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*Rebecca Moore is chair and distinguished professor of religious studies at San Diego State University. She has a PhD in religious studies from Marquette University (1996), where her specialty was Jewish and Christian dialogue. She has written and published on medieval Christian theologians and their debt to Jewish biblical commentary. Moore is author of *Voices of Christianity: A Global Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 2005) and coauthor of *A Portable God: The Origin of Judaism and Christianity* (with Risa Levitt Kohn, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007). Moore also specializes in American religions, focusing on new religious movements. Her most recent book is *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Praeger, 2009). Moore co-manages the website [Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple](#). She is director of San Diego State University's [Metropolitan Area Pluralism Study](#) (MAPS), which locates, charts, and digitally publishes a visual and descriptive guide to the religious diversity that exists in the San Diego-Tijuana border region.*

Thanks to a regional development grant from the AAR Regions Committee, the [AAR Western Region](#) hosted a discussion of “Immigration Reform: Linking the Academy to Activism” at its March 2011 meeting at Whittier College. A panel of activists, scholars, and immigrants provided a lively discussion of the ways in which teachers can integrate issues of immigration and immigration reform into their religious studies classes.

Although immigration reform has become a national issue, it directly affects Western Region members nearly every day. Many of our students are undocumented or their parents may lack legal papers. A large — and largely invisible — workforce maintains the homes, children, kitchens, and gardens of many employers. Bilingualism is the norm, and a real advantage in the multicultural society in which we teach. I not only mean speaking Spanish, but any language in addition to English. With students coming from Iran, Afghanistan, China, Vietnam, Sudan,

Somalia, and the far reaches of the globe, the old joke becomes true:

What do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual

What do you call someone who speaks three languages? Trilingual

What do you call someone who speaks one language? American

Thus, our grant proposal was designed to counter these stereotypes by connecting scholars in religion to activists in the field in order to better teach questions about immigration to all of our students. The funding request — written by Theresa Yugar, a doctoral candidate at Claremont Graduate University, and by Rebecca Moore, then-President of AAR Western Region — outlined a plan for finding new ways of talking about immigrants and immigration. Immigrants are among the most abused and misunderstood population in the United States today. At the same time, they belong to strong ethnic and religious communities that may provide more social cohesion than the dominant society. Access to accurate information about the immigrant situation is not available through mainstream media, however, while anti-immigrant vigilante organizations and state legislatures have demonized them.

Religious institutions are currently examining how they should respond to these issues. At the same time, a wide range of scholars in the region are engaged in the discussion. The focus on immigration issues under the AAR grant was aimed at preparing teachers to challenge students' misconceptions and to lead responsible and informed discussions in the classroom. The discussion panel allowed scholars to hear first-hand testimonials from immigrants, learn the facts about immigration, and find out more about the ongoing struggles for civil rights. Speakers gave the audience new information, along with strategies for presenting it, to incorporate into a variety of different types of courses.

The first part of the program, funded by the AAR Western Region, featured a plenary address by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo on religious intersections in the immigrant rights social movement, which set the stage for the panel that followed. Hondagneu-Sotelo, a sociologist at the University of Southern California, described three case studies from her research into immigrant activism. They included an examination of the post-9/11 backlash against Muslim Americans, and the response of Muslims to this; a study of clergy and laity supporting union organizing among Los Angeles's poorest-paid workers; and a description of "Posadas Sin Fronteras," a liturgical reenactment of the Holy Family's quest for lodging that occurs in several places along the United States–Mexico border. Hondagneu-Sotelo then served as the facilitator for the panel discussion that followed.

Orlando Espin, professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego, kicked off the grant-funded session by declaring, "To speak about immigration is to speak about

me.” The director of the University of San Diego’s Center for the Study of Latino/a Catholicism, Espin described his immigration to the United States from Cuba when he was a child, then his move to the Dominican Republic as an adult, and then his immigration to Brazil for graduate studies. “I have had to learn how to survive in someone else’s world,” he observed.

But Espin did not just survive; he thrived. The question he asked the audience that day was “Why?” The answer is contained in the question itself: he kept asking questions and refused to let other people define him. As he put it, “I was not silenced by other people’s charity.” Espin stated that immigrants have become an object of charity, when what they really need is for people to help them speak for themselves. “There is no immigration reform without the immigrant,” he concluded.

Ana Grande, a first-generation American of Salvadoran descent, grew up as a community organizer. She is currently the campaign director in the Los Angeles office of PowerPAC, a nonprofit advocacy and political group. Grande’s parents were undocumented, part of the Central American diaspora of the 1980s. As a seven-year-old, Grande would teach immigrants seeking sanctuary in a Jesuit facility “what the U.S. was all about.” (American religious institutions and groups housed undocumented immigrants who were fleeing torture and violence in the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s). As a high school student, Grande organized walk-outs at her high school to protest Proposition 187, a draconian measure that denied legal rights not only to undocumented immigrants but also to their American children. As a college student, she helped with the unionization of the housekeepers at her school.

Grande’s current passion is helping undocumented students, the numbers of which range between half a million to a million-and-a-half in California alone. She worked hard on the passage of California’s “Dream Act,” which would have allowed undocumented students in-state tuition at California’s public universities. The bill passed the state legislature in 2008, but then-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Catholic, refused to sign it into law, although a number of Catholic bishops called for him to support the bill. (The California Dream Act differs from the Federal Dream Act, which would provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented college students).

“Immigration reform will occur piecemeal,” according to Grande, “because political opposition will make comprehensive immigration reform impossible.” She is optimistic, however, about new efforts to pass California’s Dream Act once again.

The third panelist, Kristen Hill Maher, is an associate professor of political science who teaches about immigration issues at San Diego State University. She encounters a number of negative stereotypes among students, whose only contact with immigrants tends to be limited. She encouraged building empathy by hearing stories, reading narratives, watching films, and encountering immigrants directly. “But it’s not enough to build empathy,” she added, since students may simply move from empathy to pity to charity.

As a scholar who examines migration and labor patterns, especially among female immigrants, Hill Maher described the role that the United States plays in creating a market for immigration. “Migration does not occur until the U.S. enters a country and disrupts traditional economies,” she stated. “Thus, we have a responsibility for migrations and need to acknowledge this responsibility in our policies and attitudes toward immigrants.”

She believes that religious studies classes are a good place in which to have ethical discussions about our responsibility for creating a market for 3-D labor: that is, work that is dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. “We have created a labor structure of what we consider ‘bad jobs,’ and in doing so, have created an underclass.” Hill Maher challenged the group to consider what kind of society we are trying to create, and to think about how we rely on outsiders to do these jobs.

Edgar Hopida, director of public relations for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in San Diego, was the last panel member to speak. He began by telling a true story of an incident that occurred to his wife at a San Diego shopping mall. Both are of Filipino descent: he is an American citizen and his wife is a Canadian citizen. Shortly after the war in Iraq began in 2003, his wife, wearing hijab, was shopping for clothes. Hopida found her in tears at the entrance to the mall. A Caucasian couple had asked her, “Why don’t you go back to Iraq?!?” This encounter prompted Hopida to become more politically active in working for the legal rights of Muslims.

CAIR is a civil rights organization that started in 1994, and Hopida works with public officials, law enforcement agencies, and interfaith groups to ensure better treatment of Muslims. He described a number of restrictions that have been imposed on Muslim Americans since 9/11. Muslims entering the United States must answer a number of questions about their religious beliefs: What mosque do you pray at? Who is your Imam? In addition, some Muslims traveling abroad learn that they have been put on the “no-fly list” while out of the country and can no longer return to their home — that is, the United States.

Hopida said that religious studies professors need to consider Islam as an “indigenous entity, rather than as something foreign,” and to teach it accordingly. “Once Muslims are ‘otherized,’ it becomes difficult even to build a mosque,” he said, referring to the Islamic Center proposed for construction in downtown Manhattan. Opposition to a new mosque in Temecula, a small city in southern California, has also arisen.

After each panelist spoke for ten or fifteen minutes, they took questions from the audience. I asked the panel about ways to teach a course on the history of religion in America that might be more inclusive than the traditional address of the pilgrims, the Great Awakening, and so forth. Edgar Hopida — a former student of mine — noted that the traditional historiography for religion in America classes is focused on the East Coast and that what is missing is telling the story from the West Coast. “Americans start with historical amnesia,” he asserted. He said it is important to cover the history of anti-immigration legislation, to tell the story of the forced immigration of Africans as slaves, and to teach students about the lack of a welcome mat for Mexican, Chinese, and Filipino workers. “The ‘Grand Narrative’ needs to change.”

Orlando Espin said that he builds immigration issues into his class assignments. Since everyone except for Native Americans began as an immigrant, he asks his students why some migrants become dominant, while others are relegated to minority status. “The immigrant experience is the root of our country,” he says, “and religion had better say something on this.” Espin, past president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States, uses immigration as a parable for exploring a range of topics in religious studies and theology — from soteriology to Christology.

Ana Grande recalled the time that Sister Socorro, one of the nuns in her college, asked her, “What are you *doing*, for heaven’s sake?” But Grande heard the question as “What are you doing for *heaven’s sake*?” and it is a question that she asks herself every day. “We don’t know how to combine our lived experience with the faith we have,” she said, but nevertheless that is something we try to do.

The panel linking activists to the academy helped clarify key problems, issues, and approaches. It became clear that there is a wealth of resources available to educators in the communities of religious activists. Although each region of the country is different, globalization and economic dislocation have brought immigrants to America’s heartland: refugees from ethnic oppression in Myanmar settle in Texas; Mexicans work in meatpacking plants in Iowa; Chaldean Christians from Iraq move to San Diego; and the largest concentration of Shi’a Muslims outside of Iran lives in Los Angeles (or, as my students call it, Teherangeles). There are religious groups — ranging from individual churches that sponsor families, to refugee help centers — all across the

country. More importantly, though, as the panelists told us, are the immigrants themselves, who need ordinary citizens to help them “grab the microphone” to put a face on the immigrant issue.

AAR Western Region members learned a number of important lessons thanks to the panel presentation on immigration issues. We got ideas about reconceptualizing the way we teach courses and suggestions for incorporating the immigrant experience into a variety of different classes. We discovered a number of human resources available to us in our communities. And we got a clearer sense of what’s at stake in the immigration reform debate underway in our country today.

This issue is not going to vanish anytime soon. Espin noted that “There are only going to be more immigrants coming in to support our aging population.” The AAR regional grant award showed us some ways in which we can prepare our students for what lies ahead.

For additional information on organizing a panel linking activists to academics, please write to Rebecca Moore at San Diego State University: [This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it](mailto:rebecca.moore@sdsu.edu)

Brief List of Resources on Contemporary Immigration

Asian Law Caucus. “[Returning Home: How U.S. Government Practices Undermine Civil Rights at Our Nation’s Doorstep](#).” 2009.

Bhatia, Sunil. *American Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

Esposito, John, and Ibrahim Kalin, eds. *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Fernandez, Ronald. *America Beyond Black and White: How Immigrants and Fusions are*

Helping Us Overcome the Racial Divide . Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

_____. America's Banquet of Cultures: Harnessing Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration in the Twenty-First Century . Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000.

Foley, Kathleen. “ [Not in Our Neighborhood: Managing Opposition to Mosque Construction](#) .” 2010.

GhaneaBassiri, Kambiz. A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order . New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Goździak, Elzbieta M., and Susan F. Martin, eds. Beyond the Gateway: Immigrants in a Changing America . Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. God's Heart Has No Borders: How Religious Activists Are Working for Immigrant Rights . Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, ed. Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Le, C. N. (Cuong Nguyen). Asian American Assimilation: Ethnicity, Immigration, and Socioeconomic Attainment . New York: LFB Scholarly Publications, 2007.

Massey, Douglas. “ [Five Myths about Immigration: Common Misperceptions Underlying U.S. Border Enforcement Policy](#) .” Immigration Policy in Focus 4 (Aug 2005): 6. Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation.

Ngai, Mae. "The Civil Rights Origins of Illegal Immigration." *International Labor and Working Class History* 78, no. 1 (2010): 93–99.

Portes, Alejandro, and Ruben G. Rumbaut. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Quinones, Sam. *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream: True Tales of Mexican Migration*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

South Asian Americans Leading Together. "[From Macacas to Turban Toppers: The Rise of Xenophobic and Racist Rhetoric in the American Political Discourse](#) ." 2010.

Wierzbicki, Susan K. *Beyond the Immigrant Enclave: Network Change and Assimilation*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publications, 2004.