

Java and Jesus: July 25, 2010

Big Questions

Today's question and responses come from the Washington Post's online section "On Faith"

The following question was posed by Sally Quinn and Jon Meacham

Stopping illegal immigrants with immoral laws?

Illegal immigrants are flouting U.S. laws, but does affluent America (or Arizona for that matter) have a larger moral or spiritual obligation to help illegal immigrants who are trying to better their lives?

What about religious obligations to welcome the stranger? Are we our brother's keeper?

Response #1: by Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo: Professor Emeritus of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies at Brooklyn College and Distinguished Scholar of the City University of New York.

...There is an underlying issue of national identity that often goes unexplored in debates about immigration reform. The idea of "Protestant nation," it would seem, is much more than a sociological statement about the religious affiliation of the majority of the population. Almost from the first moment of English Protestant presence in the Americas, there was a growing sentiment that the colonists were about "God's work." When the colonies became a new nation, America became the "New Israel" in popular culture. This equation of God and country is writ deep in our collective psyche.

This presumption is threatened in the 21st century, however. Immigration today, when coupled with the higher fertility rates of people of color, has produced the inevitability that the population of the USA will be a majority of non-white, non-Protestant persons within two score years. I think it is impossible to understand today's embrace of anti-Latino legal measures without taking account of the deep-seated fear from white Protestants, Evangelicals and many Christian groups that they are about to lose hegemony in America. Hence, the cry of "Take our country back!" has the implied echo, "...and keep THEM out!"

To combat this quasi-Messianic feeling about the Christian, i.e. non-Catholic, non-Jewish, non-Muslim, identity of the United States, it is up to people of faith to speak out more forcefully. There must be refutation of the concept that the United States has a manifest religious destiny that is linked to maintaining Protestantism as the majority religion and the descendants of white Europeans as the bulk of the population. Once we can lift a fear against people of color and dissipate the resistance to non-Protestant religions, then the debate about immigration reform can be conducted based on the facts rather than sentiment.

Put another way, immigration reform must be conducted in a climate where secular realities are not tinted with theological assumptions. Contrary to the intimations of Mr. Glenn Beck, the United States Constitution is NOT divinely inspired. The border between the United States and Mexico is the result of an immoral 1848 war of military invasion and commercial cupidity: there is nothing sacrosanct about preserving it as an abstract definition of national identity. The recent attack on Ethnic Studies in Arizona and the new fabrication in Texas of a new right-wing revision of history is disturbingly anti-American because a white-washed notion of "our country" replaces the morality that makes us all God's children.

Immigration reform will be easier when it is viewed as an issue about human rights and family values. Rather than elevate legalities and man-made political divisions to the realm of inviolate doctrine, we need to set about demythologizing the supremacy of the nation-state. Instead, let us decide issues based on the common good of a humanity in which we all have participation.

Once we strip away outdated religious presumptions, reform will begin. What it will finally look like is hard to predict, but rationality will at least enable us to see the light at the end of the immigration reform tunnel.

Response #2: by Aseem Shukla: Associate Professor in urologic surgery at the University of Minnesota medical school. Co-founder and board member of Hindu American Foundation

There is a comfort in the warm, sepia-tinted collective memory we have fashioned of our ancestors from Ireland, Italy or Poland arriving on grimy decks of steamships pulling up to Ellis Island--Lady Liberty with a content, plaintive smile in the mist behind. Our "We are a nation of immigrants" narrative rests on the accurate reflection that most Americans descend from immigrants of a recent past, and our national psyche rests on the promise of the American dream and the great assimilation that happens on these shores.

Hindu Americans, many of whom are immigrants from the diaspora in India, the United Kingdoms, Trinidad and Tobago or Guyana are new arrivals still in the morning of their American experience. The trauma of emigration from India subsiding, they are embracing America and writing another chapter of the great immigrant experience.

So it is natural that Hindu Americans would empathize with the yearning of the immigrant. The affluence, opportunities and pluralism of America attracts, and clearly, it is the very vitality of our country. The engine for our economic success has always been comparatively liberal immigration policies and a national paradigm of inclusiveness that attracts the very brightest and entrepreneurial to our shores.

Beyond even trite lip-service to welcoming visitors, the Upanishads of Hindu scripture go to the extent of imparting an exalted divine status to guests. "Atithi devo bhava," a verse enjoins, demanding that an unexpected guest be welcomed with the devotion one would accord God him or herself on arrival at one's door. A high place for a visitor, indeed!

But immigration to the United States is no divine experience. Husbands here legally for work wait years for their wives and children from overseas to join, daughters may wait five years for their parents to be allowed to join, and a scientist hired for her expertise in developing cancer-fighting drugs will be tortured by a labyrinthine immigration process as she tries to stay on and contribute at the prestigious university where she works. These are the very real struggles of legal immigration.

I heard only today that a team of surgeons with whom I collaborate in India will not be joining me at an

academic meeting in San Francisco later this week as their visitor visas were denied. Though their families were staying behind and despite documents showing that their work had been accepted for presentation at an important international meeting, they were denied on the grounds that a consular official was not confident that they would ever return back to their home in India!

Alas, there is a stark difference in the immigrant experience when prefixed with illegality. And it is the grating, stark experience with uncontrolled illegal immigration that has skewed the pitch for even the occasional visitor here.

Illegal immigration is a moral issue, indeed, but the immorality of illegal immigration is too often ignored. There are factors that drive immigration from home countries that should not be ignored. Foolish farm subsidies, asymmetric trade policies, autocratic regimes and depletion of natural resources are problems that are a collective responsibility of a global world to remedy. And the federal legal immigration process is so ludicrously ponderous, that economic realities such as the absence of a visa system for low-wage workers, creates a perfect storm to drive illegal immigration.

But the recourse to illegal means of entering this country are as unacceptable as they are dangerous for all involved in that barren flight to our lands. As many shortcomings as there may be in the law, a culture of flouting laws is not an alternative.

Illegal immigrants are here in the tens of millions and will not be returning en masse. Facing this reality, the tide must now be dammed, and illegals here now should begin a process by which they earn their legal status, a process that is acceptable, if not to all Americans, then at least to a democratic majority. A human system for integration must be defined. But illegality must not be privileged over the legal efforts of so many that continue now to aspire to become Americans.

Illegal immigration as a legitimate expression of international problems is unsustainable--for the victims are those that play by the rules.