

Liberal Protestantism and Immigration

By Robert Kyser

This writer grew up in a "social gospel" Presbyterian Church on the West Side of Buffalo, N.Y. — a church that had been founded in the early 1800s as a mission to the workers at the western terminus of the Erie Barge Canal. My theological beliefs center in the sovereignty of God; in the authority of a scripture, the meaning of which has been sifted in light of modern Biblical scholarship; and in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, to be extended and expressed in service to the world.

My focus here is on the issue of liberal Protestantism and immigration to America. As I began serving local churches as a Presbyterian pastor in 1952, World War II was a recent memory and calls came from every denomination's national headquarters to serve the needs of refugees and to help rebuild church infrastructure in Europe. Most of this assistance took the form of special fund-raising so that specific needs could be met overseas.

But the mainline churches, and American society in general, had also come through the war effort assuming that pre-war animosities were to be abandoned in favor of a pot of melted cultures. Prior to the war, the Protestant churches were quite proud of their Old World roots and protective of their particular ethnic reading of the Christian tradition. The postwar curriculum in my denomination, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), devoted a major segment to teaching confirmands about the Ulster connection — Scots-Irish Presbyterians who migrated to the American colonies from the late 1600s on and played a significant role in the anti-monarchy movement of the American Revolution and in the formation of the new republic. I'm sure this was equally true of the Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists and others who were part of the immigrant stream in the early days of our country.

The predominantly British origins of the early Americans helped create the climate of disdain and rejection which greeted the Irish Catholics who migrated here after 1840. When a Northern Michigan congregation I served prepared to celebrate its centennial, we asked the Presbyterian Historical Society for copies of early correspondence between the Board of Foreign Missions and a teacher-missionary sent to work in the 1850s among the local Indians. Mr. Porter's description of the "satanic" machinations of the

neighboring French-speaking priests among his "beloved Indian children" was an embarrassment to current sensibilities.

Helping the Immigrants

Many Americans viewed the "new immigrants" of the late 1800s and early 1900s — immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe — as diluting and mongrelizing the WASP character of American/Christian society. The restrictionist stance of such a prominent preacher as Harry Emerson Fosdick is indicative of a climate of restriction that prevailed among many church people in the early part of this century:

I am a restrictionist in immigration because I am not a sentimentalist.... How can a man who faces the facts fail to see two things: first, that so far as this country is concerned, we cannot handle the problem physically or morally if, with the population of the globe multiplying itself by two every sixty years, we open our gates freely to the teeming peoples, and second, that if we should it would not solve any other people's problems.¹

At the same time there were more practical motivations at work among other Christian believers who organized themselves to minister to the migrants, once here, to make them into English-speaking, hard-working, clean-living participants in the American dream. The settlement house movement is a chapter in American church history that should not be forgotten. In the course of my seminary education (1950-53) we were urged to accept "field work" which meant working as assistants in the churches of the Chicago area. I was assigned to a "neighborhood house" on the near North side where most of the clients were from Italian immigrant homes, though there were many intermarriages with longer-standing Irish residents. The mission of the settlement house, as developed in Chicago by Jane Addams at Hull House, was to help neighborhood families adjust to American life with classes in English, nutrition, child care and home-making along with recreational and sports programs for the young.

In 1921, the famous Methodist theologian Georgia Harkness presented as her master's thesis a training

manual for church folk recruited for this special ministry. Her tone was both restrictive and constructive:

The attitude we have adopted toward the new immigrant has varied as widely as the American temperament. Many have churlishly advocated the exclusion of all immigrants for the benefit of the American workman. Others, moved by sentiment rather than sense, have urged us to fling wide the doors and take in everybody. The terms of entry which we may rightfully impose upon the immigrant ... are determined by the requirements of public safety, public health, and public order.²

One pauses in the chronology here to ask: "What happened — what transition has taken place over the past 40 years that such practical measures toward immigrants and immigration have been turned inside out?" Our religious mission to aid the Americanization of the newcomers has turned from pride in an open society of melted cultures into an embarrassed surrender to the maintenance of ethnic enclaves, as though we had been doing the wrong thing in urging the newcomers to adapt. The requirements for citizenship have been severely diluted and we find the social action offices of our major denominations advocating language rights and cultural maintenance, on our behalf.³ Perhaps we will find some answers as we move along in the story.

Because of their affinity for the Presbyterian system, many Hungarian refugees who came to the United States after their failed revolution of 1956 affiliated with Presbyterian Churches. My home church in Buffalo (a working class congregation of Scots and Scots-Irish, situated in a then-predominantly Italian neighborhood) had a Hungarian refugee, Rev. Harsanyi, as pastor for some time. He was followed by Renato Alden, an Italian-immigrant pastor whose father, a Scot, had married while serving the British Embassy in Rome.

1965 — The Watershed

My inner-city background is hardly typical of the mainline Protestant experience of contact with émigrés. The majority of our churches are in the small towns and on the rural crossroads of America. I served small congregations in Southern Michigan for several years and then moved to a newly formed church in the suburban sprawl outside Detroit. That was during the '50s when the Baby Boomers were building up congregations with their large families. During those years, refugees and immigrants were people on another side of the planet to be helped with contributions through Church World Service, the inter-denominational relief agency of the National Council of Churches.

"The mission to Americanize the migrants changed to an advocacy to protect their cultural enclaves."

Then, in 1965, U.S. immigration laws were drastically revised. Urban churches changed their programs to minister to large numbers of new arrivals. Worship and education materials were developed for Spanish-speakers and Koreans. The mission to Americanize the migrants changed to an advocacy to protect their cultural enclaves.

During the Vietnam War, churches struggled between patriotic affirmations and sympathy for the protesters. We thought long and hard about "establishments" and "generation gaps." In the war's aftermath came refugees and then "boat people," but also the guilt of a supposedly wrong-headed involvement in a devastating military engagement. The present day generation of leaders was educated in a climate of rebellion against the establishment. American flags came out of many sanctuaries and the mission turned to victims — victims of war, of poverty, of abuse and neglect, of political oppression, of economic upheaval, of racism, of sexism — as sincere believers looked for ways to express their faith in concrete actions.

The Church/Government Connection

As we think about the waves of immigrants that have come from Mexico, Cuba, Haiti and Southeast Asia it's helpful to know how much the federal establishment depends on church agencies for resettlement work. After a political decision is made to admit people to the U.S., the government asks the various national denominational offices to assume responsibility for settling them. Next, the call goes out to local pastors and churches: "Please help. Won't you ask your congregation to sponsor a refugee family?" And we did. Our Detroit congregation sponsored newlyweds from Budapest who had escaped from behind the Iron Curtain during their honeymoon trip. We rented a house for them, provided basic housekeeping items, assisted with jobs and English classes. After six months they moved to a Hungarian enclave in Chicago where they could associate with more of their countrymen.

"The congregation, by a close vote, decided to say 'no.' And it was not 'burnout' or a turn away from compassion."

After the fall of Saigon, the congregation I serve in Northern Michigan agreed to sponsor three young men who had worked with the Americans and were taken out with the evacuees. We found families to take them in, helped them with jobs and English language tutors. Within a year they had gravitated to warmer climates since there is a considerable difference between average temperatures in Vietnam and Northern Michigan.

But when the "boat people" started to arrive and the contacts from the national office came again, the congregation voted narrowly to say "no."⁴ And it was not "burnout" or a turn away from compassion. It was a realization that the process could not keep going as it was; some other way had to be found to assist the unfortunates where they were. The nation and its churches simply could not continue to accept the huge numbers of Third World people who wanted to make a new start in life by moving to the United States.

By and large church people want their better nature appealed to. They may not always follow the dicta of their leadership, but they do expect appeals to their caring nature. But as the expansionist social programs come down from denominational headquarters, church members frequently have to choose — and often they are presented a choice between altruism and their livelihood.

The church bureaucracies have their share of what one could call "tenured radicals" (a university campus appellation) and we can see how that happens. A priest or pastor comes to be known in the congregation and region (diocese or presbytery or classis) as a champion for a particular cause. And perhaps that leader rides this "hobby" so much that a local congregation can no longer put up with it. The palatable solution for such passion is to move this person up into the bureaucracy where one can specialize in preparing educational materials, drafting pronouncements and lobbying. Thus it is that denominational leaders, especially in the fields of social action, are often detached from — or even opposed to — their constituents.

Most church members are unaware that since World War II, a working relationship has developed between the State Department and denominational (including Jewish) resettlement structures to work out funds, numbers and placement strategies. This is a two-way street: there can be pressure from a Jewish refugee resettlement organization to accept more Soviet Jews, for example, or from Catholic or Lutheran groups to accept people about whom they are concerned. Church members at large are doubtless unaware that the migrant numbers can be pushed upward by a few persons speaking on their behalf.

Who Speaks For You?

This is equally true of the lobbying offices that most religious groups maintain in the nation's capital.⁵ Obviously most members of churches are unaware that

church lobbyists testify before members of Congress, that they speak for so many million Presbyterians, or Lutherans or Catholics, and urge that the immigrant or refugee or asylee quotas be bumped up. Congressional staffers can accept the inference of unanimity as true when in actuality the bulk of those church members may not agree, or even have any idea that they are being represented in such fashion.

The recent vote in California on Proposition 187 is a case in point. Most church establishments urged their constituents to vote against the proposition. The vote itself showed a resolve (on the part of many presumably sincere church members) to restrict migration by reducing the benefits-pull and making the federal government more responsive to the tax burden placed by immigrants on local communities.

One week after the election, an open letter dated November 14, 1994 asked Governor Pete Wilson to reverse the executive order by which he had begun to implement the provisions of Proposition 187. The letter was signed "on behalf of our 49 million constituent members" by the General Secretary and the President of the National Council of Churches. How many mainline pastors across the country shared that information with their parishioners?

No Simple Choices

At first blush it seems like a gross miscarriage of Christian justice to suggest that immigrant numbers be limited but other values must be taken into account. Six areas of policy need to be reconsidered by the churches:

1. **The abuse of asylum.** When a serious situation erupts somewhere in the world and various countries are asked to accept their share of the victims who genuinely need asylum, it is incumbent on us as compassionate Christians to help victims in *some* way. But a closer examination of current practice reveals that asylum is being terribly abused in many cases. People no longer in danger (if they ever were) are arriving and being coached to ask for asylum, since that ploy puts them in a legal category that virtually guarantees their immediate release onto the streets. For the sake of the very definition of compassion, we need to recover the true meaning of asylum. Others stay after the danger has passed, when they should return home. Asylum should generally be temporary, not permanent.

2. **The plight of our own unemployed — blacks, whites and others.** Church people should remember their commitments to our own poor. For instance, just as blacks were getting a foothold on the economic ladder in 1965, immigration law changes opened the gates to immigrant workers. At the very time when post-World War II attitude changes and civil rights laws began to open employment for blacks, immigration numbers increased radically and cut steadily into job opportunities. As concerned Christians

we should keep the well-being of our own poor as a top priority.

3. **Population growth.** The Presbyterian Church responded to Earth Day by urging the stabilization of U.S. population and advocating the use of national resources to encourage family planning throughout the world. Yet the population of the U.S. has climbed dramatically since 1970, with over half the increase attributable to immigrants and their offspring. Every congregation's officer corps and adult study network should view and discuss the video *It's About Time: Population and People of Faith*, produced by the Institute for Development Training, Box 2522, Chapel Hill, NC, (919) 967-0563, FAX (919) 929-2353.

"If the growth in population threatens our carrying capacity, and that growth is due to immigration, then limiting immigration becomes part of the effort to preserve the environment."

4. **The environment.** The other major concern for Protestant adherents which emerged from Earth Day is the fate of the earth. Churches reexamined their theologies and developed programs to cut consumption and reduce waste. We must teach a love for the planet and elicit a commitment to future generations, but we must not fail to see the discrepancy in advocating increasing numbers of immigrants while at the same time calling for preservation of our environment. If the growth in population threatens our carrying capacity, and that growth is due to immigration, then limiting immigration becomes part of the effort to preserve the environment.

5. **Sanctuary.** The sanctuary movement used churches and church people as a ploy to change U.S. policies in Central America. We need to own up to the downside of a strategy that undermines the rule of law. Illegals are illegal, and an affront to the many legal immigrants who wait in line and proceed according to the rules.

6. **The true meaning of sponsorship.** When congregations sign up to sponsor an immigrant or immigrant family, they should accept full responsibility for the care of these people so that they do not become a burden to the state. We should be ashamed to sign newcomers up for public assistance. It amounts to taking resources from the other taxpayers in our communities without their permission, as a way to satisfy our need to perform a good deed. That the State Department encourages the resettlement agencies to use these avenues doesn't make it right.

As a professional in liberal Protestant churches over four decades, I have been proud to serve among compassionate, generous, committed people. When called upon to help with emergencies, they have done so with high spirits. But there are dilemmas, conflicting values, and hard choices to be made. The earth cannot sustain the ever-growing human populations and the United States cannot continue to absorb the numbers of migrants, legal and illegal, who are entering now.

It is time to rethink our stance. ■

NOTES

¹ Miller, Robert Moats, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.443.

² Harkness, Georgia, *The Church and the Immigrant*, Boston University School of Religious Education and Social Work, 1921.

³ See "National Religious Lobbies" by Roy Beck, **THE SOCIAL CONTRACT**, Vol.V, No.3, Spring 1995, pp.160-166.

⁴ The change was due in no small measure to the discussion points scored by the editor and publisher of this journal.

⁵ Beck, Roy, op.cit.