



Religion & Forced Migration Initiative

Princeton University's Office of Religious Life

Alejandro Baez

Interviewed by Imane Mabrouk through an online call, 08/22/2019

Narrator Location: Las Vegas, Nevada

Interviewer Location: Bayonne, NJ

Transcribed by Kennedy Walls, 01/13/2022

(0:07) **Imane:** This is Imane Mabrouk interviewing Alejandro Baez on August 22, 2019. The interview is taking place via online call. Imane is in Bayonne, New Jersey. Alejandro is in Las Vegas, Nevada. Okay, Alejandro? Why don't you start us off by telling us or telling me where you were born?

(0:39) **Alejandro:** I was born in Apatzingán, Michoacán, Mexico.

(0:44) **Imane:** And when were you born?

(0:46) **Alejandro:** I was born on July 22, 1999.

(0:50) **Imane:** And what was what? What did your family look like? Like, what family were you born into?

(1:00) **Alejandro:** Well, I was born with a mother, father, two brothers, and one sister. And a lot of extended family. I don't really remember well. I came here when I was five. And we were the only ones who immigrated along with my cousins like, yeah.

(1:25) **Imane:** So, you lived in Mexico for five years, you said?

(1:29) **Alejandro:** Yeah, like around five years, and then it was around. We had, because of the, all the cartels and all the violence that my parents decided that it wasn't necessarily the safest or economically, like, viable solution to stay in Mexico. So that's why we ended up immigrating to the United States for safety and just like economic reasons.

(2:01) **Imane:** And do you remember your hometown at all?

(2:05) **Alejandro:** I actually don't. I mean, I can remember. I mean, my parents have pictures and stuff, but like, I don't really remember anything about Mexico, I just, it's really weird. Yeah, I mean, it's not really weird. But also, like, it's the place that I call home, but only because of history, but not really because of history. I don't know if that makes any sense.

(2:40) **Imane:** No, it makes a lot of sense. So, do you remember anything from growing up in Mexico?

(3:01) **Alejandro:** From what parents told me we had in some of the pictures, we either have like a ranch or something and life was ok I think. I think it was okay for them because they were near family though. But yeah, also, when we moved, my eldest brother and my only sister actually ended up staying in Mexico, because their lives are already ingrained so much in Mexico that it just felt it's my, it was either their decision or my parents' decision that they weren't gonna come with us. Because of all that new transition stuff. They asked [INDECIPHERABLE]...

(3:50) **Imane:** How old were they?

(3:54) **Alejandro:** I think like 14, 16ish.

(3:57) **Imane:** Oh, wow.

(3:59) **Alejandro:** Yeah, no, they're like the oldest, which meant their age just made a lot of sense since they're just kind of starting their lives, their friends, and a lot of the family were there. And a lot of our family members actually ended up taking care of them. And now they're either graduated. Yeah, they have like they have like entire families now.

(4:23) **Imane:** Oh, are they both still in Mexico?

(4:26) **Alejandro:** Yeah, they, they visit. Their visa was barely not like two years ago. It's been like a long process to get it. And they're only allowed two weeks at a time per year. So I've only seen them like twice for like two weeks. Like two weeks in, and like the current like in the past couple of years. [Indecipherable.]

(5:02) **Imane:** No, go ahead.

(5:04) **Alejandro:** But it's like really nice because it's like, they're kind of like back together all over again. And while I'm not as connected to them due to like language

barriers, like cultural differences, and just like how we were raised, it is nice to see kind of like that connection, like, or like to see how they interact with my parents and all. Because, you know, now we are all together, albeit it for like, a couple of days.

(5:39) **Imane:** It must have been really hard for your parents to leave them behind.

(5:43) **Alejandro:** Yeah, it's like I like so I'm very active in like undocumented, like, support, like groups and stuff. Because I want to see undocumented students flourish. But just knowing all the struggles and trauma that I face. Not that it's like refreshing to remember this, but like, my parents faced a lot more than I did, growing up. And like integrating, because I don't like I don't remember anything. Cause I was so young. But they kind of had to bear all that. And now they're, like of age, but like, old enough to understand, like, their reasoning for everything that they've done. But like the thing that's very clear for just like, refreshing.

(6:39) **Imane:** So, you said that your parents decided to take you? And the two of them and you guys came into America? How did you, how did you come to America?

(6:53) **Alejandro:** So that's a great question. So, my cousin, not that I remember this, but like from what she told me, she said that, we were just like, because border security was very lacking, like a decade ago, which was great for me. So, he drove us in her pickup--not pickup truck, in her car. And we're like in the back or something, covered or like in the backseat, and I was like crying or something. And then she was like, stop and I was like, Okay. So, two brothers, one was in Mexico. And the other one is just a year older than me. But if they come dropping here, they know my mom already. But yes, she actually drove us to, all across the border. And I stayed with her for a couple months in California, before my mom ended up crossing so that I could meet her. Yeah, so first, my dad who crossed and then since it's money, and then I think me and my brother crossed, and then my mom was supposed to but she got caught. And then she like, when she was released, she went out again. So that's how it just took a couple of months. Before we all over here.

(8:18) **Imane:** Wait, you said your brother stayed?

(8:23) **Alejandro:** I have two brothers. Okay. Two older brothers, one of them a year older than me and the other one is, like really old.

(8:32) **Imane:** So, you said that you guys came in waves right? You went by yourself with your cousin and then stayed with her?

(8:44) **Alejandro:** Yeah.

(8:46) **Imane:** Do you remember any of that?

(8:50) **Alejandro:** I just remember what she told me which is that like I was like crying a lot and all that Okay, cool. But other than that, I can vaguely remember being, it was either her house or apartment. Because I don't think she, yeah, she didn't have any children around so she was just constantly taking care of us as if she was like a second mom. And yeah.

(9:17) **Imane:** And when you your mom and your dad were finally reunited, where did you guys go?

(9:26) **Alejandro:** We ended up going to Las Vegas because I think the reasoning was the California was expensive. Las Vegas. At the turn off, can you kind of like a perfect place it's like it's like I guess it's not like too [INDECIPHERABLE] and so there's not like a lot of like, honing in an undocumented population. And there's like a good amount of like economic like, like jobs and stuff. So, we ended up here for the last 14 years for 14 years.

(10:05) **Imane:** And what jobs did your parents get?

(10:10) **Alejandro:** My mom just ended up being a babysitter for a while before but overall, she's like been like like just you know just like a kind of like a I guess a mother and then my dad ended up being an auto mechanic which was interesting because he didn't like go out to professional school. It was kind of self-taught with help from his like family and friends back in Mexico.

(10:43) **Imane:** Oh wow. I had just asked oh, what did your dad do when he came to the United States? Was he a mechanic back in Mexico?

(11:58) **Alejandro:** I think it was like learning, no actually he does a lot of work but like it's typewriting like in an office space he was like that kind of person. And I didn't really [INDECIPHERABLE] because all my life I've seen him like with like oil like deep in his like calloused hands again like his life is like 10 times harder than mine because he's out working and so it's just like really weird to see how he ended up picking that initially because he will be more economically viable in the United States because with I mean everyone drives, with the language because he doesn't know English with the language difference he can't really work in offices like he used to in Mexico. Which again highlights how like I feel I just like I'm very like they sacrifice a lot and I'm very proud of like then I can't even like to get to how proud I am of like that. Like it was like our greatest. I've done a lot myself. Yeah, so my mom was just a mom and my dad did, he ended up teaching my brother kinda like the same thing. He tried to teach me but [INDECIPHERABLE].

(13:33) **Imane:** So, are your parents religious at all?

(13:42) **Alejandro** [Call cuts in and out of this answer]: at once you there's like a lot of like, decision they're going to loop back to the clock. So I Well, I never will my village I was driven to a point when I was child because I did pray a lot when my parents are like my dad typically come from work at the scheduled time so if he was like 20 minutes later, or like 2 hours late, I actually did a prayer to for faith. And I think for the [INDECIPHERABLE] that me and my mom went to a local church, and I remember praying there to help but yeah, so my mom, the most religious my dad he like values [audio quality very bad in this section; call cutting out] more like really like Look it up doesn't like he doesn't like talking about like, when the when he lost his job. He was like, wait a second he was applying. We were doing a lot of freelance work. Like, like we did the print and you did the work. Yeah, so but I kind of lumped in religion there I had turmoil with my or coming to terms with my homosexuality but it's just a matter of like finding which like religion to not like chastise me for existing but there have been times when I still pray when things get really hard and in the hopes that you know the climbing climbing onto hope has been the biggest thing that kind of kicked us off. So, I mean I'm going to still [INDECIPHERABLE] it brings me some comfort.

(16:21) **Imane**: So, do you still pray? Or did that stop when you came to terms with your sexuality?

(16:30) **Alejandro**: I prioritized my sexuality. Like overall my happiness, that's what it boiled down to. Like, oh, you're gonna go to hell because you're gay or like live your best life like that kind of thing. And sometimes I do and at the university I do work at the chaplaincy. And it's a nice getting to, like, know, all the religions and the chaplaincy at Tufts is a really diverse and beautiful space, and they're really accepting of everyone. So that's gonna help turn my views around. It's also just like a matter of like, needing more introspection, but one of the things I did carry from [INDECIPHERABLE] was a cross, either for my first communion, or something I'm that my cousin gave me. I think it was my cousin gave me. Just in case. And I have worn that cross like once or twice while at Tufts, because things were getting hard. So, I feel like it's weirdly up and down between me and religion. But [INDECIPHERABLE]...

(17:57) **Imane**: So, when you first came to the States, did religion play a large role in your family's life? Like your mom and you and your brother? Did you go to church? Like did you find support in the church? Or how did your mom carry her religion with her from Mexico to the States?

(18:24) **Alejandro**: So, the church we went to was a Spanish speaking church. It was really weird because like [INDECIPHERABLE] She was like, really into it. And it probably all ties back into like knowing a greater power who's there to not only protect her, but her family. Now that I have a lot more time and I guess growth to think about it. Because even right now I'm under the protection of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which gives me some protection. So, I think that probably,

fingers crossed. But back then, there was nothing. Literally nothing. It was like if something happens, like it happens. So I think for her, especially since me and my brother were like children, so we couldn't understand the intense, complex immigration policies surrounding... So, I think to her, it was important to find that space. And she like did all the [INDECIPHERABLE] And she ended up putting us through a Catholic school. And we got blessed and stuff like that, first communion, and all the other stuff to like, get into heaven or something. And yeah, so we ended up going regularly until like normal school started interfering with that. And right now, it's kind of like, we don't usually go to church, but my mom had to make an effort for us to go on the day that the Virgin Mary is celebrated, the Virgen de Guadalupe.

(20:21) **Imane:** Why do you think that the involvement, your mom's involvement in the church has decreased over the years?

(20:33) **Alejandro:** I think it could be a number of issues. I mean, it could be like, the just increased, like, apathy that me and my brother had when going to church because he's also not the most efficient person. But I don't know about why his reasoning for that. And my dad, again, wasn't the most religious so. And I was the youngest, so she kind of dragged me along there. And then I started prioritizing, like academia over a lot of things, basically everything to get kind of where I am. So, I think all of that just like, made her kind of, like, stop fighting. And I was like, you know, like, it's whatever. So, I think that kind of played in, but she's, from time to time. Like spirituality when, like, problems arise, whether it's like, small, like, medical problems, or like, big immigration ones, she's like to, like, God always knows what to do, like, he'll guide you through it. And I'm like, okay.

(21:43) **Imane:** So, if someone asked you today, what, like, what, what is your religion? What role does religion play in your life? What would you say to them?

(21:56) **Alejandro:** I would say, Catholic, out of respect for my mother and my family the whole and their wishes. And because of all the work I've done in the Catholic Church, but then I would like, trying and explain that. It's also iffy, because I was raised Catholic, but then it's like, I'm taking a break from it. Because of my homosexuality. So that's like where I am.

(22:29) **Imane:** You were saying something? Is it something that you actively think about? Because I know for me, religion is like an ongoing conversation that I have with myself.

(22:44) **Alejandro:** It was, in high school, when again, things are very uncertain. And I was like, okay, do I like what I do who do I like turn to as an undocumented student in academia, it really, really is, really, [INDECIPHERABLE] because there aren't a lot of people who can relate to you. [INDECIPHERABLE], or who understand like, the

complexities of everything, and how to help you. So, I was like oh no who do I turn to. And just like, when I'm, like, really introspective, when I think about like, the grander things of like, living, death, reincarnation, all that stuff. I do, like, think about religion and its role, cause it does provide some answers. Even though like all the religions have, like their own different things and stuff. I am, like, closely, I still believe a lot of the things from Catholicism, and I would like to learn more. So, it's just like, it's also just like, finding, like the time and, like the emotional energy to, like, carry on those conversations with not only myself or my family. Yeah.

(24:10) **Imane:** And so do you think that DACA and receiving DACA made you more secure in your life, and as a result, less dependent on religion?

(24:28) **Alejandro:** It did give me a lot more freedom to just like, kind of like break free, and like in social and economic and a lot of other stuff. So, I never really thought about the link between my decline of Catholicism and the receiving of DACA. Because yeah, cuz the way that my, like coming out was that I was just getting really frustrated with myself and like, how I wasn't living authentically that I was bound to come out in high school anyways, with or without protection. So, but protection has made things a lot easier, especially when I overthink things. And that's just like, okay, so like, what I do is like, my parents are not and I get disowned, it's just like, now I have economic capital, if I need to get a job. It's just like, there's something they think about that. They wouldn't. I wouldn't directly link the decline of Catholicism with the protection of DACA. Since there's like a lot of other third factors going in with that.

(26:01) **Imane:** So, are you comfortable talking about your, you talked a little bit earlier about the turmoil? You said, with sexuality? Would you mind telling me a little bit more about that? At what point would you say you really started to, like, come to terms with your sexuality and try to wrangle that with your religion?

(26:29) **Alejandro:** Yeah, so I came out to one person in ninth grade over Facebook. Before that, I spent a lot of time up at night, like thinking of, that's when like, kinda like, I started. Like, not expressing but like, actively suppressing my queer...I don't know what to call it. Or my sexuality, then, like, fifth grade, because I felt like, I was just like, okay, so it was like, from like, fifth grade to ninth grade that I had like this. Like, something was weighing me down. And I just, it just didn't feel right. And with everything, like, it was just really rough, knowing that, like, every time I stepped into a church, I didn't feel welcome. So, I didn't feel comfortable in those spaces for a little while, now I'm perfectly fine, because like, I understand, like, the complexity and stuff. But like. I remember spending a lot of like, late nights, thinking about like, like eternal damnation, and that kind of thing, or being or like, expressing who I innately am. So, and that didn't really sit right with me, because I didn't do anything wrong. So, it just didn't seem fair to give up a part of myself, for the attainment of others. So once I decided to kind of, like I guess, be selfish in a way I, like renounce, or, like I

didn't renounce, but like, I decided that I just decided I would take a break quote, unquote, from religion, because that is, as I put it, under, under like, that terminology, it was just, it gave me a lot of leeway. And like a lot more space. So, I will put it in terms of that. And it's been a while since I grew up. Even with the spaces that I'm in, thinking about those too is still very turbulent. Full of a lot of turmoil. So, I just, like kind of waiting to be in a better space before I'm really fully able to kind of take all of that head on.

(29:26) **Imane:**

That makes sense. So, you said that there was a time when you felt like you were not welcome in the church. When did that come about?

(29:48) **Alejandro:** When I started learning about like, or yeah, I guess when I started learning more about like, church views homosexuality, or just like religion in general. And this has also coupled with like, you know like middle school, we're just like not people don't really know how [INDECIPHERABLE] and using sexuality as like an insult. So just tied with that social factor really just made me about like, whether like, or like, it just made me wonder which spaces were mine and which ones I felt most safe in.

(30:48) **Imane:** And so, at what point did you decide to come out?

(30:52) **Alejandro:** I came out in ninth grade to one of my friends, we were just like, joking and stuff and then she like brought up the question like, are you like blank and then she's like, okay, like are you straight or gay? But I tried really hard to actually find out what was going on. And I was like oh I'm straight. And then I like I didn't like her I don't like lying, and I'm a terrible liar. But then I ended up messaging her on Facebook. No, like, he told me about this last year, like I am gay there and she was like she's one thing that she made me apparent was that she was very supportive of the LGBT community, I think she was also queer. So just knowing all that helped, like create a safe space for me to talk about it. So, I was very happy to finally do that. And then I gradually just came up and more and more my friends. And I was met with some opposition. Since a lot of my friends are in the Latinx community. And they're not, like, the most open-minded community out there. So, it was really weird. Like one of my very quote unquote friends acquaintances. Like, certainly, made some rude comment and I was like, Dude, what the fuck? So then, like, I did mean, I still hung out with them because, like, we lived close together and like, went to the same school, the same program, but it's like I actively ended up taking more of a role in myself instead of other people. Which was very awkward to some people, but it's what I needed to stay happy and sane. Kinda like where I'm at right now.

(33:10) **Imane:** What does that mean?

(33:15) **Alejandro:** I guess just like, means like, uh, yeah, I was like, tired of being there, like tired of living lies. And even like, I guess something like, very, like apparent here in Vegas, because in Boston, when I got to college, everything's super liberal, like, I am in one of the best spaces for like, my sexuality. They're very queer friendly school, but back at home, I still am like, I'm still reminded by my dad, to not get anyone pregnant. I'm like, dude, I physically can't like I'm sorry. And then they like to talk about grandchildren which is like, you just told me not to get anyone pregnant. Okay. Just like, and I also don't like lying to my parents. I mean, I mean, I've had to, but like, it's just something that I really wish I could talk to him about. But I know I can't act too hastily. Because of the ramifications that could arise.

(34:24) **Imane:** So, you're not out to your parents?

(34:26) **Alejandro:** Yeah, no. Because they're still very conservative. Because we were born in rural Mexico. So, it's like we're not really liberal Latino family.

(34:40) **Imane:** So, do you think you'll ever tell them

(34:44) **Alejandro:** Yeah, I will. You know, just for peace of mind. Because I don't want them to leave without knowing my true self. But I need to prepare for that. So, gaining like, because one of the things that is daunting to me is they disown me. And with that comes, you know, like a lot of social support. And like the notion of family like up in uprooting itself. And also like, the economic ramifications with that because they are providing some like tuition support. And like, I stay with them over vacations. So, it's just like, finding like, different, like support systems like making my own money like, becoming strong enough, both like mentally and physically to take off on to take up all that, like, burden. And so, I think, like very early on, like, like, like, even before it was like, I came out, I was like, Okay, here's my plan, I'm going to go ahead and work my way into like an undergraduate program, get a degree, get a job, and then like, fully come out to them. And that's like, I was like, planning this when I was 14. And I was like, planning eight years of my life, just to tell them, like, Hey, I'm gay. Cuz like, I mean, I hadn't even thought [INDECIPHERABLE].

(36:29) **Imane:** And do you think that your status and your sexuality have, like, how do you think that they intertwine? And in what ways do you think they are... In what ways do they influence each other?

(36:53) **Alejandro:** I've actually thought a little bit about that. Because my undocumented status has kind of taught me that not everything, is well, not everything in my life, particularly is stable. But just how everything is kind of like free flowing, or like ever flowing. So like my notion of home goes into like, birth, my birth country of Mexico, my upbringing in Las Vegas, and my newfound, like, quote unquote, family, which is my friend and support system back at Tufts, so I feel like my

notion of home isn't like, a physical space. So that's, like, kind of indicative of how my status has kind of changed my view on a lot of like, traditional things. So it's also like, influencing how I feel about things. Did I answer your question? I feel like I veered off too much.

(38:07) **Imane:** No this is whatever you want to say. Like, it's your story, you know. But yeah. So, when you think of home, if I asked you like, what, where's home? Where would you say?

(38:35) **Alejandro:** I guess home is less of a physical space and more of like, just like support, because that's what it's been...because I have found a second family at Tufts with all the newfound friends I have. And they're like unconditional love and support. And I do consider, even though it's a really tough university, I do consider it a home away from home which is even farther away from home. But I'm not going to relinquish the fact that Mexico is like my home because of the pride that I hold in being Mexican. And I'm also not going to like, even though Las Vegas is, was like a rough, like transition. It still kind of helps. Like it provides safety or a somewhat safe place for me and my family, so I can't just up and throw away like 14 years of my life just because it's been rough. So yeah, and there is support in Vegas now because my parents have kind of changed their tone around academia. So I guess home is just where I feel most supported and supportive.

(40:02) **Imane:** It's a good way of putting it. When you see your future, what do you see?

(40:29) **Alejandro:** I don't know. It's like a mix of hope and [INDECIPHERABLE]. I have to be realistic about things because things are ever changing but like my ideal thing is finishing up my undergraduate education, pursuing a PhD program, and then finally working to the point where my parents can totally retire after that because I am the youngest and because of my educational interests I haven't taken a lot of time, and my dad physically can't do much work but he's still doing it. So, I just really want to get everything with education done with and then I see like a dog in my future, I don't know how. I guess just finally being at a place where I'm strong enough, physically, mentally, academically, to advocate not only for myself but for others. That's kind of like why I went into public health because I wanted to help people. So, the future just holds a lot of self-care and self-love but also like giving back to the communities that helped uplift me, which continue to be marginalized, so immigrant communities especially. So that's kind of where I see my future. The foundations for where it will go.

(42:32) **Imane:** And do you see the church playing a role at all in your life as you grow up?

(42:39) **Alejandro:** Yeah, I do want to go back and like to talk to someone about how all these conflicts can be resolved and just finally obtain some peace with that...So yeah, I do see it playing a bit of a role, but like once everything stabilizes with academia and stuff like that.

(43:11) **Imane:** You said at a certain point academia became the most important thing, over everything else, including religion. Why do you think that is?

(43:30) **Alejandro:** I guess I took some motivation and inspiration from my father. Not that I don't see religion as a powerful player in the world but if I can physically do something at the time to help my parents or myself and my family then I'm gonna do that. And for the longest time, I mean all throughout school we were taught that higher education is where it's at, that's where you get money, that's where you get better outcomes, and for me all that translated to breaking out of this generational poverty and providing everyone in my life like, for them, support for them.

(45:04) **Imane:** Where do you think this desire comes from? You said your dad?

(45:07) **Alejandro:** Yeah, that's part of it. This desire comes from [INDECIPHERABLE]. They really unjustly gave up their entire lives for the literal safety of me. And I don't think, and they never meant it to be a burden on me, but I'm gonna continue trying to claw our way out of the mess that the world put us in, and I'm gonna have to do all that I can in my power to do that. And I'm very positive that I can. If my parents could do all that they did and still provide a roof over our heads and support me and my brother and my family back home then I can definitely help them and also help me, and future generations, so that's what's motivating me, finally attaining peace and happiness for my family, especially when it's been rocky, with all these forces trying to wipe us out.

(46:35) **Imane:** Makes a lot of sense. Alejandro is there anything about yourself or your story that you think is important to share that we haven't covered?

(46:51) **Alejandro:** Not that I can think of at the moment. Yeah. I think I covered a good chunk of my life. Just overall hope...as strong as religion in terms of keeping me afloat. [INDECIPHERABLE] Hope is like tied back to where...someone bigger than me watching over me. That's like another trait that has been important.

(47:40) **Imane:** I'm really curious, it's been on my mind the entire time. When I first approached you about doing this interview, you said that you might not be the right candidate because religion didn't play that big a role in your life. But from the course of our conversation, it seems like it has. So why do you think you had that initial hesitancy about giving religion a large role in your life, or like admitting to religion playing a large role in your life?

(48:23) **Alejandro:** I think it's because there's still a lot of conflict between my sexuality and religion and it's been a good while since [INDECIPHERABLE]. So, I guess I didn't feel that I was in a good headspace to bring myself to that conversation. There's still a lot more in the future to talk about like how those two will continue butting heads. I think the initial conflict or like confusion, just began to rise so I was like I'm not gonna deal with you right now. So that's what initially put me off. But talking about it has been really nice. Really nice.

(49:33) **Imane:** How do you feel having dived into all of that after taking a break from religion and the role that it's played in your life, how does it feel to go back over all of it? Does that make sense?

(49:45) **Alejandro:** It feels like I've realigned a lot of things. Cuz it's just like. Yeah. Just--it's a lot clearer and stiller now because of all of that. So maybe I am capable of having that conversation, at least with myself not with my family at the moment. That's always good to know that I'm ready.

(50:25) **Imane:** Ok well thank you very much Alejandro. It's been a pleasure.

End