

Xenophobia or xenophilia? A challenge to Christian ethics

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"I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."

Derek Walcott

"To survive the Borderlands
You must live sin fronteras

Be a crossroads."

Gloria Anzaldúa

Dilemmas and challenges of migration

The United States is experiencing a significant increase of its Latino/Hispanic population. In 1975, little more than 11 million Hispanics made up just over 5 percent of the population. Today they number approximately nearly 47 million, around 15 percent of the nation, its largest minority group. Recent projections estimate that in 2050 the Latino/Hispanic share of the US population might be between 26 to 32 percent. This demographic growth has become a complex political and social debate for it highlights two delicate issues: national identity and compliance to the law. It also threatens to unleash a new phase in the sad and long history of American racism and xenophobia. Two concerns have become important topics of public discourse:

1. The increase in the Latino/Hispanic population, particularly what it might convey for the cultural and linguistic traditions of the United States, its mores and styles of collective self-identification.

2. The growth of Latin American migration, specially the undocumented or unauthorized. The influx of Mexican illegal immigration, for example, grew from an estimated average of 260,000 per year in 1990-1994 to approximately 485,000 annually in 2000-2004. About a quarter of the Hispanic/Latino adults are unauthorized immigrants.

Unfortunately, the conversation about this difficult issue is taking place in an environment clouded by the gradual development of xenophobic attitudes. One can see many signs of an increasing hostile reaction to what the Mexican American writer Richard Rodríguez has aptly termed "the browning of America." Let me briefly mention some key elements of this emerging xenophobia:

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1. There is what one might call a Lou Dobbs syndrome: The spread of fear regarding the so-called “broken borders,” the possible proliferation of Third World epidemic diseases, and the alleged increase of criminal activities by undocumented immigrants. A shadowy sinister specter is created in the minds of the public: the image of the intruder and threatening “other.”

2. This xenophobic stance intensifies the post 9/11 attitudes of fear and phobia regarding the strangers, those people who are here but who do not seem to belong here. Surveillance of immigration is now located under the Department of Homeland Security. This administrative merger links two basically unrelated problems: threat of terrorist activities and unauthorized migration.

3. One can clearly perceive this mind-set in the frequent use of the derogatory term “illegal alien.” As if the illegality would define not a specific delinquency, but the entire being of the migrant. We all know the dire and sinister connotations that “alien” has in popular American culture (thanks in part to the sequence of four “Alien” [1979, 1986, 1992, and 1997] films with Sigourney Weaver fighting back atrocious inhuman creatures).

4. Proposals coming from the White House, Congress, states, and counties have tended to be excessively punitive. Some examples are:

a. A projected wall along part of the Mexican border (compare to Ephesians 2: 14, “Christ . . . has broken down the dividing wall”).

b. The criminalization as a felony not only of illegal immigration but also of any action by legal residents that might provide assistance to an undocumented immigrant.

c. Legislation prescribing mandatory detention and deportation of non-citizens, even for alleged minor violations of law.

d. Legislation mandating an increase in punitive measures against employers. At the end of the day, the immigrants will endure the main sacrifice.

e. Proposed legislation to curtail access to public services (health, education, police protection, legal services, drivers’ licenses) by undocumented migrants.

f. A significant intensification of raids, detentions, and deportations. This is transforming several migrant communities into a clandestine underclass of fear and dissimulation.

From a clash of civilizations to a clash of cultures

In this social context tending towards xenophobia and racism, Samuel P. Huntington has written some important texts about what he perceives as a Hispanic/Latino threat to the cultural and political integrity of the United States. Huntington is a prominent Ivy League professor of politics and government, founding director of Harvard’s John M. Olin Institute of Strategic Studies, chairman of Harvard’s Academy for International and Area Studies, and cofounder of the journal *Foreign Policy*. He was also the intellectual father of the theory of the “clash of civilizations” (“The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 1993 and *The Clash of Civilizations and the*

Remaking of World Order, 1996), with notorious consequences for the failed foreign policies of the Bush White House.

In 2004, Huntington published an extended article in *Foreign Policy* ("The Hispanic Challenge," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2004, 30-45) followed by a lengthy book, *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004). The former prophet of the theory of an unavoidable civilizational abyss and conflict between the West and the Rest (specially the Islamic peoples) now generates the theory of an emerging nefarious cultural conflict inside the United States. Immersed in a dangerous clash of civilizations *ad extra*, this apostle of doom prognosticates that the United States is entering into a grievous clash of cultures *ad intra*.

The *We* of the first part of the title of Huntington's book (*Who are We?*) refers to the "We" of "We the People of the United States," the first sentence of the 1789 US Constitution and also to the previous "We" of the last paragraph of the 1776 declaration of independence ["We . . . the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress . . . solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States . . ."] The traditional myth of the Republic's "Founding Fathers" is central to Huntington's thesis, much in the way in which the "Early Church Fathers" sometimes have been in theological conversations. They founded and defined the perennial essence of the American nation.

American national identity seems a very complex issue for it deals with an extremely intricate and highly diverse history. But Huntington has, surprisingly, a simple and rather simplistic answer: The US is mainly identified by its "Anglo-Protestant culture" and not only by its liberal republican democratic political creed. The United States has been a nation of settlers rather than immigrants, according to this eminent Harvard professor. The first British pioneers transported not only their bodies, but also their fundamental cultural and religious viewpoints, what Huntington designates as "Anglo-Protestant culture." In the formation of this collective identity Christian devotion - the Congregational pilgrims, the Protestantism of dissent, the Evangelical Awakenings - has been meaningful and crucial. This national identity has also been forged by a long history of war against a succession of enemies (from the Indians to the Islamic jihadists).

Christianity and war have been the historical sources for the social construction of American national identity, according to this reading. They have provided the rituals, symbols, and ceremonies (flag, declaration of independence, pledge of allegiance, national hymn, patriotic military parades) crucial for the forging of a collective sense of communal loyalty. There is a certain romantic nostalgia in Huntington's thesis, an emphasis on the foundations of American culture and identity, in their continuities rather than its evolutions.

But the main objective of Huntington is to underline the uncertainties of the present trends regarding this nation's collective self-understanding. After the dissolution of the Soviet threat, he perceives a significant neglect of the American national identity. If the whole world is transformed at the image of the US popular culture and conceptions of free market and democratic politics, there is no "other" against which to forge the

uniqueness of American identity. National identity seems to require the image of a dangerous enemy, what Huntington terms the "perfect enemy." The prevailing trend is supposedly one of a notable decline and loss of intensity and salience of the nation's awareness of national identity and loyalty.

And then emerges the challenge of the Latin American migratory invasion. It is not similar to previous migratory waves. Its contiguity, intensity, lack of education, territorial memory, constant return to the homeland, preservation of language, dual citizenship, retention of homeland culture and allegiance, its distance to Anglo-Protestant culture, its alleged absence of a Puritan work ethic, makes it unique and unprecedented. This immigration constitutes, according to Huntington, "a major potential threat to the cultural and political integrity of the United States" (WAW, 243; FP, 33). Huntington has seen the enemy and the enemy is . . . the Latin American migrant!

A critique to Huntington

This is a romantic, nostalgic, and somewhat melancholic outlook of American national identity, badly suited for the cosmopolitan perspective needed today to solve international conflicts peacefully. It represents a rather careless way of thinking about war that disregards the exceptional destructiveness of the new military technologies and the devastation that they inflict upon the so-called "perfect enemies," who, after all, happen also to be human beings.

What exactly is here meant by "Anglo-Protestant culture"? According to Huntington, Italian, Irish, and Polish Catholics became American Catholics and thus assimilated to "Anglo-Protestant culture." Same thing seems to happen to Eastern Orthodox immigrants from Russia, Greece, Bulgaria, or Ukraine [remember the film "Deer Hunter"?], and to the Ashkenazi Yiddish-speaking Jewish diaspora. But if they all became "Anglo-Protestant" while keeping their own religious traditions and memories, even engaging into their "fat Greek weddings," what then is the specific semantic meaning of "Anglo-Protestant," apart from the fact that English has prevailed as the lingua franca and that all these immigrants seem to share a common adherence to free enterprise and democratic republicanism? "Anglo-Protestant culture" becomes here an imprecise shibboleth of misty semantic vagueness.

One might detect in Huntington a somewhat hostile attitude towards Latin American migration, which initially seems to be directed towards the poor Mexicans of the Southwest, but, as his analysis of prosperous Miami suggests, finally encompasses the entire Latino/Hispanic population in the United States. This community becomes the dreaded "other," a sinister image that plays a rather ambiguous and paradoxical role: it seems to threaten the cultural integrity of the United States, but conversely it also challenges the nation to preserve its cultural purity and resist its potential contamination by the intruders.

Huntington's discomfiture is intense regarding the encroachment of Spanish in the American public life. He calls attention that now in some states more children are

ominously christened José rather than Michael. He also seems disturbed by the fact that many corporations, before any further procedure, prompt a prior selection: “English or Spanish?” This increasing public bilingualism threatens to fragment the linguistic integrity of the United States. Linguistic bifurcation appears here to be a veritable menacing Godzilla.

Huntington is obviously overstressing the linguistic problem. There are certainly linguistic difficulties, partly occasioned by the difficulties of English spelling and phonetics (according to the Argentinean writer, Ernesto Sabato, “English is a language invented by Mediterranean pirates who wrote London and pronounced Constantinople”). But, the truth is that most Hispanics try to master English and to assimilate to the “American way of life” (whatever that vague shibboleth might be). But, paradoxically, Huntington is also worried because the Hispanics might become bilinguals and could thus have an employment advantage in many urban centers. Thus, the same Harvard professor who hopes that Americans remember and celebrate their culture, language, and traditions, expects from Hispanics that they forget theirs as soon as possible. So much for professorial coherence!

Huntington neglects the economic causes for the Latin American migration - its economic and social benefits both for the sending (remittances) and the receiving nations (lower wages for manual jobs). He does not pay any considerable attention to why they migrate and their social and economic contributions to both their motherland and host country. He does not seem to have any concern regarding the process whereby they become our new *douloi* and *μικτικοί*, at the margins of society, in a kind of social Apartheid, cleaning our stores, cooking our meals, doing our dishes, cutting our grass, picking our tomatoes and oranges, painting our buildings, washing our cars, staying out of our way . . .

Incredibly, Huntington disdains their alleged lack of work ethic. Any one of us, just looking around our own institutions, could relate countless stories of immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries with two full time jobs, additional part times, devoid sometimes of health insurance, vacation, or pension benefits. And they keep going on, looking at nights nostalgically at “la misma luna” as their children across the frontier.

Huntington also neglects the history of violence and conquest behind a substantial segment of the US Latino/Hispanic population. How can we discourse about these people without bringing into the conversation the 19th century military annexation of several former Mexican provinces, the 1898 conquest of Puerto Rico, and the suffering that many Latin American nations endured from US hegemony during the 20th century? Have we already forgotten the plight of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua during the Reagan White House?

Obscured in texts such as Huntington’s is the present trend among metropolitan Third World diasporas towards holding dual citizenship. An increasing number of Latin American nations now recognize and promote double citizenship, a process that leads to multiple national and cultural loyalties and to what Huntington classifies, with obvious pejorative tone, “ampersand peoples.”

Migration is an international problem, a salient dimension of modern globalization. Borders have become bridges as well as barriers. Globalization implies not only the transfer of financial resources, products, and trade, but also the worldwide relocation of peoples, of human beings who take the difficult and frequently painful decision to leave their kin and kith searching for a better future. The intensification of global inequalities has made the issue of human migration a crucial one. It is a process that requires analysis from: 1) a worldwide perspective and horizon; 2) a deep understanding of the tensions and misunderstandings arising from the urban proximity of peoples with different traditions and cultural memories; 3) an ethical perspective that privileges the plight and afflictions of the migrants.

Huntington pontificates the obvious: that there is a serious immigration problem in the United States and that it foregrounds sensitive issues about national identity and law. But the way he focuses this social predicament worsens its understanding and solution. He seems to suggest stricter policies regarding illegal migration, stronger measures to enforce cultural assimilation of the legal immigrants, and the rejection of dual citizenship. That however would require transforming the borders more into barriers and less into bridges. This would not only be utterly archaic and anachronistic; it might also become the theoretical underground for a new wave of xenophobic white nativism.

The train has already left that outdated station. What is now required is a wider acceptance and enjoyment of multiple identities and loyalties and, if religious compassion truly matters, a deeper concern regarding the burdens and woes of displaced peoples. The time has come to overcome our fear of diversity and to learn how to appreciate and enjoy the dignity of difference as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has put it in his recent book, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (2003).

Huntington has overstressed the peculiarities of the late 20th century Latin American immigration. After all, Benjamin Franklin once said about German migrants: "I have great misgivings about these immigrants because of their clannishness, their little knowledge of English, their press, and the increasing need of interpreters . . ." And in 1855 Massachusetts Gov. Henry J. Gardner denounced the Irish immigrants then swarming into his state as a "horde of foreign barbarians." From that "horde of foreign barbarians" emerged, by the way, the prominent Kennedy family, among many others.

Huntington rightly underscores that in American public and political affairs culture and religion are important. Indeed, they matter as much as ethnicity, race, and gender distinction. But as his views on the "clash of civilizations" became handy for a new crusade against Islam, so this new vision of a "clash of cultures" could become handy for a new prosecutorial inquisition, this time against Latino/Hispanics, especially against Latin American migrants.

Huntington's suggestion of "societal security," as complementary to "national security," might end up by narrowing substantially the horizons of American cultural diversity and pluralism. Is that a desirable goal to be pursued in times where in mega cities like the one where we meet today, Chicago, so many different worlds live and mingle in unavoidable proximity? I, at least, do not think so.

Will the Latino/Hispanics, during these early decades of the 21th century, become the new national scapegoats? Huntington seems concerned about the possible emergence of an American “white nativism.” But, is his perspective an antidote or, on the contrary, sustenance for such a xenophobic movement? I have my serious doubts. Do the Latino/Hispanics truly represent “a major potential threat to the cultural and political integrity of the United States,” as Huntington has argued? I do not think he has made his case; I doubt that he can make it. Whether that is something to lament, denounce, or celebrate depends on the eyes of the beholder. Mine, I must confess, are very critical.

Xenophilia: towards an ethical theology of migration

Migration and xenophobia are serious social quandaries. But they also convey urgent challenges to the ethical sensitivity of religious people and all persons of good will. The first step we need to take is to perceive this issue from the perspective of the immigrants, to pay cordial (that is, deep from our hearts) attention to their stories of suffering, hope, courage, resistance, ingenuity, and (as so frequently happens in the deserts of the Southwest) death. Many of the unauthorized migrants have become, in the apt title of John Bowe’s book, *nobodies* (*Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy*, 2007), our new $\mu\kappa\tau\omicron\iota\kappa\omicron\iota$, *douloi*.

This nation has a tendency to play the role of the Lone Ranger. Yet, migration and xenophobia are international problems, affecting most of the world community, and have to be understood and faced from a worldwide perspective and context. The churches and Christian communities need to address this issue from an international ecumenical perspective. Let me mention briefly some related ecumenical activities.

1. The theological congress on migration that took place September 6 – 9 2007, in Madrid. Spain not only faces similar challenges as the United States, but also has the peculiarity of a drastic historical change: from a nation of emigrants to a nation of immigrants, many of whom, let us not forget, belong to the traditional religious adversary of the Iberian nation, Islam.

2. On October 1 2007 the World Council of Churches’ Global Ecumenical Network on Migration (GEM) sponsored, in Beirut, Lebanon, a public hearing on migration's impact on the church, where a panel of experts from different regions of the world examined the ethical dimensions of migration and how churches are affected. The results, together with those of a similar public hearing in North America, will build into a major future consultation on “Migration and the changing ecclesial landscape.”

3. The World Council of Churches began in 2007 an online ecumenical and international theological forum on migration.

Christians among us should never forget nor neglect the many biblical injunctions to care for the powerless and marginalized in our societies, including the stranger and foreigner. Allow me to remember some of them (KJV):

1. Leviticus 19: 34: "The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."

2. Ezekiel 22: 6-7: "The princes of Israel, every one were in thee to their power to shed blood . . . in the midst of thee have they dealt by oppression with the stranger."

3. Matthew 25: 35^b: "I was a stranger (*xenos*) and ye took me in . . ."

We need to countervail the xenophobia that contaminates public discourse in the United States and other Western nations with an embracing, exclusion-rejecting, perspective of the stranger, the alien, the other (cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 1996), one which I have named *xenophilia*, a concept that comprises hospitality, love, and care for the stranger. For in the Scriptures' perspective we all are strangers residing in God's earth (Leviticus 25: 23: "the land is mine . . . ye are strangers and sojourners with me.") In times of increasing economic and political globalization, *xenophilia* should be our duty and vocation, as a faith affirmation not only of our common humanity, but also of the ethical priority in the eyes of God of those living in the shadows and margins of our societies.

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