

ESSAY

Immigration Anxiety and Civil Religion in America

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Introduction

Donald Trump is not a friend of immigrants. From the moment he announced his presidential candidacy by declaring Mexican immigrants rapists and murderers all the way to the latest iteration of anti-immigrant policy to come out of the Trump White House—the disgraceful zero-tolerance policy that resulted in the separation of hundreds of immigrant families from their small children—Trump has shown a degree of consistency and focus on this matter that arguably has no match on any other policy front during his time in office. Yet, in his anti-immigrant stance, Trump is hardly alone. Instead, he has tapped into a significant segment of the American populace that shares his overall outlook on America and especially his hostility toward immigrants, a segment sizeable enough to elect him into office and sustain him there with unwavering support.

Significantly, evangelical Christians are among his strongest, most ardent supporters. It may be argued that no group has been more consistent or committed to Trump's views and policies, including on immigration, than white evangelicals. This is particularly jarring considering that by standing in support—whether through acquiescence or outright affirmation—of policy measures and legislative initiatives that are clearly anti-immigrant, evangelicals are running afoul of the biblical injunction to practice hospitality and welcome the stranger, much as Americans in general also run counter to their own collective heritage as a “nation of immigrants” whenever they deride immigration and immigrants in the manner that has become all too common in recent months.

Given the immigrant heritage of all non-indigenous Americans, why are they, and American evangelicals in particular, so reticent or even hostile when it comes to further immigration? The answer to this question no doubt has to do with political expediency, material concerns, and pocket-book issues related to economic trends and conditions, whether real or perceived. But I also suggest that it has to do in part with ideological concerns tied to American civil religion which, with its view of the American nation as the exceptional Chosen People of God on earth, inevitably leaves the American public torn between recognizing immigration as a key contributor to America's greatness on the one hand, and seeing immigration as the destructive force that ever threatens to bring America to its knees on the other.

Immigration Anxiety

America's troubled relationship with immigration dates back to the early days of the Republic. In the 1700s, Benjamin Franklin voiced concern that German immigrants were turning Pennsylvania into a German colony, to the disgust and dismay of the English dwellers. Catholic schools caused apprehension during the nineteenth century, as did Jewish distinctive dress in the early twentieth century, and as did the cultural ways of peoples from Asia and Latin America in the late 1900s and early 2000s. Language was always a sore spot, as illustrated by President Theodore Roosevelt a hundred years ago when he declared that "the men of German blood who have tried to be both Germans and Americans are no Americans at all, but traitors to America and tools and servants of Germany against America" (Portes and Rumbaut 2014:172). Although largely focused at present on the Spanish language and whether it has any place in the national discourse, the question of language is a key element in the long and much broader debate about what it means to be American. The case of Joey Vento, the small sandwich shop owner in Philadelphia who became the subject of national media attention and something of a *cause célèbre* after he hung a sign on his shop window demanding, "This is America. When Ordering Please Speak English" (Zucchini 2006), is instructive, as are state ballot initiatives seeking to outlaw bilingual education, and legislative attempts to pass a constitutional amendment declaring English the official language of the United States. If successful, this would ban the use of any foreign language in public business settings, and bring the nation closer to the monolingual ideal President Roosevelt had envisioned all those years ago.

Concerns over language and culture historically found parallels in the workplace, where anxiety over the notion that immigrants compete unfairly and take jobs away from the native-born has long haunted Americans. In hindsight, the infamous "Irish Need Not Apply" phrase of yesteryear looms as a reminder that even some of the groups which have now landed decidedly in the American mainstream also come from a history of exclusion and discrimination that was fueled in large part by worries over work opportunity. Particularly sharp during times of economic hardship, the perception is that immigrants not only do not (want to) assimilate, but they also fail to pay taxes or contribute their fair share to the economy, therefore they constitute an economic burden, and ultimately represent a national security risk. Although there is ample evidence to the contrary, this public perception casts immigration as a critical national problem demanding decisive political response.

In some instances, responses have taken the form of individual and localized efforts such as the self-appointed Minuteman Project, whose members have taken it upon themselves to patrol sections of the US-Mexican border in search of migrants attempting to cross into the United States illegally, and who see themselves as a patriotic line of defense against invading aliens. In other border areas of Arizona and California, town and county officials have sometimes resorted to constitutionally questionable procedures to round up and jail undocumented immigrants, while in New Jersey and Pennsylvania local mayors and town

councils have pushed for strict ordinances forbidding residents from renting or otherwise catering to undocumented immigrants.

Other responses have been more encompassing and philosophical. Some have called for a moratorium on immigration where borders are closed and all new immigration is suspended for an established period of time, ostensibly to allow the country to absorb the foreigners already here and ensure their full assimilation before any others are allowed in. The recent ban on individuals from certain designated countries entering the United States is telling in this context, as are the latest proposals to move away from long-established practices on family reunification protocols, and to put limits on benefits and privileges afforded to legal permanent residents.

Collectively, these manifestations of misgiving and mistrust denote a deep-seated sense of national vulnerability, a sort of siege mentality that sees in immigration a clear and present danger to the American nation and its way of life. While the most extreme forms of this mindset are not representative of all Americans, it finds resonance with large segments of the public who in their reservations about, if not objections to, immigration may be vulnerable to conspiracy theories presaging the demise of America. This state of affairs is important to the extent that it speaks to a broad public disposition or response to immigration. Significantly, although it may be fairly generalized, this perception is not borne out by empirical evidence.

Indeed, while anxiety over immigration is entrenched in the American psyche, it finds little support in the objective record of the American immigrant experience. From the building of the American nation and economy to the symbolic rise of the United States as a global political, military, and cultural force, newcomers and their descendants have played pivotal roles every step of the way, infusing the country with resilience, tolerance, energy, and strength to deal successfully with whatever challenges might confront it, whether regarding language, religion, economic hardship, or national integrity. Despite all the concern over language, for instance, and the threat that Spanish presumably represents, the evidence shows that English language acquisition among immigrant children today is happening *faster* than ever before, and by the third generation languages of origin have faded away and English reigns unchallenged (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Concerns over the motivations and loyalty of immigrants are similarly dispelled by the empirical record that shows them to be dependable contributors and willing participants in America's economic growth and prosperity. In Philadelphia, immigrants represented nearly three-quarters of labor force growth in the period between 2000 and 2006, while nationally immigrants are major contributors to steady population growth and stability, shielding the United States from the specter of population contraction that is afflicting industrialized economies in Europe and elsewhere. Indeed, empirical studies, including from the National Academy of Sciences (2007) and the White House Council of Economic Advisers (2017), have found that contrary to widespread perception, immigrants are an important

contributor to the growth of the national economy, and positively impact the income of American workers.

Civil Religion and Immigration Anxiety

All in all, an objective assessment of immigration as a social phenomenon hardly supports the wariness or even hostility with which much of the American public approaches it. How, then, do we make sense of this attitude? I propose that alongside immediate factors such as concern about jobs and livelihoods, competition and mobility, belonging and identity, entitlement and fairness, and so on, a key additional contributor to America's outlook on immigration is American civil religion and its unique conception of the nation and its place in the world.

As conceptualized fifty years ago by Robert Bellah, American civil religion refers to a "transcendent universal religion of the nation" framed by a collection of beliefs, practices, and symbols of a sacred character that permeated American culture, and cast the American experience in terms of ultimate meaning (1967:12). It carried recognizable Christian overtones such as the biblical motifs of the Exodus, Chosen People, Sacrificial Death, and Promised Land, but was essentially a secular religion whose elements were dispersed throughout the landscape of American experience: from sacred texts and symbols (the Constitution; the Declaration of Independence; the flag) to religious rituals (Presidential Inaugural Addresses; Memorial Day Celebrations), sacred spaces (the National Cemetery; the Vietnam Memorial), prophets, and martyrs.

Despite its Christian overtones, American civil religion was not explicitly Christian or biblical, but rather secular, non-sectarian, and separate from both church and the state. As a collection of beliefs and practices about the American nation, it both sustained and sanctioned America's sense of nationhood, morality, and purpose, functioning as a social glue or cohesive force in a way that no single denominational tradition could claim to do in the diverse religious marketplace of the United States.

The culmination of these sacred beliefs about the nation was a sense of divine anointment and mission which rendered America exceptional among the nations not only as God's chosen people but as the instrument of God's work in the world. Famously articulated by President Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address and reiterated nearly universally by his successors thereafter, the notion of America's exceptionalism and divine favor not only harkens back to the Puritans and their claim of a special covenant whereby God's blessing would be granted as reward for obedient faithfulness, but also points to a divine purpose to bring about redemption of all peoples and peace on earth.

By internalizing through civil religion this sense of a special covenant with God and a special mission among the nations, Americans came to understand themselves as God's Chosen People, and their country as the land of God's favor on whom God's grace is shed, and to whom

a sacred mission is given to be, as Bellah put it, “a light to all the nations” (1967:18). From President Ronald Reagan underscoring that James Madison in the Federalist Papers framed the founding of America as the handiwork of the Almighty (UPI 1984), to President George W. Bush’s appeal to a national moral duty to defend the freedom that is “the Almighty God’s gift to each man and woman in this world” (Goodstein 2004), to President Barack Obama’s declaration that America’s source of strength is “the knowledge that God calls on [her] to shape an uncertain destiny” (*New York Times* 2009), all follow in the footsteps of John F. Kennedy in articulating this national sense of divine blessing and sacred mission.

This social construction of America as God’s Chosen People is of significant consequence to the nation’s self-perception and its own sense of stability and wholesomeness—because once it is established, to defile the nation or tarnish it in any way is tantamount to defying God’s sovereign will and plan for His people to be His instrument on earth. And to the extent that immigration is perceived as endangering America’s well-being, it becomes something to be resisted and opposed rather than embraced or valued. If immigrants take jobs away from native-born Americans, overburden the social safety net with their demands for services, fail to pay their fair share through taxes and other contributions, are disinterested in learning the English language and American cultural ways, and commit robberies, rapes, and murders that traumatize Americans, then immigrants are not only engaging in behaviors and attitudes that are antithetical to the fabric of the nation, they are tarnishing the sacred core of America’s *raison-d’être*, and compromising America’s ability to carry out its God-ordained mission in this world. No matter that these generalized perceptions do not align with empirical reality. They individually and collectively contribute to what at best is passive handwringing over the continued arrival of immigrants, and at worst is open hostility toward newcomers that can range from active denigration to outright violence.

Conclusion

It is striking that in this nation of immigrants, many Americans have remained staunch supporters of President Trump’s overtly anti-immigrant policies, and puzzling that conservative white evangelicals in particular have remained largely on the sidelines, even as the tragedy of families separated by the United States Federal Government and migrant children warehoused away from their parents continues to unfold before our eyes. Both groups likely owe their positions in some part to a sense that in the final analysis, immigration represents a threat to dislodge America from its preeminent place as the leading nation on earth, or to smother the putative heritage of Christian America that for many evangelicals is foundational to their individual and collective self-understanding as believers. The understanding of and consequent response to immigration by American evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike are at least in part informed by American civil religion.

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