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Embracing Immigrants is a Religious Imperative

Christopher R. Fee
Gettysburg College

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Embracing Immigrants is a Religious Imperative

Abstract

I'm an English professor, and in leftist intellectual circles it's often considered somewhat unsophisticated and definitely uncool to argue in favor of traditional religious beliefs. However, as the clerk of a tiny Quaker Meeting in a farming community in rural Pennsylvania, I feel led to do so in the context of the debate about immigration. I would submit that Scripture is explicit in its requirement that we accept and embrace the immigrants in our midst, and note that Leviticus (19:34) makes no mention of legal status. (*excerpt*)

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Biblical teachings, New Testament, Leviticus, Hebrews, Quakerism, Immigration

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by Christopher Fee

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Gary Coronado / Los Angeles Times / TNS

Seasonal agricultural workers, holders of H2A Visas, get instructions from the crew leader before picking cauliflower on a California farm on March 15.

I'm an English professor, and in leftist intellectual circles it's often considered somewhat unsophisticated and definitely uncool to argue in favor of traditional religious beliefs. However, as the clerk of a tiny Quaker Meeting in a farming community in rural Pennsylvania, I feel led to do so in the context of the debate about immigration. I would submit that Scripture is explicit in

its requirement that we accept and embrace the immigrants in our midst, and note that Leviticus (19:34) makes no mention of legal status:

“The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

The passage about the heritage of the Israelites as strangers seems particularly relevant to the American condition: My own family came to this country in search of economic opportunities and religious freedoms, not because they hated those who were different from them, but because they wanted the freedom to be themselves.

The New Testament takes up this theme, most notably in Hebrews (13:2), admonishing:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

In recent years, my immediate family has embraced Quakerism precisely because it is a faith that offers us the freedom to follow God as we choose while at the same time demanding that we worship the Risen Christ by revering each and every human being as a sacred vessel of his Holy Light. That can seem pretty mystical and new-agey, but as a literary scholar I would argue that it's rooted in a fairly careful reading of the Gospel, as is the traditional Quaker emphasis on “letting one's life speak.” In the words of 1 John (3:18), I teach my children to love their neighbors, “not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

I live in a small farming community that may be ripped apart because some members of the families of our Latino friends and neighbors are threatened with deportation. It is one thing to apprehend, to prosecute, and to deport noncitizens who have committed crimes that threaten our communities; law should exist precisely to offer us safety and security from such acts. We incarcerate citizens for the same acts. However, it is quite another thing to deport hardworking non-offenders, many of whom are members of extended families that contain generations of citizens and noncitizens alike.

I realize that some of my neighbors understand this practice as a mere enforcement of the law; for those who are churchgoers and believers, however, I would challenge them to scratch beneath the surface of that argument: Laws are enacted for reasons that sometimes have little to do with justice or common sense, and when they are wrong they must be challenged and changed, and we must do all in our power to support our friends and neighbors in the face of oppression that seems to have a lot to do with their country of origin and the color of their skin. The Fugitive Slave Act was wrong, and Quakers refused to abide by it; we were called radicals then, and I am not afraid to be called a radical now. I'm much more concerned about the judgment of my Maker than the disagreement of my neighbors.

Farmers work hard, all the time, and are subject to a thousand factors beyond their control; I have great respect for them in general, and great affection for those I know well. Farmers are subject to pretty harsh economic realities each and every day, which explains why farm wages remain low, which in turn explains why large segments of the workforce that plants, nurtures,

and harvests our food has been made up of undocumented labor. They work extremely hard, often in adverse conditions, often for wages that seem paltry by American standards, but that may offer these laborers the same sorts of opportunity to better themselves that my own family sought in America. It's worth remembering that many of our own ancestors were none too worried about the legal ramifications of fleeing the oppressive laws of the Old Country or at times bending to their advantage the laws of the new one.

Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, famously noted that the "invisible hand of the marketplace" is what moves prices and wages; this is certainly true about wages and costs in farming, and this has had a real and lasting impact upon our communities as folks willing to work for less took jobs that many American citizens didn't want. Nature abhors a vacuum, and legislation that criminalizes this natural flow of labor at the cost of family security and community stability is simply wrong. We must work to change it as we support our hardworking neighbors by any means necessary.

I see this as a religious imperative, and I suggest that those who do not should reexamine the issue. In the words of Joshua (24:15), I challenge my God-fearing neighbors to "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. ... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Christopher Fee is a professor of English at Gettysburg College and clerk of the Menallen Friends Meeting. You can reach him at cfee@gettysburg.edu.

<http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/loving-the-immigrant-as-one-of-our-own-20170727.html>