

Immigration: Don't Let "Reform" Be an Excuse for Increased Repression

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The deeply flawed plan for immigration reform put forward by Senator Chuck Schumer of New York (and backed by Obama) is not a positive place to begin the discussion.

While the nation's media attention was focused on health care reform, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters massed on Washington, D.C. They rejected the notion that reform should prioritize a portrayal of Democrats as "tough" on illegal immigrants by placing harsh enforcement strategies at its heart. Yet that is what Schumer and Graham seem to agree on. As the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights points out, the Schumer/Graham plan "emphasizes increases in worksite and border enforcement as an apparent tradeoff for a 'tough but fair' legalization program." And it relies on the idea of providing temporary worker visas to lower-skilled immigrants who are apparently expected to send their money home, providing American farmers, agribusiness, and other employers with a source of cheap labor that can depress the wages of other laborers. These temporary workers can easily be exploited and may even soon become a new group of undocumented workers.

The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights calls for a different approach based on core reforms:

Suspend detentions and deportations while humanitarian policy alternatives are being put in place, and reinstate due process.

Support legalization without the onerous hurdles of past proposals that will limit applications.

Uphold family reunification as a core principle of immigration policy.

Expand and expedite legal immigration.

End the criminalization of immigrants by repealing employer sanctions, stopping the militarization of the border, and ending local police collaboration with such programs.

Strengthen labor law enforcement for all workers, regardless of citizenship or immigrant status.

Ensure immigrant access to social services.

This is just one of many attempts to refocus the policy debate on humane principles. Yet when we state the underlying principles, we immediately run into a political roadblock: the

fear that residents of the world's richest country have of being overrun by others seeking our wealth and taking our jobs. While in the short run this fear is not well-founded, it has a logic to it — would we really allow everyone who could figure out a way to cross our borders to become citizens? If not, what should we do to help make their lives at home in their own countries more attractive to them? Isn't that a smarter alternative than further arming our borders? These questions are rarely answered persuasively, even by those who speak to the deeper level of problems facing immigrants.

To its credit, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights acknowledges that immigration is tied to policies that create displacement and forced migration. It calls for policymakers to support policies that promote sustainable economic development, livable environments, job creation, and peace “so that migration is an option and not a last resort for economic survival.”

We spiritual progressives need to enter the national debate with an ever more forceful insistence that immigration reform should include a commitment to the Global Marshall Plan (GMP) developed by the Network of Spiritual Progressives and introduced this January as H.Res.1016 by Congressman Keith Ellison. The GMP is the only coherent answer to the legitimate fear that fair treatment of illegal immigrants could bring tens of millions more to our shores in the next few decades. The answer is ending global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, and inadequate health care (i.e., implementing our proposed Global Marshall Plan). If we make these long-term reforms, people en masse will have a far greater incentive to stay in their home countries.

But what about those who do want to come, even when a GMP has eliminated global poverty and put the rest of these changes in place? The simple and consistent answer from the standpoint of a spiritual progressive should be: LET THEM IN! OPEN OUR BORDERS!

Spiritual progressives take seriously the moments in the Torah where God responds to the “realists” who warn that the elimination of debts every seven years, and the return to the original equal distribution of land every fifty years called for by the Jubilee, can't possibly work. God's response: “The land belongs to me.” Which is another way of saying the land doesn't belong to us and we have an obligation to share what we have. It belongs neither to the humans who were first there, nor to the people who took the land by conquest, nor to the people who later bought it, an understanding shared by many indigenous people who found it difficult indeed to wrap their minds around concepts of “ownership” brought by Western colonialists. Spiritual people need to teach this message: we humans don't have a “right” to any part of the earth, but only an obligation to care for it and share it with all other human beings and with the animals and plant life.

Take that seriously and you can immediately see what a crime it is against God, spirit, Gaia, the unity of all being, the consciousness of the universe, or what our ethical commitments ought to be when people stand on the borders with guns and kill, wound, torture, imprison, or deport others who want to come to live with us.

“Well,” you may argue, “that position is so utopian for the current period we'd better not even put that into public discourse.” And our response is this: It's no more utopian than to think that you can get people to treat undocumented immigrants with respect and decency in a society that believes that: 1) we have an absolute right to the earth or the part of it called the United States, 2) we have the right to use violence against those who want to

come here illegally, and 3) that if we don't use that violence but instead treat undocumented immigrants humanely we will be overrun by even more who will abuse our "generosity" by using our health care, social services, and educational systems, which are already under-financed, over-used, and requiring more and more of our tax dollars to keep running.

So, take your pick about which utopian fantasy you want to go with. For spiritual progressives, it ought to be the one that reflects our fundamental commitment to generosity and caring for others, and that means that we should be insisting that anyone who talks about immigration reform should simultaneously be talking about the goals of the Global Marshall Plan, even as we fully embrace the proposal of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, remembering the love that the Bible instructs us to show toward not only our neighbors but also to "the stranger."

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