

Immigration Idealism

A case for Christian realism by [Matthew Schmitz](#) May 2019

For much of my life, I believed in open borders. Aside from violent criminals, I could think of no person who had entered this country illegally or overstayed a visa who deserved to be sent away. But in fact, I had thought little about the matter. I simply meant well, and I knew that all well-meaning people believed in welcoming migrants. Only the uncouth disagreed.

In the summers during college, I worked construction—wiring hog houses, running pipe, digging trench. When another man on the crew complained about “illegals” taking American jobs, I knew that he was a bigot. I tried not to judge him for it, just as I did not judge him for dipping - tobacco. But I instinctively felt that these things (like my nonjudgmental stance itself) separated me from him. When my cousin, the only non-Guatemalan on his landscaping crew, began picking up Spanish, I was heartened: His experience was being enriched.

At the end of each summer I returned to college, where everyone agreed with me. We stood on one side of a great divide in public opinion, a divide that pits elites against workers, those who benefit from immigration against those who do not. George Borjas, professor of economics at Harvard, has argued that increased immigration has immediate financial benefits for elites but provides little or no benefit to the working class. But the divide is cultural as much as economic: In both Europe and America, one side prizes national identity and citizenship; the other, mobility and openness.

A 2016 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that 67 percent of Republicans think the arrival of large numbers of immigrants and refugees is a critical threat to the U.S. Only 16 percent of Republican leaders think so. A similar, but smaller, divide exists on the Democratic side, where only 4 percent of Democratic leaders view current immigration levels as a critical threat, compared to 27 percent of their public. Nor is the divide limited to any one race. In 2018, the Pew Research Center found that “Latinos with lower levels of education are more likely than those with at least some college education to say too many immigrants are living in the country today.”

Confident that I opposed all forms of bigotry, I failed to notice that support for migration is - characterized in no small part by contempt. Our elites portray working-class Americans as violent, hateful, and incompetent. They revel in their suffering.

In 2016, audience members who had paid a median \$1,600 to see the musical *Hamilton* awarded their heartiest applause to the line, “Immigrants—we get the job done!” The following year, Lin-Manuel Miranda released a song based on that line. It was a statement of immigrants’ superiority to native-born Americans—and a promise to cause them pain: “Y’all ain’t been working like I do,” the lyrics went. “I’ll outwork you, it hurts you.”

Hamilton was celebrated by elites across the political spectrum. This is fitting, for contempt for working-class Americans is a bipartisan affair. In a [2017 column](#) for the *New York Times*, Bret -

Stephens proposed, “So-called real Americans are screwing up America. Maybe they should leave, so that we can replace them with new and better ones.” In 2017, [William Kristol said](#) during a discussion with Charles Murray, “Look, to be totally honest, if things are so bad as you say with the white working class, don’t you want to get new Americans in? . . . I’m serious.” In 2018, Max Boot wrote in the *Washington Post* that Trump’s supporters were “grumpy old white people who live in rural areas and lack college degrees.” In another column, he said that he wanted to “keep the hard-working Latin American newcomers” and “deport the contemptible Republican cowards” in Congress who had supported Donald Trump. Jennifer Rubin, his colleague at the *Post*, [tweeted](#) her agreement.

Contempt for Western workers is often justified in economic terms. In 2013, a staffer for Senator Marco Rubio said that America needed more low-skill migrant workers, because “there are American workers who, for lack of a better term, can’t cut it . . . who just can’t get it, can’t do it, don’t want to do it.” Jeb Bush said in 2013, “Immigrants create far more businesses than native-born Americans. . . . Immigrants create an engine of economic prosperity.”

If these comments had been directed at migrants, the men who made them would have been widely condemned. Such consideration is rarely shown for working-class Americans who object to immigration. They are instead viewed as bigots who deserve disinheritance. In Hillary Clinton’s famous formulation, they are “deplorables”: “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it.”

Of course, since the deplorables retain the right to vote, most politicians do not express such sentiments on the record. In 2010, an elderly British woman named Gillian Duffy asked Gordon Brown, then the Labour prime minister, a question about immigration from Eastern Europe. Brown responded courteously and asked after her grandchildren. After they parted, he complained that his staff had not protected him from interacting with this “bigoted woman.” His words were caught by a hot mic.

In 2009, Andrew Neather, a former speechwriter for Brown’s predecessor, Tony Blair, confessed that Blair’s immigration policy had been designed “to rub the Right’s nose in diversity” and build a cosmopolitan Britain. London had become “so much more international now . . . and so much more heterogeneous than most of the provinces, that it’s pretty much unimaginable for us to go back either to the past or the sticks.” He argued that the results in London had been “highly positive,” bringing in so many “foreign nannies, cleaners and gardeners” that it was “hard to see how the capital could function without them.” Of course, one alternative would have been to hire native-born working-class Brits, but Neather scoffed at the idea of hiring “unemployed BNP voters from Barking or Burnley—fascist au pair, anyone?” His readiness to deplore members of the native working class is typical of elites across the West.

In its most extreme form, pro-migrant prejudice casts opponents of migration as unworthy of citizenship, the blessings of which should pass to idealized migrants. In 2017, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau suggested that immigrants have a better claim to being Canadian than do those who oppose immigration: “I always sort of laugh when you see people who are . . . intolerant or who think, ‘Go back to your own country,’” he said. “No! You [immigrants] chose this country. This is your country more than it is for others because we take it for granted.”

In 2017, the Latino Victory Fund, a progressive political group, released a political ad titled, “American Nightmare.” Its villain was shown running down a group of frightened children that included two young Latinos, a Muslim girl in a hijab, and an African-American boy. Needless to say, this white middle-aged man was not depicted as a defense contractor, white-shoe attorney, or management consultant. Instead he wore a baseball cap and drove an off-road Ford F-150, a pickup truck whose marketing features construction workers and ranch hands. Portraying Americans as violent is now a common pro-immigration talking point. In his recent rally in El Paso, Beto O’Rourke said that the “U.S. cities of the U.S.-Mexico border are far safer than the U.S. cities deeper in the interior of the United States of America.” O’Rourke was simply echoing what Rupert Murdoch said after Donald Trump’s campaign announcement: “Mexican immigrants, as with all immigrants, have much lower crime rates than native born.”

It is impossible to understand the Western response to migration without understanding its basis in a certain form of liberal Christianity: a Christianity that reduces the gospel to an abstract law of love, ignoring much of Scripture—and reality.

Angela Merkel, a Lutheran pastor’s daughter, was guided by this vision when she welcomed an unprecedented influx of migrants into Germany. Jan Werner-Müller, professor of history at Princeton, has written that Merkel’s migrant policy is a “high-risk gamble intended to truly put the ‘C’ back into CDU [Christian Democratic Union]—a reminder, not dissimilar to Pope Francis’, that Christianity has to mean, first and foremost, action for those most in need.” The German bishops gave enthusiastic support to Merkel and her migrant policy. Cardinal Rainier Maria Woelki, archbishop of Cologne, said, “The Catholic Church fully shares the Chancellor’s opinion. . . . That is why we will support the Chancellor with no ifs and buts.” (One would think German churchmen would be more cautious about giving unqualified support to the regime.)

Likewise Tony Blair. As prime minister, he—a devout Christian—oversaw the settlement of an average of 200,000 migrants each year, five times the rate of the previous government. He believed that “an abhorrence of prejudice based on race, class, gender or occupation is fundamental to the Gospels.” For Blair, Christianity is “a religion based on compassion and love” that “has been used for dubious and sometimes cruel purposes wholly at odds with its essential message.” As James G. Crossley, professor of Bible at St. Mary’s University Twickenham, has written, Blair’s reading of the Gospels produces “general concepts compatible with liberal democratic values.” This required downplaying “socially illiberal biblical passages” so as to “equate the contents of the Bible with liberalism and modern sensibilities”—a neat summary of open-borders Christianity.

Miguel Díaz, U.S. ambassador to the Vatican under Barack Obama, shares this view. “The bridge-building principle that Catholic tradition offers,” he said, “represents the cornerstone of Christian belief and practice: *The body of Christ knows and has no borders.*” Díaz identifies the Catholic view with President Obama’s claim that “the walls between the countries with the most and those with the least cannot stand. The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down.”

Since his visit to Lampedusa in 2013, Pope Francis has been widely perceived as teaching that welcoming migrants is a gospel imperative. As Federico Lombardi, then a Vatican spokesman, put it in 2016, “We should not build walls but bridges. [Francis] has always said this, continuously, and he has said this about the issues of migration in Europe many times.” Lombardi continued, “The key point is welcome—the building of bridges instead of walls—that is characteristic of this Pontificate.”

Francis has made many comments that justify this perception, but he has also said that prudence must govern migration policy: “This means you have to ask yourself first: How much space do I have? Second: You have to remember it’s not just about taking them in, but also integrating them.” He has also said that “Europe will be able to confront the problems associated with immigration only if it is capable of clearly asserting its own cultural identity.” These statements tend to be overlooked by the people who eagerly repeat his paeans to openness, but they illustrate an important truth: Sooner or later, even the most idealistic calls to welcome migrants must contend with hard reality.

In the run-up to World War II, men inside and outside the Church invoked the gospel to justify appeasement and pacifism. After his own flirtation with the idea, Reinhold Niebuhr came to believe that pacifism was “unable to distinguish between the peace of capitulation to tyranny and the peace of the Kingdom of God.” In the name of an abstract “law of love,” pacifists abandoned their duties to God and man. They refused to recognize that a fallen world can never be free of conflict. This was bad politics—and bad religion.

We are making a similar mistake today. Faced with a historic surge of migration, Christian leaders have misread the gospel and misjudged human affairs. They have done so with the best of intentions. Just as Niebuhr’s contemporaries were correct to say that Christians must be peacemakers, today’s churchmen are right to say that we must welcome the stranger. Each theme is inescapable in Scripture and demands the Christian’s obedience to the point of pain. But obedience is never so simple as renouncing violence or refusing to defend national boundaries. In an imperfect world, peace must be protected by strength of arms, and welcoming the stranger entails preserving the society that might welcome him.

We have succumbed to immigration idealism—to the vague hope that we can live in a world free of conflict and violence, in which authorities need not bear the sword, and neighbors need not build fences. This view, like the pacifism to which it is related, dreams of an unfallen world. “No more death! No more exploitation!” Pope Francis exclaimed during a Mass at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2016. He was echoing Pope Paul VI’s declaration before the United Nations in 1965, “Never again war, never again war!” These statements express our highest aspirations; in them we have a summary of paradise. But we were long ago expelled from paradise, and pretending otherwise will make our world into a closer approximation of hell.

Immigration idealism has less in common with the Christian faith than with sentimental liberalism. “In this liberalism,” wrote Niebuhr, “there is little understanding of the depth to which human malevolence may sink and the heights to which malignant power may rise. Some easy and vapid escape is sought from the terrors and woes of a tragic era.” Though they invoked the gospel, what pacifists really believed in was the Enlightenment myth wherein man “needs

only to return to the order, harmony, justice, equality and equanimity of nature” to escape “the disasters of history.”

Christians steeped in bourgeois culture and economic ideology readily imagine a world of win-wins. Niebuhr believed that pacifists suffer from a “capitalistic complacency” that imagines “that there is a preestablished harmony of nature which guarantees a just relation between all economic forces, if only man does not interfere with the automatic processes of economic life.” It is not hard to believe in a world without war or borders when one already believes that “capitalistic social organization automatically makes for mutual accord and social peace.” Thus does immigration idealism shade into libertarian dreams of spontaneous order.

Immigration idealists fear that any distinction between citizen and alien, national and foreigner, will revive the bloodiest ideologies of the twentieth century. Just as fear of past mistakes motivated Niebuhr’s contemporaries to veer from Christian militarism to an equally disastrous pacifism, our churchmen risk going from a malign nationalism to a well-meaning but disastrous anti-nationalism. In both cases, a deficient understanding of citizenship is to blame. Niebuhr saw “the very limited concept of Christian citizenship held by pacifist Christians” as one of their basic mistakes. They recognized a certain role for the state and acknowledged that Christians had certain duties to it, but “when the state has to exercise its admitted central function as guarantor of order, then the state is abandoned on the ground that the Christian has a higher loyalty and code of conduct.” By invoking their heavenly citizenship, Christian pacifists shirked their earthly responsibilities.

Immigration idealists do the same. Along with Church and family, the political community is one of Leo XIII’s “three necessary societies, distinct from one another and yet harmoniously combined by God.” Our possession of a heavenly citizenship is no reason for disdain the political community, just as the love of our perfect father in heaven does not license contempt for our imperfect fathers on earth. It is no more Christian to despise the political community than to divinize it.

Rather than acknowledge each man’s need for a political home, immigration idealists valorize a kind of homelessness. William Cavanaugh is the most eloquent exponent of this mistaken view. He has written that the Church must “embrace the identity of pilgrim . . . embrace a certain kind of mobility in the context of globalization.” While praising the stability of monks, Cavanaugh argues that Christians must resist the “artificial segmentation of a truly global concern for all of God’s children.” This requires “the relativization of national borders and the active denunciation of all kinds of nationalism that would impede the catholicity of the Christian vision.” Crossing boundaries becomes the consummately Christian act: “The pilgrim seeks to transgress all artificial borders.”

When St. Paul taught that the Christian’s citizenship is in heaven, he drew on his experience of citizenship in the Roman Empire. Paul not only claimed his rights as a Roman citizen in Acts 22, he boasted in his status as a citizen of Tarsus, “no mean city.” Paul was able to take simultaneous pride in his earthly and heavenly citizenships because he treated them analogically, not antonymically. Naturally: The Church can hardly proclaim the value of our heavenly citizenship if its earthly analogue is meaningless or malign.

Christians need a response to migration that does not merely baptize liberal pieties. The richest resource is in Question 105 of the *Summa*, where Thomas Aquinas discusses the justice of the Israelites' laws governing the treatment of foreigners. He observes that certain commandments, such as "The Ammonite and the Moabite, even after the tenth generation, shall not enter into the church of the Lord," may strike us as cruel and seem to conflict with more universalist statements in the Old and New Testaments. But for Thomas, God's commandments are never arbitrary or unjust.

Thomas makes several distinctions. The first is between travelers and migrants. Both should be treated with respect, but people seeking to settle in the community can only be welcomed as citizens if they fulfill certain conditions. They must, first of all, have the common good of the community at heart. It is for this reason, Thomas says, that certain people who had settled in the land were not given citizenship until after the third generation.

Thomas also distinguishes among migrants based on the nation and culture from which they come. Those whose nations of origin had "close relations" with the Israelites, such as "the Egyptians, among whom they were born and educated, and the Idumeans, the children of Esau, Jacob's brother," were to be admitted to the Israelite community after the third generation. Those who came from historically hostile peoples, such as the Ammonites and Moabites, were never to be welcomed as citizens.

Unlike today's immigration idealists, Thomas makes a sharp distinction between the spiritual and political communities. The former was open to all comers. The latter was not. "The Law excluded the men of no nation from the worship of God and from things pertaining to the welfare of the soul," he writes. "But in temporal matters concerning the public life of the people, admission was not granted to everyone at once." Grace knows no boundaries, or distinctions between nations. A just immigration policy follows a different logic.

Our Christian leaders take neither Scripture nor political reality as seriously as Thomas did. Conflating the openness of the Church with the openness of society, they imagine that immigration preferences based on shared history and culture are unjust—though their justice and prudence are demonstrated in Scripture. They conflate the welcome given the traveler with the different and more demanding welcome given the aspiring citizen.

A just immigration policy will recognize that whereas the Church welcomes all comers, no nation can. It will insist that migration policy give preference to those who share the history, culture, and creed of the welcoming nation. It will recognize that those who are, by reason of history and belief, hostile to the host culture cannot really aspire to join it. European states should not forget that they are, in Pierre Manent's phrase, societies "of a Christian mark," impressed with an indelible character. The same is true of America.

Above all, a more realistic immigration policy will recognize that not everyone can or should be admitted to any political community. Despite what some seem to believe, neither the United States nor Europe is a Celestial City from which no weary pilgrim can be turned away. Sentimentality about migration should be rejected as firmly as anti-migrant bigotry.

While advocating realistic and Christian migration policies, the Church must not forget that the most important migration is that of souls into heaven. In *Exsul Familia Nazarethana*, Pope Pius XII speaks of the need to “provide all possible spiritual care for pilgrims, aliens, exiles and migrants of every kind.” He praises the Church’s long history of care for migrants, including the Catholic colonizers of the New World. (Pius’s view is not easily reconciled with today’s sentimentalities.) According to the Pew Forum, 19 percent of the foreign-born, Hispanic adults living in the United States have given up their Catholic faith—half before they arrived, half after. These are souls lost at sea, spiritual migrants stopped at the border between earth and heaven.

In August, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) carried out a raid in O’Neill, Nebraska, the small town where I grew up. This operation, one of the largest of Trump’s presidency, centered on Juan Pablo Sanchez Delgado, an illegal immigrant who had recruited other illegal immigrants to work at local businesses. These workers were forced to cash their paychecks at Delgado’s store, with Delgado keeping a portion of each. On March 5, he pled guilty to harboring illegal immigrants for profit. According to ICE, he had made more than \$5.6 million off his scheme. As part of his plea deal, he forfeited four homes he owned in Las Vegas.

The pastor of O’Neill’s Catholic church helped stage a demonstration in response to the arrests. In a subsequent homily, he insisted that he supported the punishment of crime; he merely objected to family separation and the breakup of the community. He denied that it was a protest, preferring instead to call it a rally. His position was not so much incoherent as sentimental. He had sought to demonstrate his good intentions, not to demonstrate for or against any specific policy. One can hardly blame him. He was following the example of church leaders and Christian politicians across the West. Rather than promote the common good of their polities, they have denigrated citizenship. Rather than preach the gospel to migrants, they have distorted it to conform with liberal pieties. Like all immigration idealists, they have forgotten simple truths. The state cannot arrest, prosecute, and punish lawbreakers, as it must do, without separating them from their families. Nor can it defend its borders without the use of force. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female. In this world, however, the distinction between citizen and alien, like that between man and woman, will always remain.

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