

EDITORIAL

Immigration, Identity, and God's Providence

American politics, it is often noted, resembles a shouting match more than a reasoned deliberation. Indeed, as I write these words, an intense debate is underway about a Senate attempt at comprehensive immigration reform. This is a strange debate; one in which the word “amnesty” has become a form of slander. Fear and loathing seem the order of the day. Even the so-called War President, George W. Bush, has had enough. At a recent rally he warned, “If you want to scare the American people, what you say is the [Senate] bill’s an amnesty bill... That’s empty political rhetoric trying to frighten our citizens.”¹ The trouble is that Mr Bush is speaking about some of his political allies who gained office in part because of how persuasive he was in repeatedly reminding us of 9/11. Ironically, he now finds himself trying to put out the fire that he helped start. Meanwhile, inside the halls of Congress, political arsonists such as Presidential candidates Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) and Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.) are reportedly jockeying with one another to see who can be the one to torch the Senate’s reform plan by way of a procedural maneuvering. For many, this side of American politics is deeply disheartening. Even a good Protestant like me can grow weary of the rancor, animosity, and machinations. As theologians, clergy, or simply people of faith, we find ourselves wondering what our role is in this mess we call politics. I want to suggest that our theological convictions can indeed make a genuine contribution to our political life, and I want to dare to do so in relation to the immigration debate.

I recognize that this claim is somewhat counter-intuitive, given that religious language often plays a very different role—that of turning policy debates into divisive cultural battles over identity. In the case of immigration, there are people on both sides working hard to ensure that their point of view is heard and adopted as law. Both sides are armed with statistics about the consequences of this latest wave of immigration. Those

1. George Bush, “Bush Takes on Conservatives over Immigration,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2007.

advocating further restrictions on immigration talk of border security, the loss of jobs, the rule of law, fairness, and cultural cohesiveness. Those looking for a more open immigration policy talk of families, tough jobs and economic benefits, the need for legal reform, and a history of cultural diversity. Depending on whom you ask, our failure to curb immigration is either threatening or renewing our society. The stakes are believed to be high, and both sides are impassioned and deeply entrenched. In this context, then, it may seem unwise to introduce God-talk. In fact, there are already signs of a divide between Catholics and conservative Evangelicals, but while division along religious lines is a real possibility, it is not inevitable. Indeed, our most profound convictions may yet be capable of informing the debate in ways that invite both sides to re-interpret the situation and find common ground.

Before re-interpreting our situation, I want first to examine more closely how the situation is conventionally described. Many participants in the debate rely on the moral languages of law and order, cultural cohesiveness, and liberation and compassion. The language of law and order is often employed in conjunction with a notion of fairness to argue that undocumented workers should be penalized for entering the country. Politicians of both parties, but especially congressional Republicans, have claimed that the penalty should disadvantage these immigrants in relation to those working through recognized legal channels. A crucial point from this perspective is that immigrants are linked with criminality and even terrorism, which suggests that they are a threatening presence we should fear and seek to remove. At a minimum, we are told, they are taking our jobs and over-burdening our schools, hospitals, and prisons.²

Closely related to this language of law and order is a second moral language, the language of cultural identity. This language is used to contend that illegal immigration threatens our cohesiveness as a nation by fragmenting our common cultural identity. Samuel P. Huntington claims in his 2005 book, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, that he is not against immigration per se but only immigration from the south in the large numbers witnessed within recent years, which he claims are overwhelming the American tradition of assimilation.

The first two languages are challenged by a third moral language, that of liberation and compassion. Catholic and mainstream Protestant groups regularly employ this language. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, for example, has been vocal in articulating the moral responsibility of legal

2. The social consequences of immigration are significantly more mixed than the law and order perspective acknowledges. In fact, it is fair to say that the scholarly consensus is that the long-term effects of immigration are positive. At the same time there are negative consequences, such as the depression of the wages of so-called low-skilled workers.

residents to show compassion toward the immigrants who are identified as the victims of an oppressive economic system.

The first two languages have dominated the conversation about immigration and consequently have fostered a divisive debate that pits one group against another, citizens versus immigrants. This raises the question of why the third language seems to have failed to win greater acceptance. I want to suggest that the third position fits a liberal vs. conservative paradigm in which liberals are heard to appeal to compassion for victims of injustice. Conservatives almost reflexively reject this call in favor of what they claim is a more realistic and just position in which laws are upheld and consequences enforced.

One of the striking things about this debate is the nearly complete absence of talk about God. The dominant languages have been content to focus instead on human identity. The debate has been about whether the immigrants are criminals, cultural aliens, or victims of oppressive systems and conditions. A second feature of this debate is the prevalence of fear and anxiety. An obvious question is what, if anything, these features have to do with one another. I want to suggest that they are closely related. The lack of God-talk reflects our failure as people of faith to reason together about what our fundamental convictions have to say about our situation with respect to immigrants. More specifically, belief in God's providence ought to cause us to at least question appeals to fear and anxiety. Faith in God's providence should alter the conventional interpretation of immigration by giving us a more confident perspective. Ironically, talk of God's providence is suddenly nowhere to be found. Mr. Bush and his supporters were only too eager to speak of God's providence in justifying the Global War on Terror, but in the case of immigration it seems that he is simply concerned about prudence, humanitarianism, and the economic benefits of reform. The problem, of course, isn't with these values in of themselves. The problem is that they are only part of the picture. Moreover, they are no match for the rhetorically compelling talk of terrorism and border security.

If my analysis is correct, one may wonder if it is all for naught. The obvious problem is that talk of God's providence has lost much of its traditional meaning. Though our culture is infused with talk of God's care, that care has been reduced, for many, to an individualized spirituality in which God functions as a personal fetish. For example, God seems to be in attendance at every major sporting event controlling outcomes—at least for the winners. It is less clear that God is at work in the path of nations and peoples. To put it another way, we Americans are big fans of a personal Jesus, but we seem to lack any sense of God's fundamental goodness, benevolence, or love expressed in a providential care for the natural

world, including the peoples of the earth. This loss of faith or confidence makes it difficult to resist the language of fear, which helps explain why so many citizens of the world's sole remaining super-power talk, organize, and vote as if we were literally under siege from our neighbors to the south. The recovery of a fuller notion of God's providence would aid in forming a more accurate interpretation of our circumstances and responsibilities. Such an interpretation would begin from a posture of confidence rather than fear and would discern that immigrants present our society not only with challenges but also with significant possibilities, which include not only the typical gifts of economic productivity and cultural ingenuity but also the immigrants' own faith or confidence in God's providential care. Might it be that this latest wave of immigrants is itself providential?

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