

## Embracing The Stranger: Hispanics, American Christianity, And Immigration

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**Abstract:** American Christian churches have responded to the current Latino immigration across the U.S.-Mexico border in fundamentally two ways. On the one hand, the so-called “Christian Right,” intentionally and unintentionally feeds perceptions of Latino immigrants as suspicious and even dangerous. On the other hand, there are Catholic and Protestant theologians and laity who see the Christian church as being duty-bound to the stranger and alien, regardless of legal status. This paper explores how both these attitudes derive from and play into historical American ambivalence toward immigrants in general and the role the American Christian churches have played in dealing with the alien. American Christianity’s role as protector of and provider for immigrants must be preserved so that the nation not lose its moral compass nor its potential for future growth and prosperity..

### Introduction

In 2000 a book entitled *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* was widely read by Christian instructors of foreign languages. The authors argued that the work of a foreign language instructor in a Christian setting has to necessarily go beyond the conjugation of verbs and an occasional festive nod to such visible cultural phenomena, in my case as a Spanish professor, as Mexican *sarapes* or Spanish *paella*.

The authors Smith and Carvill remind their Christian readers that there is a biblical mandate throughout the Christian Bible to show kindness to the alien and stranger and that, by incorporating this biblical mandate in our teaching, we deepen students’ experience of the language they are learning by using it as an open window into the daily experiences of the speakers of that language, whether they reside in their native land or in the United States. The incorporation of hospitality into the foreign language and culture curriculum can serve as an antidote to long-standing American fears surrounding the alien, particularly the one living in one’s own neighborhood. In this sense, hospitality to the stranger, as Smith and Carvill put it, is “an overarching metaphor and spiritual virtue in foreign language education.” (82)

One could go a step further to say that this overarching metaphor extends to the American Christian church and its members as they participate in the current debate surrounding these most recent immigrants from over the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>1</sup> That there are Christians who heartily agree as well as disagree with showing kindness and generosity to the alien, will be seen as we look at the attitudes of American Christians toward the Latino immigrant.

In the United States where I was born and raised by Christian Latino immigrant parents, Christians are living the challenge of dealing with the alien, particularly the immigrant alien from just across the U.S.-Mexico border. Torn between concepts of national identity, national security, and isolationism, fueled by fear inspired by historic nativism and the more recent threat

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf finds that the American world in which he lives is growing in “gracelessness.” For Volf, this absence of generosity that he observes in this country is an outgrowth of a pervasive popular philosophy based on the aphorism: If you give, you lose (2005, 14). He decries a society of “takers” and calls on Americans not only to be recipients, but “channels” to benefit the weak (Ibid., 59-60). In his study on American social renewal, Wuthnow finds a similar breakdown in American “deep culture,” that is, in the assumptions that affect American identity and attitudes toward its growing pluralism. In his chapter entitled “Self-Made Men and Women,” he concludes that “Morality is never sufficiently understood if it means ‘to thine own self be true,’ and nothing more” (2006, 127)

of terrorism, American Christians have become divided among those who would associate true patriotism with resistance and even hostility toward this alien and those Christians who belong to a longer tradition of providing “sanctuary” for these newcomers to the U.S. Armed with the justification of “illegality” provided by American immigration laws that no longer serve the interests either of Mexico or the U.S., certain Christians, whether clergy or laity, have made these “illegal aliens” the target of the most vitriolic and contrived accusations of labor market subterfuge, undermining of American culture, and criminality, leaving other Christians either uncertain or silent in their response to such rhetoric and yet others, determined to uphold the American Christian church’s historic role as protector and provider for newly-arrived immigrants.

For Morris Dees, founder/director of the Southern Poverty Law Center (hereafter SPLC), a human rights watchdog organization, the current acrimonious tone of the debate surrounding Latino immigration is nothing less than a test of the American spirit. He states that the Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that hate crimes against Latinos have risen by 35% and Center investigators have confirmed that 888 hate groups are now active in America, almost a 59% rise in their numbers since the year 2000.<sup>2</sup> In Attorney Dees words, “This unprecedented growth is the result of an escalating anti-immigrant fervor that is contaminating our nation’s very soul.” (2008, 3) He continues: “While people of good will can have different opinions about our nation’s immigration policy, hatred, racism, and violence should have no place in the debate.” (Ibid.)

This paper attempts to address the following questions: What are the moral implications of the current immigration debate for American Christian churches, organizations, and individuals? What are the attitudes of American Christians toward this most recent immigration? What role are/should Christian churches play in addressing issues brought up in this debate?

### **Mexico’s Unique Migration**

Although Mexicans share with other immigrants many points in common, the history of immigration from Mexico has, nevertheless, been quite a unique one, dating back to when more than a third of what is now the Southwestern United States actually belonged to Mexico. When the Puritans arrived on our northeastern shores in 1620, the Spaniards still owned the area of the U.S. formed today by the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. Spanish, was spoken widely in this area called northern New Spain up until the Independence of Mexico from Spanish rule in 1810.

Later, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848 and Mexico lost these territories, the coming and going across the newly established border continued because the Treaty provided that Mexican citizens living in the former New Spain should continue to enjoy full property rights (See *Treaty*, articles VIII and IX). However, the American government slowly took over these lands from Mexican citizens living in these areas and the attitude of Americans toward Mexicans who, from this time forward would be “guests,” began a trajectory ranging from reluctant acceptance to outright rejection together with an overall ambivalence

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<sup>2</sup> Brentin Mock of the SPLC (2007) lists a series of hate crimes experienced not only by Mexicans, but by Cubans, Ecuadorians, Central Americans, and American-born Latinos, ranging from property damage to murder. The case of Esequiel Hernández documented in the film “The Ballad of Esequiel Hernández” relates the case of Esequiel Hernández who was shot and killed by U.S. Marines while he was caring for his family’s goats, armed with a .22 rifle to keep the wild dogs away: (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2008/ballad/about.html>). Although the case is still being investigated and is not listed as a hate crime, it reveals the dangers of using military personnel to enforce domestic law, particularly in the current climate of Latino bashing.

arising from economic necessity, on either side of the border, and fears of what some have characterized as a new Latino “Reconquista” or Reconquest (Kennedy 1996, 5).

The reasons for Latino immigration have coincided with those of other groups of immigrants that have come to our shores: 1) civil and/or political unrest (the 1960s refugee immigration from Communist Cuba and the 1980s rush from war-torn Central America) and 2) economic distress. The more recent immigration over the U.S.-Mexico border, however, is due to a complexity of factors, mostly economic. And the resulting numbers in which Latinos are arriving have alarmed certain sectors of the American public as well as the American Christian church. Although studies indicate that every immigrant group will assimilate by the second or third generation,<sup>3</sup> the recent flow of immigrants from “a single cultural, linguistic, religious, and national source” (Kennedy 1996, 15) has set Mexican immigration apart from other groups in its ability to produce what no other immigration has succeeded in doing, to this extent, in the past: the creation of significant, widespread social unrest.<sup>4</sup> Whether due to political framing of this immigration or media hype, there is an unusually widespread malaise surrounding this particular immigration. To be sure, concentrated largely in California and Texas, two of the most economically and politically influential states, Latinos from all over Latin America, but mainly from Mexico, constitute 28% of the population in Texas and 31% of California’s. California holds nearly half of the U.S. Hispanic population and more than half of the population of the Mexican-born population in the entire country (Kennedy 1996, 15). However, U.S. history with Mexico and Latin America make these numbers logical rather than alarming.

The impression of being overrun by immigrants<sup>5</sup> has to do with the fact that most of the recent immigrants to the U.S. settle in just six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. It is also related, as pointed out earlier, to 9/11 and fears related to historic discomfort with U.S.-Mexico border immigration. As for the border immigration specifically into California and Texas, one might wonder if the prosperity and influence of these two powerful states can be attributed, at least in part, to immigrant labor from and through Mexico. That was the compelling thesis of Sergio Arau’s 2004 controversial film, “A Day Without a

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<sup>3</sup> One of the concerns expressed by anti-immigration proponents is that the flood of Spanish-speaking immigrants will not learn English and that, along with keeping their language and culture, they will reduce the influence of English as the *lingua franca* of the U.S. In a survey sponsored by the Pew Hispanic Center (12/06/07), it was found that fewer than one-in-four (23%) Latino immigrants reported being able to speak English very well, but that fully 88% of their U.S.-born adult children spoke it very well or fluently. Among later generations, the figure rises to 94% and reading ability shows a similar trend. See Suro and Escobar, 2006 National Survey of Latinos: The Immigration Debate.

Rhys Williams underscores the fact that immigrants come to this country with some citizenship skills already in place and that these skills inevitably contribute to the assimilation process. Another factor that makes assimilation inexorable is the globalization of American culture: “Recent discussions of globalization and American imperialism testify to the shaping power of American culture, even among people who have not yet emigrated—implying that some significant adaptation to U.S. society has begun even before an immigrant’s arrival.” (Williams 2007, 16)

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brimelow’s book argues that the 1965 Immigration Act has not allowed the country “a pause for digestion,” (Brimelow 19) that is, a reduction in immigration that would allow for assimilation (particularly of Hispanics), which Brimelow seems to believe is not happening, at least not fast enough to ensure, in his opinion, the preservation of a predominantly white America. Is this what America wants?, he asks, contributing to the sense of fear that we are witnessing the demise of an empire by tolerating an invasion of non-whites. For a more even-handed treatment of American immigrants and immigration, see Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*.

<sup>5</sup> Massey et al point out that, although the current immigration “crisis” has its roots in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there is no statistical evidence showing that undocumented migration was accelerating at that time: “What did change was how political and bureaucratic actors framed the issue” (2002, 84). See Chapter 4, “System Specifications: Empirical Parameters and Constants in the U.S.-Mexican Immigration System 1965 to 1985.”

Mexican.” It is also the premise which many Christian individuals and organizations use to bolster their role in advocating for and protecting the border immigrant, a role they consider derives not only from American economic realities, but from the Christian Bible and Christian teachings.

### **American Ambivalence toward The Immigrant**

Christian attitudes to Mexican immigrants belong to the larger context of America’s historically conflictive views of immigrants in general. On the one hand, when the nation was in need of growth, such notable voices as that of Abraham Lincoln, on proclaiming Thanksgiving Day as a national holiday, thanked God for having “largely augmented our free population by emancipation and by immigration” (Kennedy 1996, 1). Immigrants, from this perspective, were hardworking, noble, and freedom-loving peoples whose blood ran through the veins of true Americans. This view of immigrants would generally persist up until the 1960s when immigration began to come in large numbers from developing nations in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

On the opposite side of the “noble immigrant,” there arose another immigrant in the national imagination, one that elicited suspicion and disdain. This immigrant arose in the context of the phenomenon of “nativism.” Nativism, understood as any form of antipathy towards aliens, their institutions (including churches), and ideas (Higham 1988, 3), began to take on racist elements in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in response to new immigrations not only from Eastern and Southern Europe, but from Asia and Mexico. Originally linked to anti-Catholicism among the early Puritan settlers, American nativism soon became tied to nationalism in the years leading up to the Civil War. As John Higham puts it, whether it was a “workingman or a Protestant evangelist, a southern conservative or a northern reformer,” (Ibid., 4) nativism was associated with the incipient national identity. Eventually nativism expanded to include fear of foreign radicals (Ibid., 7) and disdain for non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups (Ibid., 9). At first, the affirmation of Anglo-Saxon roots was a form of distinguishing the new nation from others, but soon it turned into a way of determining who was a “true” American.

In the post Civil War era, what Higham calls “Anglo-Saxonism” became a kind of “patrician nationalism” which he attributes to social climbing during the Gilded Age and its accompanying pride of ancestry (Higham 1988, 32). Even so, Anglo Saxonism still welcomed the immigrant because it was believed that Americans had the remarkable ability to assimilate peoples from a wide range of racial origins. By the 1880s, the ingenuous conception of America as a homogenous culture begins to give way to the creation of an immigration “problem” among certain social critics who gave “intellectual respectability to anti-immigrant feelings” (Ibid., 39). And it was a Christian clergyman, Josiah Strong, who sent out the first and most telling salvo in this battle. In his book *Our Country*, Strong focused on the perils of class strife in the cities and led his readers to believe that immigration was contributing to the impending struggle between the rich and the poor (Ibid.). Well-meaning promoters of the Social Gospel and other reformers of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued to equate poverty with immigrants and underscore immigrant threats to national homogeneity. With the preparedness and hyphenate movements during WWI and the new push to conformity linked to nationalism, America confirmed the reticent, even hostile positions it would take with immigrations from Mexico and other developing countries in subsequent years.

### **American-Mexican Economics and Border Immigration**

Before identifying the two veins of Christian attitudes toward the recent immigration, it is important to note what Massey, Durand, and Malone point out: “Public sentiment against immigrants has generally oscillated in tandem with expansionary and recessionary times and in conjunction with broader ideological currents” (Massey 2002, 8). Indeed, one may wonder what effects American economic policies in the Western Hemisphere have had on this latest flood of immigration from Mexico and how these policies have affected, in particular, the work of Christian groups working to protect Mexican immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

In his work at the U.S.-Mexico border, Fr. Daniel Groody finds that economics play a major role in the current immigration from and through Mexico (Groody 2002, 16). In 1983, the devaluation of the Mexican peso triggered an explosion of foreign-owned factories, called “maquiladoras,” along the Mexican side of the border. American companies, taking advantage of the favorable exchange rate, moved their assembly plants to Mexico in pursuit of cheap labor. On the Mexico side, hundreds of thousands of Mexican citizens, most of whom had lost their lands to Mexican agricultural policies, rushed to the border to work. In more recent years more than a quarter of these plants have closed, seeking ever cheaper labor in Asia and creating a crisis of unemployment and underemployment in those border towns that has helped to feed this latest wave of immigration.<sup>7</sup> The response of the U.S. to this influx of undocumented as well as documented immigrants was a series of so-called “operations” during the 1990s. “Operation Hold the Line” in El Paso, Texas and “Operation Gatekeeper” in San Diego. The increasing militarization of the border meant to deter this immigration has only succeeded in redirecting the paths of immigrants through more dangerous territory, creating a moral dilemma for Christians on either side of the border, due to the resulting increase in migrant deaths.

The 1990s saw yet another economic factor that has indirectly contributed to the current flow of immigration from Mexico, i.e., the North American Free Trade Agreement, that some suggest has contributed, at least in part, to the desperation with which Mexican urban-campesinos and small farmers are leaving Mexico and Central American countries. Roger Bybee and Carolyn Winter published an article in which they lay out some of the ruinous effects of NAFTA on Mexico’s economy and labor market (2006, 1-2). For example, by permitting heavily-subsidized U.S. corn and other agri-business products to compete with small Mexican farmers, the latter have been driven off their lands because they cannot compete with the low-priced imports of agricultural products. Some have fled to Mexico City and other large urban areas in Mexico or have formed part of the recent wave of migration to the north.

Again, NAFTA allowed huge service-sector firms, such as Wal-Mart, to enter the Mexican market and sell low-priced goods made by even cheaper labor in China, displacing local shoe, toy, and candy firms (Bybee and Winter 2006, 1). According to the authors, some 28,000 small and medium-sized businesses have been eliminated. They cite a Carnegie Endowment study that has revealed that wages along the Mexican border have been driven down by 25%, due to an oversupply of workers and government policies that work against union

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<sup>6</sup> Borjas made the point in 1996 that, whatever decision the U.S. makes about reforming its immigration policy, the decision will be based on “our values and ideology,” not on pure economics. For Borjas, the current debate seems to be between those who would gain by immigration and those who would lose. The moral travesty of such a debate is what certain Christians are addressing through their work on immigrant rights.

<sup>7</sup> Groody cites a 1994 study indicating that 27.5% of Mexican immigrants came to the United States due to a lack of steady jobs and livable wages (Endnote #11, 2002, 34)

organization. The poverty created by the inability of Mexicans in the border area to earn living wages in the few American-owned *maquiladoras* that still exist has been exacerbated by environmental pollution, congestion, unacceptable living conditions (cardboard shacks and open sewers), and a lack of resources, such as police and street lights, to deal with the crime wave affecting young women working in the factories, itself, perhaps, the unforeseen social effects of NAFTA: the social inversion of wage-earners in the Mexican family and its impact on traditional male-female roles.<sup>8</sup> In Ciudad Juárez where Americans have large numbers of low-wage plants and where they do not pay even minimal taxes, the mayor of the city, Gustavo Elizondo stated in 2006: “We have no way to provide water, sewage, and sanitation workers. Every year, we get poorer and poorer even though we create more and more wealth” (Ibid).

Currently the wage differential between the American and Mexican blue-collar workers is ten to one (Groody 2002, note 12, 34) , and the Mexican unemployment rate hovers around 40%. Groody’s contacts with Mexican heads of household have confirmed that the decision to emigrate is not taken lightly and that, on the contrary, the decision grows out of desperate economic conditions, making the dangerous flight to the north preferable to deplorable conditions at home.

### **The American Christian Church and The Latino Immigrant**

Where, then, does the American church figure in this historical tug-of-war with the Mexican immigrant? It can be stated that the first American institution was the church. Civic life grew out of the values and mores of the Spanish-sponsored Catholic church on the west and southwest of the U.S. and English-based Puritanism and Catholicism on the east coast. Joseph M. Palacios observes that the first step of integration into American life for the immigrant is through the church. It is here that the immigrant acquires what Palacios calls “precitizenship” skills and participates in precitizenship activities that will eventually allow him/her to participate in American public life.<sup>9</sup> The church gives the immigrant “a social location for worship, education, culture, ethnic identity, social welfare, recreation, and friendship” (Palacios 2007, 76).

This observation is consistent with the role the Christian church has always played in our country. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo concurs that American churches and synagogues have always served as “schools” for training in civic skills and action (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 4). The author reminds us that many American socio-political movements began and were sustained by the church: abolition, prohibition, civil rights. Over the years the Christian church, Catholic and Protestant, has been a bastion of community action, volunteerism, and social justice work extending its work to the homeless, environmentalism, and peace and justice issues (Ibid., 5 ).

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<sup>8</sup> See Olivia Ruiz Marrujo, in *Perilous Journey*, 225-239 where she presents some of the factors on both sides of the border that contribute to sexual violence against Latinas. Ciudad Juárez has been the site of female homicides since 1993. Amnesty International has demanded protection and justice for Mexican attorneys and activists who are probing into this rash of murders directed against young women, ages 12 to 22. See <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGUSA20070628006>

<sup>9</sup> Using Saul Alinsky’s community organizing model, Palacios suggests a model for faith-based community organizing as a social justice cultural system for newly-arrived immigrants. Ebaugh and Chafetz find that a major motivation for immigrants to create or join culturally-familiar congregations is to 1) enjoy companionship with others of similar ethnic background and 2) to develop social networks that will facilitate integration into the new society. Language usage as a means of preserving their cultural heritage is yet another way in which the church provides a safe place to both preserve the familiar and integrate into the unfamiliar (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2007, 80 and 100-119).

Furthermore, the U.S. has a proud history of Christian churches intervening to correct injustices perpetrated against immigrants. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American Christian missionaries who returned from China became advocates for Chinese migrant workers and the Social Gospel influenced early 20<sup>th</sup> century Progressive reform movements such as the Jane Addam's settlement house movement for immigrant slum dwellers and factory workers. During the 1890s Bishop Scalabrini who had established centers for émigrés to the United States in his native Italy also championed their cause in the United States and Latin America (Ibid., 9).

### **The Christian Right**

Despite its history of caretaking for newcomers, the influence of nativism has also been a constant in the American Christian church's attitudes toward immigrants, which may explain why the American Christian church has also supported, either by its voice or by its silence, institutions of injustice, such as slavery, the persecution of ethnic groups, and the exploitation of ethnic minorities by American businesses and corporations at home and abroad.

In more recent years, this historical relationship between the American Christian church and American nativism has been evidenced in the work of the so-called Christian Right. These Christians with their civic and political skills honed, have more aggressively entered the public square to protest what they perceive to be a lowering of America's moral guard, mainly in areas relating to human sexuality: abortion and homosexuality. As early as 1948 with the movement of fundamentalist Christianity to the South and West of the country, figures such as Strom Thurmond, Jesse Helms, and Phil Gramm, formerly of the Dixiecrats, moved into the Republican Party as socially conservative segregationists and populists. Tapping into the racial nativist roots of this influx of Southern politicians, Republican Christian activism would add race to the card it would play from now on.

With the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Acts and Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" campaign that played on racial fears, even more defections of Southern Democrats to the Republican Party strengthened the hand of the Christian Right. Eventually, it would be Jerry Falwell who, in 1979, would galvanize this movement into what he called the Moral Majority, considered to be the beginning of the New Christian Right. With the triumph of Ronald Reagan's run for the presidency supported by the Christian Right, the latter has increasingly seen itself as having a central role, not only in American political life, but in contesting market and state institutions (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 5). Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, strongly politicized this branch of American Christianity by distributing voter guides and using the pulpit to promote political candidates.

It has been the principle of the separation of church and state in the U.S. that has allowed for the coexistence of the wide variety of religions practiced on American soil to this day. However, with the increasingly aggressive role of Christian church leaders in the political sphere during the 1970s and 1980s, taking strong positions within the Republican Party against abortion and homosexuality and later joined by the white evangelical push for anti-gay legislation, this branch of American Christianity has mixed the discourse of morality with traditional nativist/racist ideology and applied it to Latino immigration, presenting the latter as a growing danger to the American way of life. This politicized Christianity with its anti-immigration message has been picked up in recent years by such strident media voices as Lou Dobbs, Ann Coulter, Pat Buchanan, and by such groups as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum and erstwhile presidential candidate, Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo, to mention but a few. In this rhetoric, these Christian voices, fanning the flames of historic American fears surrounding the foreigner, seem

to be moving further and further away from biblical teachings about Christian duty toward the stranger and alien in our midst.

For example, in 2004 James C. Russell complained of the “current universalist tendencies” of many Christian churches in the U.S. and attributed this open-heartedness of American Christianity to illegal immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border to “a deliberate effort by liberal intellectuals working within the churches to dismantle the traditional Western socio-religious order and replace it with a multicultural, socialist utopia, bound together by a secular religion of universal brotherhood” (Russell 2004, 8). He goes on to assert that this agenda of dismantling hierarchical and authoritarian Christianity has not only created havoc in “all Protestant and Catholic congregations,” but “the disruption of the spirituality and morality of European and American Christians” (Ibid., 8). This “spiritual generosity,” says Russell, has weakened the American Christian church and left our nation vulnerable to invasions of spurious ideologies and peoples whose religions and cultural habits threaten the very fabric of white American values and lifestyle. Russell’s insistence on isolating America from further immigration, particularly from non-white nations, takes him down the road of making the improbable connection between biblically-legitimate Christian beliefs about the alien and Communist notions he has come to believe have infiltrated not only the Christian religions of America, but the American public in general.<sup>10</sup>

Another recent example of race-based “solutions” to the immigration crisis can be found in Pat Buchanan’s book, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America*, a runaway bestseller in 2006, garnering Mr. Buchanan much media attention. In this book Buchanan, an American Christian thought leader and former presidential candidate, proclaims that America is experiencing “the greatest invasion in history” (Buchanan 2006, 5) and that this invasion is “one of the greatest tragedies in human history” (Ibid., 5). He further asserts that the Mexican government is involved in a plot (he calls it the “Aztlán plot”) to take over the Southwestern United States. Another argument set forth in this book is that the American nation was not founded on creeds, but on ethnic homogeneity and that to lose the dominance of whites is to lose the ideals and institutions that made America what it is. That same year, in a review of this book, the SPLC characterized Buchanan’s book as nothing but a “white nationalist tract” (Zaitchik 2006).

More recently there are indications that such radical positions are losing favor with the American public and even within the ranks of the Republican Party. For example, in June of 2008, Chris Cannon of Utah was being interviewed on the Lou Dobbs show, lamenting Cannon’s loss of his House of Representatives seat due to his anti-immigration stance. In that same month, in a letter to John McCain, U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo, a Colorado Republican known for his outspoken views against immigration, chastised the presumed Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, for meeting with Hispanic leaders and promising them comprehensive immigration reform, including amnesty for the 20 million illegal aliens already in the U.S. The position Tancredo represents demands that no immigration reforms should take place until the

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<sup>10</sup> Such biblical passages as those found in Acts 2:44-45, referring to the early Christian church can easily and wrongly be linked to Communist doctrines surrounding the ownership of property: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Sharing what one has in order to benefit those who have not is one of the most fundamental Christian teachings of the New Testament. Russell would have us believe that to do what Christians are mandated to do (which he sees as a weakness) is a form of Communist infiltration. What Russell implies by American Christianity’s “breach of faith” is that Christians and Christian churches that are fulfilling their Christian duty should be seen not only as untrue to the Christian faith, but as enemies of the state.

borders are secured, a position that supports the further militarization of the border and has contributed to the creation of such vigilante groups as the Minutemen and other self-appointed civilian border watchmen and women<sup>11</sup> The fact that McCain addressed the National Council of La Raza in June of 2008 in his bid for the presidency reveals that the Republican Party and the so-called Christian Right are very much at odds on this issue. What seems most evident is that hard-line positions toward Latino immigrants may do more harm to these conservative Christians' political aspirations than good. It will, in fact, take nothing less than the best efforts and the good will of *all* Christians to deal with the current immigration challenges.<sup>12</sup>

### **The New Christian Voice**

Historically, religion has conflicted with nationalism and national interests in at least two ways: 1) representatives of the state have perceived religion as a threat to the nation and 2) church-based movements have acted against the state to protect human lives.<sup>13</sup> The latter role of American churches in protecting human lives during the 1970s and 80s with the Sanctuary Movement is a case in point. While the U.S. was sending arms to El Salvador and Guatemala to ostensibly fight Communist insurgents, government military in these two Central American countries were slaughtering civilians who began to flee their countries for political reasons. The U.S. did suspend economic relations with El Salvador after the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980 and the assassination of four U.S. nuns later that same year (Nawyn 2007, 142), but the American government was reluctant to criticize a government it was supporting militarily.

Meanwhile, Liberation theologians in the U.S. joined forces with those of El Salvador and Guatemala to form the Sanctuary movement to provide refuge in American Christian churches for illegal immigrant-refugees. This "illegal" action on the part of Christian churches

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<sup>11</sup> Members of TechnoPatriots, a self-appointed group of what could only be characterized as armchair border vigilantes (they, in fact, call themselves "armchair warriors"), were recently featured in our local newspaper, *The Press-Enterprise*. Jon Healy, cofounder of this organization is pictured with a laptop computer and digital camera to track the movements of illegal immigrants from his home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Other such civilian-based Internet groups mentioned in the article include the American Border Patrol (not to be confused with the U.S. Border Patrol) and a California chapter of the Minuteman organization. To their credit, these groups charge a fee for membership and carefully interview applicants to weed out racists and other undesirables. Even so, the use of military terminology such as "armchair warriors" suggests that the mindset of these, no doubt, well-meaning Americans, is that we are at war with Mexico and Mexicans. The post-9/11 rhetoric of the war on terrorism seems to have merged with a new "war" on Latino immigrants.

<sup>12</sup> In an effort to bring together the two governments, Dr. Juan Hernández, founder/director of the Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, and liaison between the Bush and Fox administrations, was instrumental in the development of the 2002 U.S.-Mexico Partnership for Prosperity signed by Presidents Bush and Fox, aimed at promoting economic development "in the parts of Mexico where growth has lagged and fueled migration." According to Hernández, "[T]hey [the two presidents] launched the Partnership for Prosperity, a private-public alliance to harness the power of the private sector to foster an environment in which no Mexican feels compelled to leave his home for lack of jobs or opportunity." (Hernández 2006, 191, Appendix #3). What is worthy of note is that, of the nineteen partnership initiatives listed in the U.S. Embassy's Mexico website, only four directly address the needs of the Mexican working poor who would most likely emigrate.

<sup>13</sup> In relation to the Christian church's historic role as protector of newcomers, Stephanie J. Nawyn lays out the constructs of what she calls "an interfaith ethic of refuge." The Jewish and Christian organizations that currently resettle immigrants do so based on strikingly similar bases: "showing hospitality to the stranger, providing refuge to the cast-out, and honoring the rights of human beings regardless of national boundaries." (Nawyn 2007, 141) Kurtz and Filton underscore the historic "culture of moral resistance" that the Protestant churches have nurtured: "The tension between the poles of advocacy and criticism is at the core of mainline [Protestantism's] involvement in U.S. foreign policy" (365)

was given legitimacy when the American Baptist Church sued the Immigration and Naturalization Service, thereby successfully pressuring the federal government to offer Temporary Extended Status to Salvadorans (Ibid.).<sup>14</sup>

In response, no doubt, to the hard-line and outright unbiblical positions commonly taken by the most vocal Christian Right, what I call the “New Christian Voice,” is beginning to be heard and felt. Not nearly as well-organized nor politicized as the Christian Right, but certainly gaining momentum, this new Christian coalition made up of Catholic theologians and church leaders, Protestant churches, and inter-faith organizations<sup>15</sup> is calling on Christian churches and members to guide their attitudes toward the alien by Christian Scripture, rather than by protectionist postures. While powerful voices in the Christian Right condemn the “welfare state” they perceive Latino immigration is creating, the New Christian Voice remind their Christian counterparts that the Bible calls on Christians to provide for the poor and be a voice for those who have none.

Proponents within this New Christian Voice believe that, if Christians are going to engage in the world as Christians, they must do so informed by the tenets laid out in the Old Testament and in the teachings of Jesus. In Leviticus 19:33-34 Christians who see themselves as the New Israel, grafted on to the trunk of Judaism, understand that “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” Under the laws of justice and mercy listed in Exodus 22 and 23, Christians learn that they must not oppress the alien: “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.” (23:9). Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5-7 is yet another even more compelling call to Christian modes of exercising justice and mercy. The Beatitudes place God’s blessing on the “poor in spirit,” the hungry and thirsty, and the persecuted. The call is to love even one’s enemies (Matt. 5:44). The Sermon on the Mount invokes such high moral and ethical living that even Christians wonder if it’s meant to be practiced in this world of sin. Nevertheless, the call is clear: Christians cannot stand by while the weak are trampled under foot and the poor are exploited. They are to love their neighbor as they love themselves (Matt. 22:39) and practice the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12). Matt. 25:31-56 presents yet another motivation for Christian practices of mercy: the Parable of the Final Judgment where the saved and the damned are separated on the basis of their willingness or unwillingness to show compassion toward the poor and destitute.

These and similar biblical injunctions found throughout the Christian Bible serve as the core of what some Catholic and Protestant theologians are calling the “Theology of Immigration.” Fr. Daniel Groody, director of the Center for Latino Spirituality and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, belongs to a group of Catholic scholars who have found in Latino immigration a *locus theologicus* that brings together ideas surrounding the poor, derived from Latin American Liberation theology and the works of Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino. Ellacuría compares European and Latin American theology and finds that, while the former cultivates a theological discourse more interested in the understanding of meaning, the latter’s objective is “the transformation of reality, and of humankind within reality” (Campese 2007,

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<sup>14</sup> See the American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh (ABC) Settlement Agreement [www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543fd1a/?vgnextoid=86d796981298d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1RCRD&vgnnextchannel=2492db65022ee010VgnVCM1000000ecd190aRCRD](http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543fd1a/?vgnextoid=86d796981298d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1RCRD&vgnnextchannel=2492db65022ee010VgnVCM1000000ecd190aRCRD) for details on the lawsuit.

<sup>15</sup> For a listing of faith-based immigration websites, see [www.churchandimmigration.org/resources.htm](http://www.churchandimmigration.org/resources.htm)

179). The difference lies in Latin America's reality, one of oppression, poverty, exploitation, and violence. Any theology surrounding Latino immigration must realize the weight of that reality, take responsibility for it, and act on one's Christian duty toward that reality.<sup>16</sup>

Migration theology, according to Ellacuría, has to confront the negative in reality in order to transform it, which explains why theologians and pastoral personnel who subscribe to this view will as often be found serving food to the hungry and water to the thirsty as preaching a sermon. The second step requires taking responsibility for the ethical demands that grow out of the reality of migration: demands for justice, acceptance, and human dignity. When the U.S. claims to be a "nation of immigrants," the migration theologian expects that there will be sustained reflection on how that claim impinges on issues of social justice. Thirdly, this active theology is committed to addressing whatever threatens human dignity and rights of the immigrant as a living human being, made in the image of God. And, finally, this theology recognizes that the migrant experience is not simply one of suffering and marginalization, but of the hope and courage these immigrants bring to the nearly insurmountable obstacles they find on their journey to the life they are entitled to live as God's children (Ibid., 179-180). For the border immigrant those obstacles include having to make the initial decision to emigrate in order to provide a life of minimal dignity for himself and his family. It means breaking with family and with the familiar, crossing an inhospitable desert and facing the possibility of death, dealing with unpredictable *coyotes* and the Border Patrol and its detention centers, once on the other side. With the closing of the usual routes across the border, immigrants find themselves facing the dangers of more challenging routes through the desert: rattlesnakes, hunger and thirst, the implacable desert heat, suffocation in train cars and vans.

In the face of these realizations, these New Voice theologians ask: Who would give up so much and face such life-threatening obstacles, if the need were not legitimate? And if the conditions that create this desperate immigration have to do with systemic injustices, then it is the business of Christians to address both the results and the causes of these conditions (Groody 2002, 30).

Groody calls the U.S.-Mexico border "the border of death," not only because of the life-threatening challenges migrants must overcome to cross the border,<sup>17</sup> but because, once having crossed it, they face another kind of death: cultural, psychological, social, and emotional "death" as they move from belonging to non-belonging, from relational connectedness to separation (Ibid., 32). As he works directly with Mexican immigrants and hears their stories, Groody hears "echoes of the universal experience of suffering" (Ibid.) and in the journey of the suffering migrant, a kind of *via crucis*:

Through them we can glimpse hints of the hidden presence of God who lives with them on the margins of society. These immigrants are willing to descend into the depths of hell

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<sup>16</sup> Ellacuría's theology deals with Latino reality on three fronts: 1) "hacerse cargo de la realidad," that is, recognizing that reality by participating in it; 2) "encargarse de la realidad," or taking responsibility for that reality and understanding that this responsibility must necessarily lead to transformation of that reality; and 3) "dejarse cargar por la realidad," allowing that reality to move one to actions that contribute to transformation. See Campese 2007, 175-190. Similarly, other Catholic theologians, such as Roberto Goizueta with his "theology of accompaniment," seek to find a theology that grows out of the Hispanic immigrant's reality "on the ground," one that will reflect their experience and sustain them in their various journeys.

<sup>17</sup> In the film, *Dying to Live*, for example, the immigration realities on the ground become amply evident. The camera's focus is on families "rushing" the border in hopes of making it across. We're told that in Nicaragua and Guatemala the rate of unemployment is 70%, which explains why the Central American men pictured hanging on train cars and sleeping out in the open are willing to risk it all to gain a life of minimal dignity.

in the desert for the people they love so that they may have better lives. Within their particular stories of hunger, thirst, estrangement, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment we can begin to see the face of a crucified Christ...In their suffering, the immigrants reveal the hidden mystery of Christ today. (Ibid., 32-33)<sup>18</sup>

Although the Catholic church is furthest along in creating theologies that link the immigrant experience to biblical concepts of suffering and justice, other Christian churches are putting forth official statements that support compassionate actions toward the immigrant. The Episcopal Migration Ministries states that its mission is to serve refugees and immigrants ([www.ecusa.anglican.org/emm.htm](http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/emm.htm)); the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has a statement directly addressing Christian responsibilities toward the immigrant ([www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Messages/Immigration.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Messages/Immigration.aspx)); and the Mennonite Central Committee provides education on immigration issues ([www.mcc.org/us/immigration](http://www.mcc.org/us/immigration)). Coalitions of Christian churches, such as ESPERANZA, “the largest Hispanic faith-based non-profit corporation in America,” ([www.esperanza.us](http://www.esperanza.us)) and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference ([www.nhclc.org/about/news/apr2006\\_5.html](http://www.nhclc.org/about/news/apr2006_5.html)) work for immigrant rights on the streets and in legislative halls ([www.esperanza.us](http://www.esperanza.us)). Also, other coalitions--often White, conservative, evangelical Christian churches--are weighing in on the tone of the immigration debate. For example, a group of Arizona pastors recently called on elected Arizona state and local officials to abandon the “hateful tone in the debate about illegal immigration and to adopt a more compassionate approach” (González 2008)

Thus it is that church groups as well as inter-faith coalitions and secular organizations based in the U.S., convinced that both the church and the state have failed border immigrants, have begun to offer water, food, clothing, and immigrant rights information to migrants in danger of dying from hypothermia and dehydration on their way to the border: “While state regulations create an increasingly dangerous landscape, religion steps in to minimize risk, danger, and social injustice” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 13).

For example, the Casa del Migrante in Tijuana is a shelter for men. As a Scalabrini mission<sup>19</sup>, one of seven throughout Mexico and Guatemala, the mission provides temporary lodging, food, and clothing to men deported after being arrested by U.S. Border Patrol and to an increasing number of men deported who have lived and worked in the U.S., some for decades (Adame 2006). Humane Borders,<sup>20</sup> a coalition of Christian individuals and churches, based in Arizona, states on their website that their work of providing more than 70 water stations along the U.S./Mexico border, on both sides, is a humanitarian labor “motivated by faith,” ([www.humaneborders.org](http://www.humaneborders.org)) intended to save lives and invite public discourse. They go so far as

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<sup>18</sup> The multidimensional challenges of Latino immigration are being addressed by a range of Catholic clergy, such as Robert Schreiter who works with the trauma related to migration (Groody/Campese 2008, 107-123) and Patrick Murphy who is developing ways of meeting the needs of the growing Hispanic congregations of the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas (Ibid., 141-159). Stephen Bevans is yet another leading Christian voice in his attempts to incorporate migration into the mission of the church and migrants, as potential channels of that mission (Ibid., 89-106).

<sup>19</sup> The order established by this Italian bishop is the only order dedicated exclusively to immigrant pastoral care and social action. For more details on the tradition and work of the Scalabrini missions, see Giovanni Graziano Tassello in Groody/Campese, 2008, 124-140.

<sup>20</sup> For more details about the work of Humane Borders, see Robin Hoover’s chapter in Groody/Campese 2008, 160-173 and the Humane Borders website, [www.humaneborders.org/about/about\\_index.html](http://www.humaneborders.org/about/about_index.html)

to declare their intention to promote the legalization of undocumented migrants who currently work and live in the U.S., “create a responsible guest worker program; increase the number of visas for Mexican nationals; demilitarize the border; support economic development in Mexico; [and] provide more federal aid for local medical service providers, law enforcement and adjudication, land owners and managers” ([www.humaneborders.org/about/about\\_index.html](http://www.humaneborders.org/about/about_index.html)).

The New Sanctuary Movement is creating much debate around the tensions between the dictates of law and those of the individual conscience. Influenced by the older Sanctuary Movement that grew out of the influx of refugees from Central America in the 1980s, the newer movement seeks to protect immigrants from unjust deportation by sheltering them in churches where government officials, to date, have been reluctant to trespass to make arrests.

Tucson-based BorderLinks, created in 1987 with origins in the Sanctuary Movement, is a bi-national organization with facilities on both sides of the border. Its board of directors includes faculty from different universities and community leaders. Their mission is to provide educational resources and raise awareness among U.S. citizens about the socio-economic and religious realities of the border and the effects U.S. policies have on Mexico and Central America (Menjívar 2007, 110) <sup>21</sup>

What is interesting are the diversity of teachings that inform the work of these and many other Christian groups and individuals. Some are inspired by the LiberationTheology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the writings of Paulo Freire, the Quaker and Mennonite teachings on non-violence, or the principles of social justice deriving from the Christian faith. Others simply state that “God sent me here” (Ibid., 119-120). It is common for those engaged in immigrant work to say that they see in the immigrant the personification of Christ. That is, they believe that serving this community is a form of serving Christ who is seen as a kind of undocumented alien who took up the cause of the poor and oppressed (Ibid., 119) This identification of the immigrant with “the lowly Jesus” is linked to the notion that immigrants have the right to emigrate and that, often, the decision to emigrate is not purely individual, but influenced by broader structural forces. As Ufford-Chase aptly puts it:

The most successful way to resolve our border and immigration crisis is to create economic opportunities that will allow people to stay in their countries of origin. But that will never be accomplished with a trade policy that regards smaller nations as nothing more than a cheap labor supply. *It is not morally defensible to create a global economy without accepting the responsibility of building a global community*” (Ibid.; italics added).

It is common for these organizations and individuals to believe that the Christian faith cannot be limited to private spirituality and corporate worship. It must engage in the socio-political life of the nation as it impinges on the poor. The reasons for engaging in immigrant work may vary depending on the Christian denomination, but “they do similar work, engage in similar ways of organizing, oppose violent structures, and dedicate their lives to pursuing justice and creating a just society (Ibid., 120).

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<sup>21</sup> Rick Ufford-Chase, founder/director of BorderLinks notes: “Christians who come to learn from the border are pushed hard to examine their faith. . . . The challenge is to squarely face the contradictions that exist for North American Christians who are benefiting from a system that depends on the deepening poverty of factory workers all over the world. An honest reading of the Bible in that context makes most of us squirm” (Menjívar 2007, 111). Their website is [www.borderlinks.org/](http://www.borderlinks.org/)

### **American Christians and The Current Immigration Debate**

One might get the impression, after reading about the noble work of Christians on the U.S.-Mexico border, that American Christians sitting in the pews share in the generous attitudes of these border faith workers and “border theology” clergy. Such is not the case, at least, not entirely.

An article that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* may help understand the kind of tensions Latino immigration has created in the American Christian community on the right, the left, and in the center. The article reports on a debate sponsored by the Christian Right’s Family Research Council (hereafter FRC). After surveying their members, the FRC discovered that a ratio of 9 to 1 of their members held that illegal immigrants should be “detected, arrested, and returned to their country of origin” (Lochhead 2006, 1), a finding that was very disturbing even to the FRC. The Rev. Samuel Rodríguez, head of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, expressed similar concern over the Pew Hispanic Center poll that found two-thirds of white evangelicals considered new immigrants to be a burden and a threat to American culture.<sup>22</sup>

Yet another study, a 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center entitled “Attitudes Toward Immigration: In the Pulpit and the Pew” reported strong pro-immigrant statements issued by prominent religious leaders, such as Cardinal Roger Mahoney in Los Angeles and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick in Washington, D.C., Frank Griswold, presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church USA and a number of moderate and liberal evangelical leaders as evidence of changes in Christian thinking about immigration. On the other hand, they found that large segments of the American public, including many Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals, expressed serious concerns about immigrants and immigration. Although the study covered the general American public, the focus of the study was on the views of White evangelical Protestants, White mainline Protestants, White, non-Hispanic Catholics and secular Americans who constitute 11% of the population.

The concerns addressed included 1) fears related to newcomers changing traditional American customs and values and 2) immigrants being a burden because they take away jobs, housing, and health care from Americans. The vast majority of respondents across the religious spectrum saw Hispanics in a favorable light, viewing immigrants from Latin America as hard-working people with strong family values. But when asked about the impact of these immigrants on American society and the U.S. economy, many more expressed negative views, including respondents from the three largest religious groups. Nearly half of respondents agreed with the statement that the growing number of immigrants threatened American customs and values compared with 45% who said newcomers strengthen American society. Catholic and Protestant attitudes in response to this statement matched more or less those of the general public. White evangelicals, however, demonstrated a higher level of concern with 63% of them seeing

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<sup>22</sup> Commenting on the Republican Party’s gains among Latino voters in recent years and the party’s more recent hard-line positions on Latino immigration, Puerto Rican-born Rev. Rodríguez remarks: “I don’t think white evangelicals are racist...But the Latino community is starting to have some concerns that need to be addressed. We must start changing hearts and minds through dialogue. The risk of polarization is real” (Zaitchik 2006). In the same article, Rodríguez calls on his White evangelical counterparts to consider the following: “My message to the white evangelicals would be, Hispanic immigrants resonate more with your values than many other constituencies or groups. They are God-fearing, hard-working, family-loving people. And if that doesn’t look a lot like the Joneses and Smiths of Alabama and Arkansas and Michigan, other than the color of their skin, I don’t know what would.”

immigrants as a threat to U.S. customs and values. Only the seculars had a majority who agreed with the pro-immigration sentiments expressed by the above-mentioned religious leaders.

As for immigration and the U.S. economy, a majority of Americans in general, 52%, agreed that immigrants are an economic burden because of their impact on jobs, housing, and health care. Only 41% believed that newcomers strengthen the country through their hard work. All three of the largest religious groups held views almost identical to the general public, including more than 6 out of 10 evangelicals.<sup>23</sup>

What struck me most about this study's results, in terms of Christian attitudes toward immigration, was that, holding constant various demographic and socioeconomic factors, such as income, education, and gender that might influence attitudes, it was found that *frequency of church attendance* was associated with more favorable views of immigrants and immigration on several of these questions. Those who were most religiously committed tended to be more similar to seculars in their views than those less religiously committed. Although one cannot draw hard and fast conclusions about church attendance and the caring attitudes toward the alien from one survey, one can assume that church attendance is more likely to put Christians in contact with biblical doctrine surrounding the stranger, thereby influencing their thinking and behavior.

It is precisely this biblical obligation inherent in embracing the stranger that has some Christians, who are very vocal about same-sex marriages and abortion, silent or uncertain on the immigration question. An example of this uncertainty is Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas who converted to Catholicism in 2002 and who helped to craft the most recent bill addressing immigration reform, spoke thus in defense of his bill:

Any one of you in this room today, if you knew anybody that was in a tough position, if their family member was sick or dying or they were hurting or they needed a cup of water, or they needed food, not one of you right now wouldn't do that exactly for those individuals even if they were illegal undocumented immigrants...You know you would do that. You know that nothing would stop you from doing that....We all came from somewhere....If I have no option to feed my family in any legitimate way, we can see ourselves maybe jumping across the line ourselves...I don't want to face my maker [sic] without every day, every minute, having tried to have done what I think is the moral thing to do, even if it's politically difficult. (Lochhead 2006, 2)

Brownback's later renegeing on the bill he had helped to craft illustrates the ongoing ambivalence of Christian politicians about Latino immigration.

What is clear is that, if our country is going to address the immigration question with any moral responsibility, it must do so by allowing Christians and their churches to fulfill the role they have always had in welcoming, protecting, and educating newcomers as well as protesting unjust laws that affect these newcomers. As Levitske points out, illegal immigration raises two separate matters of conscience for the Christian: 1) the Christian duty to extend compassion and 2) the long-term issue of how best to preserve the common good (2007, 2). On both counts, the church's work as the conscience of the nation must be preserved so that the nation does not lose its moral compass. In this sense, both the Christian Right and the New Christian Voice have much they can contribute, as long as the debate is informed by Christian biblical concepts of

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<sup>23</sup> In support of these findings, Beck cites a Gallup poll that found two-thirds of Christian church members objecting to present mass immigration. Less than five percent of Christian members were in favor of expanding immigration.

justice and mercy, untainted by self-serving ideologies that benefit some to the detriment of others.

Recently, voices have been raised against the historic role of the Christian church as protector of/provider for the newcomer. In fact, most recently, efforts have been made to criminalize the work of the church for undocumented Latino immigrants. Congress at the beginning of 2006, for example, attempted to pass a bill making it a federal crime to offer assistance or services to undocumented immigrants. In response, Bishop Gerald R Barnes, speaking for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, warned that such a law would place churches and their outreach social programs at risk of criminal prosecution for doing what they always have done. Likewise, Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney, leader of the nation's largest Archdiocese in Los Angeles wondered out loud: "What could be more 'un-American' than to deprive Christian churches of their freedom to offer refuge to the strangers and aliens in our land?" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 6).

Not only did church leaders speak out against such legislation, faith-based and secular groups organized and mobilized the largest immigration rights marches ever seen in the U.S. April 10, 2006, the National Day of Action for Immigrant Social Justice, saw marches and rallies in over 60 cities across the country, those with the most participants, in Dallas and Los Angeles. Among those participating were Catholic clergy and laity as well as Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Pentecostals and clergy and laity from many other Protestant and evangelical churches. Such an unprecedented public demonstration affirmed once again that the American Christian church continues to see its role as conscientious objector to laws perceived to be unjust toward the weakest in our midst.

## **Conclusion**

In his review of the book, *American Mythos*, by sociologist Robert Wuthnow, Manuel A. Vázquez points out how Wuthnow studies the ways "elite" immigrants successfully integrate into American society. Wuthnow doesn't see the future of America in isolated narratives, but in asking "What kind of individual persons do we want and need in order to be a good society?" (Vázquez 2008, 265) For Wuthnow, the kind of "democratic individualism" he envisions would have to be grounded in a pluralism with two essential characteristics: 1) attachment to a religious faith community, in order to build identity on moral and spiritual values, and 2) openness not only to the communities of memory, but to new communities: "...a truly multicultural approach would go further than simply encouraging cooperation and agreement. It would also evoke discussion of the different interpretations one might have of common events because of one's racial or ethnic background." (Ibid., 265)

Vázquez wonders if such a template could accommodate, not only the immigrant elite that Wuthnow studied, but immigrants on the margins of American society. Christian social doctrine, whether Catholic or Protestant, teaches that the moral fiber of a society can be judged best by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. For Vázquez, and I would add, for American Christians, the real questions to ask are:

Who can count as a legitimate self in America? How inclusive can our society be? What are the limits of American pluralism in an increasingly global context, in which our economic and political interests, even if pursued in the name of democratic individuality, affect other regions of the world, encouraging immigration (in both authorized and illegal forms)? Perhaps contemporary reflections on American identity have to go beyond

individuals and national narratives to include structures and transnational realities. (Ibid., 266)

One can wonder what it will take to move the immigration debate out of the ideological, political and economic morass in which it is currently stuck. The current confusions notwithstanding, in moving the debate to higher moral ground, the Christian church can help to rewrite the public narrative about American identity to include, as Vázquez suggests, the larger economic and political decisions made by our leaders that often trespass not only physical, but moral borders in the global community of which we are a part. It is precisely the role the Christian church plays in the national community as the latter's conscience that demands from it the highest standards of ethical action, moral courage, and faithful adherence to its biblical roots.

In discussing mainline Protestantism's public role, Wuthnow and Evans conclude that Protestant churches (and I would add, all Christian churches) must not lose sight of "speaking in Christian language and with Christian conviction" while avoiding arrogant posturing as "exclusive mouthpieces of God" (Wuthnow/Evans, 2002, 21). The church's role is to tap into the "deeper truths about love, redemption, reconciliation, and justice..." When that happens "influencing public values for the good does not always or necessarily follow. But without it, public influence is destined to falter" (Wuthnow/Evans, 2002, 22).

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