In his first State of Union address, President Trump repeatedly linked immigration with gang violence, murder, and terrorism. This, of course, was not surprising from someone who has made demonizing and deporting undocumented immigrants and gutting legal immigration a major focus of his Administration. Notably missing from his speech were any facts supporting the notion that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans. There is good reason for this: over a century’s worth of social science research has consistently found that immigrants are no more likely to engage in criminal activity than persons born in the U.S.

One of the earliest studies on immigration was conducted by the Industrial Commission, a body appointed by President William McKinley to investigate questions pertaining to immigration, business, and labor. In 1901, the commission issued a special report that found that “foreign-born whites were less criminal than native whites.” Although the United States Immigration Commission, formed by Congress in 1907 to study the impact of recent immigration to the United States, concluded that immigration from southern and eastern Europe posed a serious threat to American culture and society, it nevertheless found that “no satisfactory evidence has yet been produced to show that immigration has resulted in an increase in crime disproportionate to the increase in the adult population” and that the presence of recent immigrants may have even suppressed criminal activity. The Wickersham Commission (1929-1931) documented widespread evasion of Prohibition and its negative effect on American society. In the course of its investigations into law enforcement practices, the commission noted a “strong likelihood” that immigrants “can definitely be exonerated from the charge that they are responsible for a disproportionate share of the crimes current in this country.”

Evidence documenting the lack of connection between immigration and crime has only grown in recent years. In 2017, criminologists Graham Ousey and Charis Kubrin concluded an exhaustive analysis of two decades worth of studies (1994-2014) on the relationship between crime and immigration to “geospatial” units such as city blocks, census tracts, counties, or metropolitan areas. A meta-analysis of the 51 studies they examined found almost no relationship between immigration and crime. However, when they compared point-in-time studies to longitudinal studies within their sample, the researchers found that longitudinal studies revealed a significantly larger and more negative relationship between immigration and crime, i.e. increased immigration was associated with a decrease in crime. Ousey and Kubrin believe this finding is particularly noteworthy as longitudinal studies tend to carry more weight in scientific research because they offer a greater ability to control for confounding variables.

Another way to measure the relationship between crime and immigration is to look at the number of immigrants serving time in jails or prisons. This is complicated by the fact
that several states do not report the immigration status of persons they incarcerate. However, the U.S. Census counts the nativity and naturalization status of incarcerated persons in its annual American Community Survey (ACS). Using 2014 ACS data, the libertarian Cato Institute employed statistical methods to identify undocumented immigrant prisoners by excluding incarcerated, non-U.S. citizen respondents with characteristics that undocumented immigrants are unlikely to have, such as a household without children receiving Food Stamps. They estimated the incarceration rate for native born Americans at 1.53 percent compared to 0.47 percent for legal immigrants and 0.85 percent for undocumented immigrants. When those incarcerated solely for immigration violations were not included, the incarceration rate for undocumented immigrants fell to 0.5 percent.

Nativist politicians scapegoat immigrants and inflate immigrant criminality to manipulate public fears and create support for harsh, anti-immigrant policies. But why do people continue to believe such distortions, despite the preponderance of evidence that such fears are misguided?

Some might argue that the human brain is “hard-wired” to fear outsiders—that in pre-historic times, this kept humans safe. Additionally, because our brains are also built to be vigilant, we are constantly on the lookout for new threats. Such fears are then compounded by the way our minds have evolved to think in mental shortcuts (heuristics), making anecdotes about the threatening actions of outsiders even more potent. By focusing on one aspect of a complex problem (e.g. crimes committed by immigrants) and ignoring others (e.g. probability, randomness) humans form “cognitive biases” that lead to faulty decision-making processes. The constant barrage of disparaging comments about immigrants by the president also serves to reinforce a mental frame that immigrants are different and dangerous.

How can one respond to the fearmongering about immigrants and challenge the harsh policies that such scapegoating makes possible? I suggest through the lens of mature religious faith.

A core teaching of all the great faith traditions at their most evolved or mature level is the unity of creation and the equality of humankind. Such an understanding of the universe has come to be seen as essential for the survival of human society and the environment. Without this kind of consciousness, humans seem inevitably to resort to primitive tendencies that result in tribalism, endless war, and the degradation of the earth’s resources.

Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, writes that mature religion serves as a “conveyor belt for the evolution of human consciousness” towards love, non-violence, justice, inclusivity, and the universality of such a message, in contrast to immature religion which stalls people at the early stages of tribal consciousness where they are convinced that only they are worthy. Mature religion creates willing people who unfold in response to love and grace and freedom; immature religion creates willful people who react to the illusions of others.

Fr. Rohr suggests that if we would just imitate Jesus in very practical ways then the Christian religion would be “made to order” to grease the wheels of human consciousness towards love and inclusivity. Since its central figure was himself a refugee who fled Herod’s persecution and eventually became an itinerant preacher, perhaps it is not surprising that mature Christianity, rooted in the Hebraic tradition, has so much wisdom to guide the treatment of immigrants. The moral imperative to treat strangers with hospitality is repeated more times in the Old Testament than any other except the commandment to worship one God. And just so we would not miss the point, Jesus repeats four times in the Last Judgement (Matt 25:31-46) that compassion towards others, including “the stranger,” is essential to our salvation.

Christianity’s core teachings could not be more clear on the imperative to welcome and love the stranger. This then begs the question—when will Christians “grow up” and start taking our faith seriously?

ENDNOTES

1 The report did not even bother to distinguish between foreign born people of color and U.S. born people of color.


5 Almost six million U.S. citizen children under the age of 18 live with a parent or family member who is undocumented. As U.S. citizens, these children are eligible for Food Stamps (SNAP). See https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/us-citizen-children-impacted-immigration-enforcement.


9 Ibid.