

Religion and Civil Engagement in Bangalore

By Catherine Yuh, RPLP Undergraduate Research Fellow

This past Spring the Religion and Public Life Program hosted Brandon Vaidyanathan, a PhD candidate in the sociology department at the University of Notre Dame. Vaidyanathan has since joined the RPLP as a postdoctoral fellow, and his presentation in April was a wonderful introduction to his work.

On April 24th, Vaidyanathan met with the RPLP fellows for a dialogue about his ongoing dissertation on religious transnationals. Drawing on sociological data from 12 months of participant observation and 200 interviews, Vaidyanathan examines when religion might enable civic participation in the transnational professional class, and under what circumstances. Specifically, he examines religion in the context of immigration and how Roman Catholicism in Bangalore and Dubai enable political and cultural citizenship.

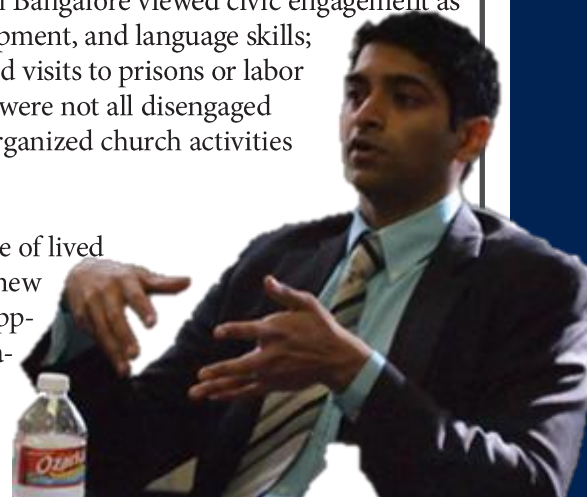
On the surface, Bangalore and Dubai present similar case studies- both have experienced increasing consumerism, the rise of a new transnational professional class, and explosive population growth in recent decades. Now referred to as the “Silicon Valley of India,” Bangalore has become a key destination point for both internal and reverse migration. Similarly, local citizens in Dubai are now the minority, a result of a stark population transformation in the past 40 years. Roman Catholicism, though a minority religion in both cases, remains highly socially influential in both.

His findings reveal a puzzle: Catholic transnational professionals in Dubai, though expatriates in a non-democratic nation, are more directly and actively involved in poverty-alleviation efforts than their counterparts in Bangalore, who are citizens in a democracy. During his time with the RPLP fellows, Vaidyanathan explained these paradoxical findings by shedding light on key structural factors that contribute to such differential outcomes among members of the same social class and same global religious form in two prominent outposts of neoliberal capitalism.

According to Vaidyanathan’s research, differences in institutional priorities of the church, for example, created different orientations toward engagement with the poor, such that the parish leadership in Dubai emphasized social services for the poor more so than that of Bangalore. Differences in ideological sentiment about helping the poor further explain these dissimilar outcomes, as the prevailing sense in Bangalore is that certain jobs are reserved for certain people, and that the professional class does not engage in helping the poor. Vaidyanathan also pointed to parish stratification in Bangalore that was absent in Dubai. Whereas parishes in Dubai were varied and diverse, those in Bangalore were predominantly comprised of a single class. Lastly, Vaidyanathan suggested that the parish leadership has agency to encourage modes of particular engagement, and that the leadership in Dubai orients its members more toward the provision of social services.

When asked about variations among participants in the compared cities, particularly along lines of age, income, and orientation of applied faith, Vaidyanathan responded that while he did see some Catholic professionals in Dubai that were not necessarily engaged in helping the poor, those in Dubai interpreted civic engagement differently from those in Bangalore. For example, Catholic professionals in Bangalore viewed civic engagement as an opportunity to cultivate their own cultural capital, leadership development, and language skills; whereas civic engagement in Dubai centered on economic assistance and visits to prisons or labor camps. Vaidyanathan also said that Catholic professionals in Bangalore were not all disengaged from helping the poor, but that they did not necessarily participate in organized church activities for the poor.

Vaidyanathan expressed that he hopes his research demonstrates a mode of lived citizenship in the absence of a formal legal framework, and speaks to a new model of assimilation in which immigration becomes an “indefinite stepping stone” across generations. The content from Vaidyanathan’s presentation will eventually become a chapter in an upcoming book, and he was thankful for the feedback provided by the RPLP fellows. Likewise, the RPLP fellows appreciated the opportunity to meet Vaidyanathan, and have since welcomed him to the research team as a post-doctoral fellow.



Vaidyanathan speaks to RPLP