama's call for the development of green energy, health-care reform, and increased spending on education were all framed as initiatives needed to maintain U.S. economic dominance.

Despite its seemingly amorphous nature, globalization leaves its mark more prominently on certain key urban centers around the world. These urban regions constitute the nodal points of globalization where capital and information are created and then exchanged through elaborate, international fiber-optic networks linked to other cities around the world. The sociologist Saskia Sassen refers to these cities as the “command and control centers” of the global economy where cutting-edge producer services are created and marketed for use by transnational corporations that invest and produce around the globe. Cutting-edge producers within this global information and service economy prefer to work in cities, which are seen as conducive for the kinds of creative synergies that lead to innovation and new product development. Consequently, certain key cities now bring together a global workforce—a small number of which are highly educated and skilled man-
agers along with thousands of others who work, often in the informal labor market, servicing the living standards of the highly paid managers.

As a result of their incorporation into empire, certain cities have become highly contested spaces as central-city locations are now regarded as the coveted work and residential locations for the global networked economy. Prior to the 2008/9 recession, land prices had been skyrocketing, creating very lucrative real estate markets in the inner urban core. This led to a dramatic reconfiguring of urban space with the wealthy moving into downtown locations while the poor were rapidly being squeezed out. This transformation has been startling in cities such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and, to a lesser extent, Los Angeles. For example, since the early 1990s, Chicago’s downtown office space doubled, while a ring of new constructed upscale housing arose on three sides of the downtown area. Housing projects were torn down, their residents scattered into poor outlying neighborhoods, to make room for fashionable townhouses for the global managers. City and state officials were vying with one another to lure new global corporate headquarters and production facilities, yet had little interest in investing in infrastructure for neighborhoods in which new immigrants, poor African Americans and others live. Community-based activism has expanded in reaction to these dramatic transformations as congregations and other community-based institutions resist the resultant marginalization of poor African American and immigrant communities.

The Politics of U.S. Empire

In a 2005 book titled *Inequality and American Democracy*, a group of prominent political scientists led by Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol linked the growth of income inequality in the United States to a decline in the federal government’s support of policies that “promote equal opportunity and security and enhance citizen dignity and participation, reinforcing the suspicion of many in the American public that government officials ‘don’t care’ about the needs and values of ordinary citizens.”12 Even though globalization has exacerbated disparities in wealth within the world’s richest nations, some responded by using government policies to protect the living standards of their most vulnerable citizens. However, the same study found that not to be true of the United States. The researchers concluded that “government policies and actions in the United States have been especially responsive to the values and interests of the most privileged Americans and therefore have often not undertaken active and effective steps to mute or offset mar-

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ket inequalities.”¹³ In the United States, globalization has been accompanied by the political decline of those institutions, including unions, civil rights organizations, and activist elements within religious denominations that in earlier times had played key roles in empowering marginalized groups in American society. As a consequence of this decline, independent religious justice organizations are assuming an increasingly critical role as a principal moral voice within local, state, and national political arenas.

In an earlier work, the political scientist Theda Skocpol demonstrated that in the past the voices of ordinary citizens were frequently mobilized through an extensive web of voluntary organizations, which reached across class boundaries by organizing chapters at the local, state, and national levels. These organizations successfully mobilized and trained people of modest backgrounds in the art of politics while simultaneously encouraging people of higher status to interact with their fellow citizens on a wide range of issues. At their height, organizations such as the Masons, the Elks, the Fraternal Order of Eagles, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Knights of Columbus, and various veterans groups “often rivaled political parties in affording organized leverage in civic and legislative affairs to large numbers of Americans.”¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, African Americans founded their own broad-based civic organizations aimed at the promotion of social and economic uplift, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and Marcus Garvey's more populist Negro Improvement Association. By the mid-twentieth century, these popularly based membership federations rivaled business and professional organizations for influence over national policy making. Organized labor, represented by the recently merged AFL-CIO, stood at the forefront of struggles over economic and social policies. Still others worked on agricultural, educational, and family related issues.

By the early 1970s, however, many of these older organizations found themselves increasingly sidelined. In part, they were displaced by the political upheavals of the 1960s that had brought new social movements to the forefront of American politics. New grassroots activist civil rights organizations, movements against the war in Vietnam, and an emerging women’s movement increasingly supplanted the traditional organizations. African Americans finally gained full citizenship rights, which were accompanied by new legal protections of their voting rights along with a revamped immigration law that for the first time granted legal admission into the United States to people from all countries in the world. Taken together, the 1960s social
movements led to a reordering of racial- and gender-based power relationships while striking a blow to U.S. ambitions of global hegemony.

The political coalitions that brought about these expansions of democratic rights proved to be quite fragile. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., moderate civil rights organizations were displaced by new militant Black nationalist organizations, which quickly alienated many Jewish and mainline Protestant supporters of civil rights. The political momentum gradually tilted toward conservatives as reaction to the expansion of rights set in, not only in the Bible Belt but in the Democratic Party’s urban strongholds and within organized labor. A politico-religious realignment, coupled with the emergence of global capitalism and a reaction to the growing hybridity of the nation’s racial and ethnic makeup triggered by globalization and the new immigration law, transformed the political landscape. With the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, national administrative agencies responsible for the implementation of labor and civil rights fell into conservative hands. Reagan’s appointees to the two agencies responsible for overseeing the implementation of labor and civil rights began to dismantle their enforcement mechanisms. The Reagan National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) displayed a pronounced hostility to unions and collective bargaining, while the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) labeled affirmative actions programs set up to compensate for decades of structural discrimination in the workplace and the academy as reverse discrimination.

The historic Protestant denominations that had stood at the center of American religious life for generations were not immune to this national shift toward conservatism. Roman Catholicism, having arrived early in the Americas with the Spanish conquistadors, had taken root in the United States among newly arrived working-class immigrants. In contrast, Protestants’ center of gravity lay among whites living in the rural towns of the South and the Midwest. Protestant denominations were well connected to political power, preferring quiet private meetings with politicians over any public forms of protest. Their views on political matters reflected their elevated social and economic status. As we will see, the oldest religious peace organization in the United States was formed in direct response to the denominations’ open endorsement of the U.S.’ entry into World War I.

In the 1950s, the predominantly white Protestant denominations remained silent even as early local manifestations of the gathering civil rights movement arose throughout the South. The success of the Montgomery bus boycott, which highlighted the pivotal role of the black church in the emerging activism, made “the inaction and moral hesitancy of the major white
denominations” even more glaring. It was the 1963 March on Washington, the movement’s penultimate national event that finally catalyzed the moderate denominations into active engagement. The white Protestant churches mobilized belatedly, bringing forty thousand people to the Washington Mall. A growing number of clergy became directly involved in civil rights activism. One study of Protestant clergy in California found that in 1968 one quarter of them had taken part in some kind of civil rights demonstration. Final passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act is credited in part to the grassroots efforts of local religious activists that swung midwestern Republican members of Congress into support for the legislation. This monumental effort was the fruit of a broader ecumenical movement that flourished in the early 1960s, which included the convening of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII’s conciliatory overtures toward non-Catholics, and the welcoming of Catholic and Jewish representatives into the National Council of Churches as regular participants.

The intervening decades have witnessed nothing less than a seismic shift in the landscape of American religion. Today, the United States is a post-denominational society, in which many people select local congregations, based not on their denominational affiliation but on whether the pastor and the church feel right to them. Fifty years ago, religion was treated as an ascribed aspect of a person’s identity. A Gallup poll taken in 1955 found that only 4 percent of Americans no longer adhered to the religion of their childhood. Yet by the mid-1980s there had been a dramatic shift, with another Gallup poll discovering that one in three Americans had left the denominational faith of their childhood. Religion had increasingly become “achieved,” a chosen identity that is not always or even often the same as that of one’s parents or upbringing. Today religion is often one more consumer-driven choice, made less on doctrine and more on the psychological or emotional fit of a local church to an individual. Simply hanging a denominational identifying sign outside a church’s front door no longer draws people in, just as the old brand names of Ford and Chevrolet are insufficient. Both white and African American Protestant and Catholic churches have been slow to comprehend the implications of this sea change, often continuing to assume that their members would remain loyal from baptism until burial. The result has been a steady numerical decline in membership among the old denominations.

Within the historic Protestant denominations, conservatives reacted to these declines by arguing that they are in part the result of their progressive activism. They argued that the churches’ bureaucracies continued support for progressive causes was out of step with members in the local con-
gregations. Today, conservative caucuses exist within the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the Episcopal Church. They are committed to rooting out all forms of what they perceive as unorthodox expressions of support for various liberal justice issues, including support for the rights of gays and lesbians to marry or to become ordained clergy. They have particularly targeted what they consider to be theologically progressive clergy and seminary professors who are seen as questioning the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Their decades-long campaign to silence progressive religious lobbying has led to a decline in funding and a resultant quieting in the activism of the denominations’ Washington lobbying offices. The United Methodist Church’s shifting budgetary priorities have also led to declines in resources allocated to clergy training, while funding for a wide variety of resources used by local churches and regional denominational bodies has increased from a mere 3 percent in 1969 to 15 percent in 2008.20

The dramatic weakening of unions, civil rights organizations, and prophetic voices within denominations has left these historic advocates of expanded substantive rights unable to mount strong responses to the consequences of globalization on the rights of American workers or the urban unemployed. Working-class whites and African Americans for whom manufacturing jobs had served as a route into the middle class have seen their economic status decline. As manufacturing jobs were exported, millions of new low-wage service jobs were being created for which many employers preferred to hire undocumented immigrants who could claim no rights due to their lack of legal status. In recent years, unions have mounted aggressive new organizing campaigns among service workers, yet unions and employees are often too weak to win against the formidable array of union-busting tactics that employers throw at them. It is in the midst of these increasingly contentious battles that independent religious justice organizations now play critical roles. Not only do they provide a much-needed moral voice in support of the rights of vulnerable workers and communities, they increase support for these struggles among a broad range of American citizens. Moreover, local religious activists have opened up new spaces for dialogue between African American and Latino clergy whose communities have been deeply divided by globalization’s impact on the domestic U.S. economy.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States also asserted its global military dominance, including claiming the right to militarily intervene in countries that it perceives as threats. Here too, religious opposition has consistently raised the critical moral questions surround-
ing the U.S.’ foreign policies. It has been peacemaking organizations, some of which identify as religious while others have large numbers of religious members, that have consistently challenged the U.S.’ support for paramilitar- 
es in multiple Latin American nations, its invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, 
its endorsement of conservative Israeli governments’ support for expanded 
settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as its support of 
torture. Religious activists are also largely responsible for triggering what 
is now a remarkably broad commitment on the part of the United States 
and other wealthy countries to invest significant financial resources in the 
elimination of disease and hunger in the world’s poorest nations, especially 
in Africa. Much has happened since religious activists embraced the call for 
Jubilee in the years leading up to the new millennium. It is in this arena that 
they have made significant progress in achieving a religious commitment to 
establishing right relationships among nations.

Prophetic Activism as Resistance to Empire

Resistance to these new forms of domination takes many forms, as people 
seek to increase their capacity to live fruitfully in the context of empire. In 
the United States, major advances in both formal and substantive citizenship 
rights tend to occur as a result of initial pressure from below, gradually find-
ing expression in the centers of political power. Yet, certain critical foreign 
policy issues, which are often shrouded in secrecy, emerge directly on to the 
national political agenda. Much of present-day religiously inspired activism 
works alongside groups of people, both domestically and internationally, 
who resist becoming victims of the new global order. In certain international 
contexts, activists hold the United States directly culpable, while in others, it 
is seen as capable of exerting pressure on other regimes that are oppressing 
their citizens. We will see how, depending on the activists’ social location, 
they are assisting the disenfranchised to be empowered to act on their own 
behalf or they are creatively seeking indirect means of making other people’s 
voices heard within the halls of power. As a whole, these new types of reli-
gious activism constitute an element of a broader multidimensional global 
resistance to modern empire. Their efforts are constituent of what Hardt and 
Negri call the “multitude;” a collection of singularities that have been brought 
into existence by the new global order or imperial sovereignty. The forms of 
prophetic activism featured in this book frequently share common goals and 
commitments with secular forms of resistance to empire, even though they 
may not share common strategies or methodologies of creating change.
While much of the U.S. activism featured in this book is rooted within the Christian tradition, many current activists are increasingly working within broader interreligious and secular contexts. This is true even of a few evangelical justice organizations, which are collaborating with other Christian, Islamic, and Jewish activists. This willingness to embrace inclusive engagement places them in opposition to triumphalist forms of Christianity that demand exclusivity for the Christian message, making them hostile to interreligious collaboration. The growing multireligious nature of prophetic activism is itself a challenge to American empire since Western imperial regimes have frequently used some form of Christian triumphalism to undergird their power. Triumphalist Christianity has served to justify European empire since the time of Constantine, the first imperial ruler to embrace the faith. In fact, the very formation of a European identity of self rested on the creation of the notion of triumphal Christendom standing in opposition to Islam. Following Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, the idea of Christian superiority became critical to European justifications of colonial domination over the globe’s non-Christian dark-skinned peoples. All forms of religious triumphalism are undergirded by the belief that adherents alone possess the knowledge of God’s truth: anyone who disagrees is not only wrong but is guilty of apostasy. Contemporary Christian versions of triumphalism frequently claim to take the Bible, which is viewed as inerrant, seriously, yet in reality they rest on the use of selective proof-texting, which carefully picks out only those passages that appear to give credence to their vision of the world. They habitually personalize the readings of Scripture, reading often substandard English translations as though they were written for a singular rather than a plural “you.”

Prophetic activists, who are also grounded in the texts of their religious traditions, have consistently taken an alternative approach. All religions contain some forms of “other-regarding” beliefs that can be used as powerful motivators for engagement in justice activism. Within Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist religious traditions, activists are mining their foundational religious texts for fresh interpretations that not only affirm the sacredness of all living beings but their interconnectedness as well. They do so either by reworking traditional literalist readings, by referring to the newest scholarly translations, or by identifying portions of the texts that are commonly bypassed by those who construct hegemonic interpretations. The reinterpretations are aimed at strengthening the scaffolding upon which religiously grounded collective justice activism occurs. In some cases, this requires shifting interpretations away from an emphasis on spiritual prac-
tices aimed primarily at strengthening individual communion with the divine toward those aimed at engaging with other people as a means of communing with the divine. For example, Jewish Reform rabbis who are engaging in congregational-based community organizing draw on new readings of the book of Exodus, claiming it not just as a narrative of redemption but as the bringing into being of a community at Sinai, culminating with the building of the tabernacle where the people would dwell in covenant with Yahweh.22

Christian prophetic activists also emphasize God’s commitment to justice as a foundation for their religious engagement on behalf of justice for others. While they certainly quote specific passages of Scripture in their literature, at rallies, and in public testimony, their worldviews are shaped by the reading of whole texts as the stories of God’s interactions with Moses, the Israelite prophets, and of Jesus, who lived within the borderlands of the ancient empires of the Near East. This relational approach allows them to recognize the complexities of the biblical narratives, beginning with Genesis and the covenant with Israel, through the prophetic warnings of the impending destruction of Israel to Jesus’ boundary crossing vision of radical inclusivity in the face of Roman imperial oppression. Taken as a whole, the gospels become stories of Jesus’ efforts to spearhead a movement “of renewal of the people” in which he repeatedly pronounced God’s judgment on their Romans rulers and their local Palestinian underlings.23 After the destruction of the Second Temple, the apostle Paul, who possessed a cosmopolitan identity as a Jew with Roman citizenship, corresponded with newly formed multiethnic and multinational Christian communities located in various cities across Asia Minor. His letters instructed them on how to live out a new countercultural reality in the context of Roman domination. For example, contrary to the rigid social hierarchies of the first century CE, Paul instructed the church in Galatia that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Such alternate readings interpret sacred texts in ways that provide the scaffolding needed for a prophetic call to build shalom (peace), and care and speak for the marginalized. These activist organizations draw on their religious understandings and imagery to call a new more inclusive global vision into being. Interestingly, in the final pages of Multitude, the authors Hardt and Negri themselves call for the recuperation of a “public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions,” going on to say, “Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive of love as a political act that constructs the multitude” (italics added).24 Religious activists are successfully
reframing demands for community, workplace, immigrant rights, peace-making, and global poverty eradication as religiously grounded moral issues. The work of these activists has grown significantly in scale and visibility in recent years. Between 1999 and 2000 there was considerable international attention focused on the campaign for global debt relief started by churches in the Two-Thirds World in alliance with churches in the United Kingdom and the United States. The movement gained visibility through the eloquent support it received from Pope John Paul II, yet media attention was also directed to the remarkable presence of the rock star Bono in the movement. In the United States, the movement’s success was largely due to work done at the grassroots by countless religious people who lobbied their congressional representatives to vote in favor of the supporting national legislation. Another prominent alternative voice is that of Sojourners, a magazine and organization based in Washington DC, headed by Jim Wallis. Through the magazine, Web site, blogs, and Wallis’s extensive speaking tours, a younger generation of evangelicals is abandoning the narrow political agenda of their parents and becoming engaged in these new campaigns for social justice. A small number are intentionally relocating into poor inner-city neighborhoods where they are establishing semimonastic communities that work among the poor.

Perhaps less visible are the hundreds of organizations engaged in organizing poor communities, low-wage workers, and immigrants, and in working for peace in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Darfur, and Uganda, for nuclear disarmament, for a resolution to the conflict between the state of Israel and the Palestinians, for just trade, for complete debt relief, for the elimination of hunger, and for improved foreign aid to the world’s poorest nations. Becoming more sophisticated and networked, these organizations are gradually gaining the power to influence state and national policymakers.

The Centrality of Social Location

Scholars of Christian public engagement generally point to the existence of significant theological or doctrinal differences to explain variations in the public activities (or the lack thereof) of denominations or broader religious collectivities. While it is helpful to position the various established Christian traditions along a doctrinal or theological spectrum, it is insufficient in explaining variations in the public activities present among individual congregations within the same tradition or even the same denomination. Certainly not all Southern Baptists congregations are alike, as witnessed by
the remarkable range of social issues taken up by the Saddleback Church in Southern California, including its massive campaign on behalf of AIDS victims in Africa. Similarly, many suburban United Methodist churches can be as politically conservative as their neighboring evangelical churches, while urban black United Methodist churches work in conjunction with their local Democratic politicians on a myriad of issues of concern to their community. Importantly, with regard to religious institutions, social location matters to such an extent that in some cases it will outweigh doctrinal predispositions.

Religious activism does not just spring up randomly across the national landscape—it emerges in particular social locations among people with certain types of identities. Indeed, religion can never be divorced from its social location. One of the clearest examples comes from the era of slavery in the American South, where slave-owners used Scripture to justify their enslavement of Africans, while the secret congregations formed by African slaves read the same Scripture as a message of liberation from “Pharaoh.” Such examples force us to recognize the contingent nature of scriptural texts, which can be mined for their liberative message, while acknowledging “that this same Bible contains elements of bondage and disenfranchisement.” The text has stories of victims and victors, exploitation and benevolence, and enslavement and emancipation.

As a religion that emerged at the interstices of the Roman Empire, Christianity has been particularly well suited to continuous reinterpretations as varying groups of people around the globe have appropriated aspects of its core tenets, reshaping them for their particularistic context. In many parts of the world, Christianity has blended with existing indigenous religious traditions and practices. This is the case within regions of Latin America where ancient Meso-American religions have become intermingled with the Catholicism brought by the conquistadores. It has also occurred in Korea where the missionaries’ orthodox Christianity has been fused together with the country’s much older Confucian traditions to create a uniquely Korean religion. Today Christianity is in decline in most Western societies, which had been its primary social location for a millennium, while it is experiencing remarkable growth and vitality in the global South where it is once again undergoing multiple reinterpretations. In explaining the distinctiveness of South Asian Christianity, the postcolonial theologian, R. S. Sugirtharajah writes, “Religion and religious symbols have been used successfully both in the colonial and postcolonial Christendom.” This is true elsewhere in the global South where Christianity can be a mixture of orthodox, charismatic, and liberative. In such locations, literalist readings of biblical texts
can provide not only justifications for political activism but also a command to engage. “Deliverance in the charismatic sense easily becomes linked to political and social liberation” in the global South where its message is often embraced “by exactly those groups ordinarily portrayed as the victims of reactionary religion, particularly women.”

In examining religiously constructed activism in this book, we seek to be attentive to the impact of varied social locations upon the work. We explore how social location impacts the overall character of varying forms of religious activism, and whether the construction of religious narratives vary from one social location to another. Are different methods of organizing apparent within distinct social locations? How does religious activism bridge between distinct social locations? Finally, does cross-fertilization occur between various social locations so that over time, praxis in one location influences religious praxis in other locations? We consider five major case studies situated within two large, distinct, yet overlapping social locations, which characterize much of current religious activism in the United States. For heuristic purposes, we identify these as the “borderlands” and “cosmopolitans.” These two categories are not conceived of as being parallel or necessarily comprehensive in scope. The borderlands category describes both a geographic location and a set of identities, such as immigrant, low-wage service worker, ex-felon, lesbian or gay couple, which are most commonly present within the borderlands space. The cosmopolitan category describes certain types of people who come from positions of privilege and yet have come to identity themselves with the other, with people on the margins. In some cases, these categories overlap so that it is possible to be a borderlands cosmopolitan. There are also many cosmopolitans working within borderlands organizations. We will use these categories to draw out the significance of these two distinct arenas and to distinguish between various types of justice work that occurs within them.

The Borderlands as a Social Location

The “borderlands,” or “los intersticios” as Gloria Anzaldúa calls them, are spaces being created by the extensive cross-border movement of people in the era of globalization. Large scale migration is concomitant with today’s form of empire. Borderlands exist not only directly alongside international borders, but in certain large urban regions in the United States and other wealthy nations that have become the destinations of a vast stream of global migrants. Researchers at the Brookings Institution have identified twenty-
seven “melting-pot metros” in the United States that are the major gateways for new immigrants, making them distinct from the rest of the country by their far greater ethnic and racial diversity. The list includes the major city-regions of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington DC, Houston, and Miami that are central to the functioning of empire.33

The origins of borderlands in the United States can be traced back to an earlier form of global capital accumulation that led to the transportation of millions of African slaves to the Americas and the annexation of vast stretches of Mexico. The more recent large-scale immigration of people from Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa has created regions in the United States, especially along the East and West Coasts and in Texas and Illinois, which are characterized by very heterogeneous populations. Those who are immigrants possess multiple identities—those of their home countries and those acquired in the United States. There is a duality to their existence as people in a prolonged stage of transition. Borderlands are places of displacement and marginality; home to many people with multilingual, multicultural identities. They are in-between spaces, intertwined with the mainstream, dominant society, yet separated from it. Borderlands are also dynamic spaces where new hybrid identities are formed, new ideas and commitments take root, making them places of great ferment.

As people from the global South migrate to the United States, they carry along their own contextualized ways of living out their home-country religious traditions. Religious practices continue to bind extended immigrant families and communities together by spiritually linking those who are now in the States to those who have stayed behind. The rituals and worship of the immigrants’ faith affirm their inherent dignity and worth, giving meaning to the hardships of their day-to-day lives. Yet, the experience of immigrating to a new place also gradually transforms the religious traditions they bring with them, so that the new understandings of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam emerging on American soil represent a hybridization of home-country religion and new forms created in response to this country’s context.34 Given the growing religious diversity in the United States resulting from the arrival of new immigrants, religious activists are increasingly seeking to contextualize their justice issues—not only in more familiar Christian religious traditions but also within Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. We will see that within all three of our borderlands case studies, there are examples of emerging interreligious activism. This activism is still in its early stages as non-Christian traditions carry out the interpretative work necessary for the construction of a religious justice tradition.
Several earlier scholars who have written on borderlands (or on *Mestizaje*, which is the embodiment of hybridity within Latino/a American communities) have primarily conceptualized it as a cultural or religious phenomenon.35 I add to that understanding by also conceiving of borderlands as spaces characterized by the presence of people who possess limited citizenship rights. Some are immigrants who currently lack access to formal citizenship within the country in which they are long-term residents. Others have experienced various forms of political disenfranchisement even though they were born U.S. citizens. For example, there are an estimated 5.3 million Americans who have lost their right to vote because of prior felony convictions. It is estimated that 13 percent of all African American men have been stripped of their right to vote due to the prevalence of racial disparities in the criminal justice system.36 Another type of citizenship right—the right to have one’s marriage recognized by the state—is still denied to gay and lesbian couples in the majority of states. As of 2010 eight states and the District of Columbia allowed gay and lesbian couples to marry, while a number of others had some form of domestic partner provisions.37 The dominant culture has defined the poor, nonwhites, immigrants, gays and lesbians, and ex-offenders as threats to society whose lives therefore require regulation by the state.

In a world made up of nation-states, to be a noncitizen is effectively a form of being a nonperson since even universal human rights are ultimately enforced by nation-states. As new religiously inspired forms of resistance emerge in response to these circumstances, they assert the moral authority needed to engage in a politics of insurgent citizenship. Our case studies of congregational-based community organizing and worker rights highlight religious organizing in the U.S. borderlands communities where the meaning of citizenship rights is multilayered. It includes those formal rights gained through membership in a nation-state, alongside other basic human rights such as the right to work, to access education, health care, and affordable safe housing. Some immigrants now also possess certain transnational citizenship rights by virtue of rights granted to migrants by their countries of origin. Given our historical development as a federated nation in which the fifty states retain substantial powers, formal citizenship in the U.S. nation-state brings access to relatively fewer substantive rights than is the case in nation-states with highly developed national systems of social provision. Access to substantive rights has become further attenuated since the early 1980s by the progressive dismantling of national social benefits, including income support, health care, subsidized housing, childcare, and job training.
As access to national substantive rights became more restricted, the arena of contention over the provision of substantive rights shifted to local and state governments. It has been at these lower levels of government that borderlands activists have been most successful in securing new rights, even for those immigrant residents who do not possess formal U.S. citizenship.

The case studies will show how religious justice activists are using various liberative pedagogies to assist in overcoming the social and ethnic divisions inherent in borderlands spaces, thereby creating possibilities for building new alliances across a broad spectrum of cultural, ethnic, and class divides that normally disrupt the social cohesion of the globalized city. Through building various broad institutional collaborations, they are gradually creating the organized power necessary to reclaim diminished citizenships rights. Thus, they create forms of insurgent citizenship.38 Taken together, their efforts challenge the inequalities created by globalization with its growing disparities between wealth and poverty.

The cultural anthropologist James Holston, who coined the phrase “insurgent citizenship,” applied it to new movements of the urban poor for “rights to the city” and of women, gays, and ethnic and racial minorities for “rights of difference.” I am using that phrase to describe struggles to empower people in the borderlands who are pushing back against the denial of their basic human rights. Movements for an expansion of substantive citizenship rights force the state to respond to the deteriorating social conditions of the working poor—which are only one of the consequences of empire on citizenship. Such movements are unprecedented because “they create new kinds of rights, based on the exigencies of lived experience, outside of the normative and institutional definitions of the state and its legal codes.”39 To interpret a wide variety of struggles for increased economic security, improvements in the quality of community life, and even the basic right to family unity in the borderlands as forms of “insurgent citizenship” acknowledges that at present, socioeconomic justice cannot be separated from access to basic democratic freedoms and ethnic and racial self-determination. The opposite is true as well; socioeconomic equality is a necessary precondition for the effective exercise of democratic citizenship rights.40

Within the context of empire “insurgent citizenship” is not a form of revolutionary upheaval. Rather, its assertion of the right to have rights should be understood as a expansion of basic freedoms as they are conceived by the India-born, Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen. For Sen, freedom is defined as “the capability to live really long and to have a good life while alive” in contrast to a life of misery and unfreedom.41 Sen empha-
sizes the quality of people’s lives and the strengthening of their own abilities to enhance that quality through their own capabilities. For Sen, the most elemental form of unfreedom is the inability to survive due to famine, inadequate health care, or a lack of sanitation, functional education, gainful employment, or economic and social security. Unfreedom also results from gross inequalities between men and women and from the lack of political rights and freedoms. We will also consider the right to migrate as both a right and a form of freedom, while current efforts to limit that right are seen as increasing “unfreedom.” Sen advocates for prioritizing the creation of opportunities that enable people to achieve what they themselves would like to achieve, including the ability to participate in democratic decision making that holds their political leaders accountable. For those people lacking formal citizenship within a nation-state, expanding their freedom to have a good life is a form of “insurgent citizenship” achieved from the bottom up.

Thus, campaigns waged by congregational-based community organizations and worker-justice activists are to a certain extent able to expand the rights sphere within certain local arenas so as to increase people’s capacity to live well. However, in the case of the roughly 12 million people now in the United States with no access to formal citizenship, their rights can be fully achieved only through national legislation. Yet, within a democracy, expanding citizenship to new categories of “foreigners” requires that a majority of the nation’s citizens agree to such an expansion. Citizens are being asked to expand the right to U.S. citizenship at a difficult moment when they are under siege due to the severe crisis in global financial markets. In his book on the politics of immigration control, the political scientist Paul Tichenor reminds us that a majority of American citizens have never supported expansions of citizenship to new groups of immigrants. Instead, extensions of citizenship have come as a result of political support from coalitions of business and farm interests, organized labor, immigrant associations, and pro-immigrant advocacy groups. Religious constituencies have historically been divided and continue to be so at present. As “illegal” immigrants have been increasingly vilified and marginalized, religious activists have stepped up efforts to provide urgently needed humanitarian aid, while also documenting the dehumanization occurring along the border and within the interior borderlands. Yet, unless religious activists as part of a larger “multitude” successfully secure equitable national immigration legislation, immigrants will continue to be cast as the other who is deemed unworthy of access to American citizenship. Without access to citizenship, other forms of insurgent citizenship that have been won through tough struggles are in jeopardy of being lost.
The Cosmopolitan Social Location

The second social location in which religious justice activism occurs is among cosmopolitans. We look at two case studies that highlight work primarily being done by individuals and religious communities who are predominantly middle class, occupying positions of greater power and privilege. Many cosmopolitan activists are Euro-Americans, although there are also prosperous, well-educated native-born African Americans, Latinos, and Asians as well as immigrants and their second-generation descendants. In his book on cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah explains it as a twin set of ideas. “One is the idea that we have obligations to others that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the formal ties of shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life, but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.” Cosmopolitans recognize that differences abound within the human family, all of which are worth exploring and seeking to understand. “They neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life.” Cosmopolitans have no interest in remaking the world in their image or returning to some earlier “more pure” era when Western notions of what constituted civilization dominated the world. For them there are no “good old days” before American society became multinational. They have abandoned hegemonic notions of the moral superiority of the West, making them willing to enter into true partnerships with people around the globe.

Religious cosmopolitans work in all five arenas of activism featured in this book, but they dominate among peacemaking and global justice activists. When asked, they can consistently point to certain transformational experiences in their lives, which have enabled them to see the world from the point of view of the other. This book contains the stories of several cosmopolitan activists who were transformed through having spent extended periods of time living somewhere in the global South, most often in Latin America. These experiences frequently occurred either while they were students or while they were serving as missionaries. Interestingly, direct missionary experiences or reports sent back to the United States from missionaries in the field have been catalytic in several religious activist movements. This is especially true of Roman Catholic missionaries who worked in Latin America beginning in the late 1960s. Since most missionaries were sent to work among ordinary people, rarely interacting with the upper classes, they were exposed to the people’s hardships, their strong commitments to community,
and their popular religious practices. Young religious Americans who spent extended periods of time in Latin America in the late 1960s were frequently exposed to the intellectual and social ferment surrounding the emergence of liberation theology and concomitant pedagogies, which sought to foster critical consciousness among the masses of Latin American people.

For still others, early experiences in U.S.–based movements including pacifist, civil rights, antiwar, farmworkers, Nuclear Freeze campaign, and others proved to be so transformative that they embarked on a lifetime of justice activism. In a few cases, people even referenced the impact of their parents’ activism. Still others grew up in poor or immigrant families where they have personally experienced being treated as the other. Through access to education, including seminary degrees, they have since gained middle-class status, yet their childhood experiences give them a strong affinity to those who remain on the margins. It is important to emphasize that these varied experiences are processed and interpreted through the lenses of each person’s deeply held religious and ethical percepts. Their life experiences are indeed transformative as they connect with their understandings of the sacredness of all life and one’s responsibility to show compassion for the other. Such beliefs can be found in some form in every religion. As a result of these varied transformative experiences, cosmopolitans learn to embrace an “other regarding” worldview, leaving them open to engaging social issues that are in the interests of people who have little power, but are not necessarily in their own direct personal self-interest. They frequently come to see themselves as world citizens rather than being deeply attached to any one nation or racial/ethnic identity. At the same time, their expanded sense of belonging compels them to make use of their privileged identity as American citizens to advocate on behalf of those who do not possess that status. Thus, they acknowledge their own privilege and chose to use it in ways that places them in solidarity with those who are suffering at the hands of the very nation-state through which American cosmopolitans hold their privileged citizenship.

In order for religious belief to provide the grounds for justice activism, it must have the capacity to move a person from empathy for those who are suffering to anger against the societal practices that cause that suffering. Yet, given the broad commitment to nonviolence among most religious activists, anger at injustice cannot be allowed to turn into acts of violence against the perpetrators. We trace the emergence of active nonviolent resistance back to its origins in Gandhi’s concept of satyagraha, which recast elements of the Hindu tradition to ground a commitment to nonviolence as a form of no-
harm. We note that these ideas were carried into the U.S. Christian context through several activist streams and have now been broadly embraced by religious activists.

Both Christian and Jewish justice activists find religious frameworks for their work within the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Each religion also draws on still other texts central to their tradition: the New Testament for Christians and the Talmud for Jews. Christian cosmopolitans frequently see themselves as the inheritors of earlier generations of religious social activists whose justice work also grew out of their faith commitments. Depending on their religious orientation and the issues in which they are primarily engaged, they may claim the historic legacy of the nineteenth-century abolitionists, the proponents of the social gospel, the Catholic Worker movement, or the more recent civil rights, farmworkers, antiwar, or sanctuary activists. Activists in other religious traditions are building their own frameworks for justice activism and finding inspiration for social activism from earlier activists within their religious traditions. For example, Jewish activists make frequent reference to the image of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama.

Religious justice organizations often act as a bridge between borderlands and cosmopolitan social locations. This is most evident in cases where organizations were established to intentionally bring cosmopolitans into solidarity with people on the margins, such as much of the work of the religious worker-justice organizations including Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) and Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ). In both cases, a great deal of their work is accomplished in close collaboration with unions that are organizing directly among low-wage workers. CLUE and IWJ function to bring religious cosmopolitans into solidarity with what are often hard-fought unionization campaigns. The same is true of organizations such as Witness for Peace (WFP) and Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), both of which send American volunteers overseas to give witness to and provide accompaniment for rural villagers living in the midst of violent conflict zones. These volunteers in turn send back very graphic reports of the suffering people are enduring to their networks of mostly cosmopolitan supporters in the United States.

While religious activists working in borderlands social locations make extensive use of liberative pedagogies to instill people with an awareness of the root causes of their oppression, cosmopolitans generally possess a far greater sense of their own political efficacy. There certainly are immigrant
activists who arrive in the United States with significant prior political or organizing experience in their home countries, enabling them to readily become active here, yet cosmopolitans who were born and educated in the United States generally have a greater familiarity with the workings of American institutions and politics. Those who have gone through multiple tiers of the American educational system have been exposed to the basic mechanics of the political process in this country and have been taught to believe that they have a voice in policy decisions. They are also more likely to have social networks that can connect them to various funding sources, especially those that exist within religious institutions. As a result, organizations whose primary constituency is among cosmopolitans employ very different mobilizing methodologies. They rely heavily on email and increasingly on YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter to educate and mobilize their constituencies. We will encounter one organization that actually sends its supporters instructions on how to organize mass actions in their local communities via YouTube. There are a few organizations whose primary objective is to generate letters to members of Congress in support of whatever issue they are currently working on. Others combine such email letter-writing campaigns with mass actions, including acts of civil disobedience. However, as the head of one religious peace organization pointed out, being able to participate in acts of civil disobedience is itself a form of privilege. Only those who are U.S. citizens with jobs that allow them to possibly miss a few days of work can risk arrest resulting from an act of civil disobedience.

To the extent that cosmopolitan organizations are largely composed of middle-class whites, they are always challenged in their ability to connect to broader multiethnic constituencies. Some have wrestled with this dilemma and yet were largely unsuccessful in moving beyond their historic base of supporters. During the 1980s, as WFP was sending delegations to Nicaragua, despite their efforts they attracted very few nonwhites to join their delegations. Yet, as Clare Weber, a former WFP staffer points out, “it is whiteness to the degree that it intersects with middle- or upper-class standing in U.S. society that is privileged in the body politic.”45 Thus, in large part the very whiteness of WFP activists gave the organization its political clout. More recently, Bread for the World is finding greater success in finally building networks of supporters for its anti-hunger advocacy among African American and Latino congregations. Perhaps the distinction is that Bread has consciously maintained a dual focus on global hunger as well as hunger in the United States. Thus, they are able to access borderlands constituencies in a way that solidarity with Nicaragua could not do in the 1980s.
Methodological Approach

The content of this book is based on qualitative research. I sought to portray the broad sweep of American religious justice organizing, although there are certainly other important issues, such as environmental justice or LGBTQ-rights organizing, which are not included. There are undoubtedly organizations I missed that should have been incorporated, for which I apologize. I quite intentionally made heavy use of a narrative style of research that mirrors these organizations’ widespread emphasis on storytelling.

I made extensive use of my own personal connections to the religious activists involved in this work, especially those in Chicago and Los Angeles. In January 2008, I spent a week in southern Arizona visiting the various humanitarian activists who are active in saving immigrants’ lives in the desert. In writing the peacemaking chapter, focused on a movement with which I was less familiar, I began by consulting a number of scholars who are active peacemakers, asking them to provide me with assessments of who were the most important organizations active in the field.

I conducted dozens of individual, open-ended interviews with staff from each of the organizations referenced in the chapters that follow. I want their voices to come across the pages of this book. Since every activist organization now has a Web site, I also made use of online materials as well as material from newsletters and regular email postings. In the case of a number of older organizations, I was able to draw on some excellent secondary literature, which is generally not yet available for those organizations that have come into existence in more recent years. I have been careful to include only those organizations with which I was able to conduct a phone interview with a staff member, since there are clearly inactive organizations that still have a presence online.

The Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 presents a fuller explanation of what the prophetic traditions within both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament have to say about various justice issues. It also includes a more extensive discussion of the trajectory of various methodologies prevalent throughout religious activism. The first is a broad based commitment to active nonviolent resistance. The chapter also traces another important thread that shapes much of American justice organizing, namely, the influence of Latin American liberation theology and pedagogies, which have also been contextualized in the United States.
The next three chapters focus on borderlands activism. Chapter 3 begins by discussing the distinctive legacy of Catholic social action and the entrance of Latin American liberative models of praxis into community organizing in the late 1970s. It then introduces the major national organizing networks and recounts the personal stories of a number of professional organizers to demonstrate their understanding of the prophetic nature of their own involvement. The chapter then addresses the use of popular education models in various aspects of community organizing’s day-to-day praxis. Finally, it examines a variety of concrete forms of insurgent citizenship that have been created by these organizations’ work. Chapter 4 begins by examining the decline of the American labor movement and the barriers to successful organizing created by the dismantling of the federal labor regulations. It then focuses on the work of two major religious worker-justice organizations, Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) and Clergy and Laity Concerned for Economic Justice (CLUE), both of which were constituted as interreligious organizations. Both have established their own identities in the midst of significant on-going turmoil within the ranks of organized labor. They both act as moral voices in the midst of an increasingly difficult union organizing climate and also function as bridges between borderlands and cosmopolitan social locations. In recent years, IWJ has birthed a number of worker-justice centers, which embody the institutional hybridity common among borderlands organizations. As a result, IWJ has also become more active in national advocacy, recognizing that only stronger enforcement and legislative reform can protect the most vulnerable workers. CLUE has recently initiated a series of dialogues between African American and Latino clergy and is successfully recruiting evangelical clergy to support worker justice.

Chapter 5 begins by tracing the contested history of immigrant rights in the United States. It then looks at the religious humanitarian work along the Arizona border with Mexico, some of which has roots in the 1980s sanctuary movement that also originated in that region. These organizations are also engaged in documenting human rights abuses and advocating for a more humane set of immigration laws. The chapter then looks at the work of the new sanctuary movement and the religious responses to the massive 2008 federal raid of a meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa. Finally, it analyzes the broad based multiethnic interreligious coalition that is lobbying for national comprehensive immigration reform.

Chapter 6 marks the shift toward cosmopolitan religious activism by looking at various forms of religious peacemaking, including traditional pacifist support for conscientious objectors, solidarity work, and human rights work. While there is a long-standing pacifist tradition within Christianity, the domi-
nant position among Christians has been just war theory, versions of which have undergirded justifications of empire throughout the centuries, including the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), which is the oldest U.S. religious pacifist organization, has over the decades been joined by a diverse array of other religious peace-making groups. A commitment to peacemaking is now central to the identities of a wide range of religious adherents. More than any other arena this work includes distinctively Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim peace organizations, as well as a younger generation of evangelicals who are important new voices within a religious community marked by strong triumphalist tendencies. Less concerned with empowering individuals to act, peace-making activism focuses on the intricacies of the issues, making heavy use of email to reach its supporters. Most organizations also engage in various types of mass actions, including civil disobedience, yet there are a few whose outreach is entirely done online.

Chapter 7 looks at a range of global justice organizations, includes ones that are engaged in advocacy work on debt relief, hunger, and global poverty. Beginning with the Jubilee 2000 campaign, much of this work has been focused on Africa. Its deepening poverty has directly contributed to growing violence throughout many parts of the continent. As a result, global justice has become closely aligned with efforts to reverse Africa’s growing humanitarian crisis through massive infusions of public and private funding into the poorest regions of the continent. This chapter also features several anti-genocide organizations that have formed in response to ongoing conflict in various parts of Africa. Although not necessarily religious in their identities, they organize among religious communities. They are also using innovative, creative organizing strategies that attract large numbers of young adults to work on their issues. These new methodologies clearly suggest new emerging forms of future organizing.

Finally, chapter 8 concludes the book with an assessment of the overall significance of this work in bringing renewal to communities, creating new citizenship rights, and ultimately confronting American empire. While activism occurring in both borderlands and cosmopolitan social locations seeks to lessen the impact of the most negative consequences of globalization and empire, the case studies also reveal clear distinctions in the actual character of the work in the two settings. Indeed, it is apparent that religious activism frequently serves as a bridge between the two.

All quotes from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) or in some cases, an individual translation.

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