

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

Juan Martínez

Introduction

The 2016 US presidential election has brought major change and disruption to the United States and the world. For those who supported the new president, the disruption was long needed. They were tired of what seemed to be business as usual. Nonetheless, for many people in the United States, the changes are creating disruption without the hope for positive change.

Juan Francisco Martínez Guerra is professor of Hispanic Studies and Pastoral Leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary. A Mennonite Brethren pastor, Martínez also coordinates the Los Angeles chapter of the FTL.



65

Vol. 12, No. 1

Juan Martínez

The US immigration system has been broken since long before Donald Trump became president. But he promised to “fix” it by an extreme vetting of potential Muslim immigrants, by lowering the cap on refugees allowed into the country, by building a wall on the US-Mexico border that Mexico would pay for, and by a massive deportation of “bad people.” During the first few days of President Trump’s administration we have seen some of his early attempts to put these promises into practice. His executive order halting the entry of immigrants from seven majority-Muslim countries was stopped by the courts. Though his administration promised a new order that would meet legal muster, a tighter, second executive order has also been tied up in the courts. His anti-Mexican rhetoric caused the cancellation of a meeting with President Peña Nieto of Mexico and increasing tensions with our neighbor to the south. There have also been some high-profile apprehensions and deportations, or attempted deportations, of Latinos, including DACA young adults. There was also a leak of a series of memos from within the White House that proposed mobilizing up to 100,000 National Guard troops for a massive deportation of the undocumented. While this paper was being written, the president called for a wide-scale growth of the infrastructure for border enforcement and massive deportation, including more agents, more immigration judges, and more jails. The president also proposed “forcing” Mexico to accept deportees from all countries, if they had entered the US through Mexico.

According to a recent Pew poll,¹ a majority of people (58%) in the US want stepped-up deportations, but 72% want there to be a way for those who came as children to stay, and 62% want there to be a way for the undocumented currently in the country to legalize

1. Rob Suls, “Less than Half the Public Views Border Wall as an Important Goal for U.S. Immigration Policy,” Pew Research Center, January 6, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/06/less-than-half-the-public-views-border-wall-as-an-important-goal-for-u-s-immigration-policy/>.

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

their status. Additionally, 61% state that the country should accept more refugees from war-torn countries. Only 39% of people in the US want the border wall to be built. As a subgroup, Trump supporters are much more in favor of enforcement, deportations, and building the wall than the populace in general, though even 60% of Republicans favor legalization of the children and 40% want to find a way for the undocumented to be legalized. Most of President Trump's actions so far point toward enforcement and deportation and very few toward immigration reform and a potential legal status for those currently in the US.

Given this environment, how does a Latino *evangélico* who lives and works among those who have “alternative” documentation respond? What does it mean to care wisely for the foreigner in the midst of a system that proclaims “America First?” How will Christians walk with immigrants, refugees, and the undocumented in the age of President Trump?

*Most of
Trump's
actions so far
point toward
enforcement
and
deportation
and very
few toward
immigration
reform.*

The Convoluted Vision of Immigration Reform in the US

It is important to put President Trump's actions in historical context. US laws on immigration have changed throughout the years and have been more immigrant friendly, or less so, depending on the political climate of the moment. Our ideals might be engraved on the Statue of Liberty, in the poem “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus (“Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”). We talk about ourselves as a nation of immigrants. But our actions and changing attitudes have been reflected in our immigration laws and policies.

Juan Martínez

US
immigration
laws and
executive
orders have
always
strongly
encouraged
some forms
of migration
while
excluding
others.

This country was built on European migration. But it was also built on the forced migration of African slaves and the forced migration and destruction of Native American peoples. The United States encouraged the westward migration of certain types of European migrants while ignoring the land rights of the people already living in the Southwest. US immigration laws and executive orders have always strongly encouraged some forms of migration while excluding others. The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the forced deportation of Mexicans—including people born in the US—during the Great Depression, Japanese internment during World War II, the Bracero programs, and Operation Wetback in the 1950s are just some of the ways that the US has excluded and deported people based on racial or national background. When candidate Trump praised Operation Wetback during one of the Republican debates, he was using past unjust treatment of immigrants as a justification for repeating that pattern.

But immigration laws have also pointed in more positive directions, getting closer to our purported national ideals. The 1965 Immigration Law made it possible for people from around the world to legally enter this country in significant numbers. Laws and policies of that period made it easier for people fleeing the communist regime in Cuba to legally enter the US. The 1986 Amnesty Bill, signed by President Ronald Reagan, recognized the contribution of most undocumented immigrants and made it possible for them to legalize their status. The efforts to pass another “immigrant-friendly” law during the first decade of the twenty-first century also points to our better nature.

But the 1986 law did not address future flow. It did not set up a system for allowing the legal movements of peoples to meet the increasing labor demands of this country. The response of the Clinton administration during the 1990s was to begin building the

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

border fence that President Trump now wants to expand and reinforce. And it was an “immigrant-friendly” president, Barack Obama, who deported more undocumented immigrants than the previous administrations combined. In the midst of these mixed signals and without a new immigration law, our country has developed a series of practices and policies that many have called a “broken immigration system.” The popular rhetoric criticizes undocumented immigrants for not “getting in line” even though there is no line for most and the waiting period for lines like family reunification is up to twenty years long.

President Trump’s executive orders and plans are adding more complexities to this broken system. Those that seem to benefit most from the current situation are the employers who can continue to pay unfair wages and no benefits, those who prey on the vulnerable, and those who run the private prisons that house those held for immigration violations.

The current laws and policies reflect the fact that we, as a country, have not been able to approve laws that provide a coherent vision of how to address migrants and refugees. We are not alone. We live in an increasingly globalized world in which there is a desire for more freedom in the movement of capital and goods. But there is a desire to limit the movement of people so as to control salaries and keep labor costs low in those places that build the inexpensive goods that we consume in places like the United States. As countries find that they cannot control the movement of capital and goods because of the power of multinational corporations, they seem more determined to control the movement of people. And because basic “rights” are only defended by nation-states, those who live and work outside of their home nation-state (migrants and refugees) usually find themselves with very limited rights. Of

*Popular
rhetoric
criticizes
undocumented
immigrants for
not “getting
in line” even
though there
is no line for
most and
the waiting
period for lines
like family
reunification
is up to twenty
years long.*

course, in practice, this changes if the immigrant is wealthy or highly skilled. These latter migrants are usually welcome, no matter their country of origin or the color of their skin. But those who are poor and those who flee violence or natural disasters find that their presence is not nearly as welcome.

A Country Divided

Our history as a country and the current situation all point to the fact that we are divided on the issue of migrants and refugees, as we are about so many issues related to our vision of what it means

As countries find that they cannot control the movement of capital and goods because of the power of multinational corporations, they seem more determined to control the movement of people.

to be a country together. The differing visions clearly drove the recent election. Those divisions are ideological, but they are also regional. Our country is divided almost completely down the middle but with a vision that seems to split the coasts from the central parts of the country. And because of our political system, the person with the most votes will not necessarily win the presidency. Even though Hillary Clinton won almost 3 million more votes, Donald Trump easily won the Electoral College.

In the midst of this significant division, some people feel that they have benefited from the ways the United States is changing, while others feel left out. The 2016 election process demonstrated that many people on both sides of the ideological divide felt left out of the direction our country was going. That sense of loss was linked to the immigration debate. Much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric was a reflection of the pain and frustration felt by many in this country. Scores of people that feel left behind in the midst of the economic and social changes find in immigrants the explanation for many of their problems. On the other hand, people that live in parts of the country where

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

immigrants have been important contributors to the region's economic vitality generally have a much more positive attitude. Business owners tend to have more complex views of immigrants, contingent on how dependent their sector is on immigrant labor. So this issue tends to unite liberal Silicon Valley with conservative farm owners. Both see benefits to having migrants in the labor pool, though they are looking for very different types of workers and would probably not agree on much else.

In the midst of this panorama we have the “culture wars” debate. For some voters, the rights of immigrants are placed on the same side of the ideological ledger as abortion rights and same-sex marriage. For many socially conservative evangelicals, the opportunity to have a president who would name a conservative Supreme Court judge weighed more heavily than the needs of immigrants, something which they might also consider important. The end result has been an exchange rate of 11 million (undocumented) to one (Supreme Court judge). The possibility of the one weighed more heavily in their decision than the reality of the 11 million.

Issues like race and religion also impact how people think about immigrants and refugees. Since this nation was built by immigrants, it is clear that some types of immigrants have been welcome, while others have not been. During the nineteenth century, white Protestants were more welcome than white Catholics. It is clear today that some people in the anti-immigrant movement are motivated by the desire to keep the US “white” and Christian. From that perspective, immigrants and refugees are to blame for the demographic change that is occurring in the United States. The fact that the US population is shifting toward a non-white-majority future has many concerned about how to keep the US white. So even though the vast majority of immigrants are

For many voters, the possibility of the one (conservative Supreme Court judge) weighed more heavily in their decision than the reality of the 11 million (undocumented immigrants).

Juan Martínez

Christian, there is an opposition to their presence because most of them are not white. On the other hand, refugees who are Muslim represent the shift away from what is perceived as a clearly Christian nation (even though the changing religious landscape in the US is as much due to the secularization of US-born whites as it is to a growing Muslim population).

Pulpit rhetoric often reduces the complexities of the immigration issue to “obeying” the law, so that some people live in the tension between obedience and mercy.

There is also a sense of racial superiority in how the issue is playing out. Most of the anger against immigrants is focused toward those who do not look white (let us not forget that both Trump’s former wife, Ivana, and his current wife, Melania, are white European immigrants). In practice, undocumented people with light skin are less likely to be randomly questioned by immigration officials than those who “look” foreign.

For many Christians this situation becomes more complicated because of the tensions they feel between obeying the law and showing mercy toward “the least of these.” Pulpit rhetoric often reduces the complexities of the immigration issue to “obeying” the law, so that some people live in the tension between the commitment to obedience or to mercy. They know the gospel calls them to practice mercy toward refugees and the vulnerable, but their reading of Romans 13 makes it difficult for them to support the undocumented.

This type of tension was demonstrated in a specific way among the evangelical community in this country during the election season. News headlines often stated that evangelicals favored Trump. What they meant, but often did not clarify, was that *white* evangelicals were voting for Trump. The vast majority of non-white

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

evangelicals voted for Clinton.² Some of the reasons given for voting for Trump among white evangelicals focused on Christian “values.” The focus of these voters was usually on socially conservative values, such as biblical marriage and being pro-life. But many non-white evangelicals also voted for Christian values, though they focused usually on a different list, such as social justice, care for the needy, mercy for the immigrant, and treating all humans equally.

The issue is further complicated by the complexities of human nature. Refugees and immigrants are sinful just like everyone else. Simplistic analyses present stereotypes that reduce all of them to innocent victims or potential terrorists. The reality is that people seek entry into the United States for myriad reasons and multi-layered motivations. Once here, they relate to their communities in a variety of ways just as natural-born citizens do, ranging from well-intentioned hard work and dedicated service, to nefarious violence and abuse of the systems. Though the vast majority of immigrants contribute to the US in positive ways, there will always be those who do not.

A World Divided

The reality of migrants and refugees is a worldwide phenomenon. The issues being faced in the United States are being lived out in many countries around the world, even on a larger scale. Over 200 million around the world are not in their country of origin. Migrants and refugees are forcing many countries to ask hard questions about how they will deal with the Other. Governments have come

2. See Joe Carter, “No, the Majority of American Evangelicals Did Not Vote for Trump,” The Gospel Coalition, November 15, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/no-the-majority-of-american-evangelicals-did-not-vote-for-trump>; and Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

Juan Martínez

up with very different answers to the issues raised by migration, not unlike the different ways the US has treated migrants and refugees throughout its history. What is clear is that legal systems are bounded by the nation-state, while migrants and refugees are transnational by definition.

They may be marginalized by national legal systems, but migrants work to create their own realities and to become agents of their own futures.

There is also the fact that migrants and refugees will move to address the issues they are facing, whether or not they are welcomed by the receiving country. Their calculations push out beyond national laws that want to define their future without taking their needs and aspirations into account. They may be marginalized by national legal systems, but they work to create their own realities and to become agents of their own futures. Because they have limited rights in the host country, they cannot influence legal decisions that affect them. And because legal systems tend to only include “citizens” within their purview, these systems cannot keep up with the reality of movement.

A Christian Vision for Migrants and Refugees during a Trump Presidency

If the current (as of March 2017) actions of the Trump administration are an indication of things to come, it will continue to be difficult, if not impossible, to fix our broken immigration system in the foreseeable future. It seems likely that most of the initial energy of those of us who care about migrants will go into defending their basic rights from what could quickly become an abusive situation.

But Christians who care will need to respond at many levels. We will need to be there for those who will suffer in this environment. We will also need to work for a just immigration system, even if

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

the space for this does not seem to exist at the moment. We need to defend religious liberty and have wide open doors for refugees, even while recognizing the importance of proper vetting. We may also need to address the injustices faced by immigrants and refugees more directly.

This will mean that we need to be ready to give prophetic witness in the midst of a system that will claim, and will have, legal legitimacy. This witness needs to be lived out on the daily, personal scale of one-on-one interactions in the neighborhood, the church, the workplace, and the marketplace; as well as in interactions with our elected officials and community leaders of all levels. We will need to denounce laws that make migrants and refugees suffer and that justify that suffering in the name of our own national self-interests. Justifying the breakup of communities and families because they are “breaking the law” is a gross simplification of the complexities behind how and why immigrants are here without legal documentation. We may need to remember the ways of peaceful civil disobedience to protect the vulnerable. We will certainly need to constantly raise our voices so that we remember that we are talking about 11 million *people*, their US-born children, and the families around the world that depend on their remittances.

But we also need to develop a more robust theology for our work among migrants around the world. Many have responded to migrants and refugees from a perspective of mercy but have not sufficiently addressed issues of justice or the fact that all humans were created equal by God. We have allowed the nation-state to define our vision of who and what is acceptable, safe, and worthy, instead of the global church of which we are a part. We have often seen migrants and refugees as people in need of our action. We have assumed that they are passive objects and that we have to work on their behalf. We need to recognize that these people can be agents of God’s transformation in our world.

Juan Martínez

We have often assumed that migrants are passive objects. We need to recognize that they can be agents of God's transformation in our world.

As Christians we have much to learn from migrants and refugees. Even as we work to support them, we need to recognize that in the Bible God often works in and through migrants. Abraham and Sarah were used of God when they were willing to move. God liberated Israel from Egypt and made them refugees on the way to the promise. Israel learned that God was the God of all during their exile. The New Testament calls Christians pilgrims and exiles and reminds us that our primary citizenship is in heaven. No matter how conservative the Supreme Court justices are, and no matter how open our border policies could be, followers of Jesus Christ will *always* be out of place as citizens within the United States of America or any other nation because no country on earth receives our highest loyalty.

We need to raise up scholars, with a Christian perspective, who will study and report on the impact of worldwide migration. One of the tasks of Christian leaders is to read the signs of the times. We need sociologists, economists, lawyers, theologians, psychologists, missiologists, politicians, demographers, and many others to help us understand the changing reality of our world as more people move, with or without “legal” documentation. Massive migration is creating deep changes in our world. We must be attentive to the changes and reflect on what that means for our mission as the church of Jesus Christ.

We live in a global environment that is interconnected. Christians are part of a global church. The rich countries have created or contributed to the issues that cause people to move. The economies of many poor countries depend on the money sent by migrant workers back to their families. As a global community of faith, we need to remind our leaders that their decisions will have an impact on our sisters and brothers around the world. Massive deportations will not only disrupt and destroy families in this country, they will

Immigration, President Trump, and Christian Visions of the United States

also impact the countries of origin of those deported. The result will adversely affect all of us. The sooner Christians demonstrate that we understand this fact because we are a global community, the sooner we will be able to help our country understand it.

Though President Trump has not shown a willingness to listen to those outside of his tight circle of advisors, we still must speak truth to power. We must address the issues that have an impact on the poor and needy. We cannot be guided by fear, but by hope, by believing in God's future, participating in God's mission, being agents of what God is doing in the world. Instead of asking God to bless the United States of America, may we pray that the United States be used to bless the world.

Conclusion

In the midst of the pain being suffered by immigrants and refugees, Christians need to seek a way forward. One of the issues we need to work on is our relationship with Christians on the other side of the immigration divide. Can we find ways to use our common faith to address these issues? Or will we write off our sisters and brothers because we do not agree with them on this issue?

But we also recognize that we must continue to astutely care for immigrants; hold out the counter-cultural hope of the resurrection in the midst of a political and economic climate that often offers them no hope; learn from and be blessed by them as fully human image bearers of God; and to suffer with those who are suffering. On the last day, will the Lord say, "I was suffering and you aided me, I did not have legal documentation and you sought my best interest" or will we have to admit that we did not see him in those fleeing violence or those without legal documents?