

Metropolis 2013: Western Models of the Role of Religion in Immigrant Integration

**The Role of Faith-based Advocacy and Faith-Based Coalitions
in U.S. Immigration Policy Debates**

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Introduction

The paper will explore the developing role and impact of faith-based entities in the immigrant integration process in the United States and the shaping of public policy towards immigrants, with a particular focus on faith-based advocacy coalitions active in the current debate around comprehensive reform. While coalitions of faith-based groups or faith-based actors working in broader coalitions have been in the forefront of political activism on behalf of U.S. immigration reform in recent years, the history and the social and political dynamics underlying this engagement are not well studied, especially in the context of the evolving role of religion and religious groups in the immigrant integration process in the U.S. more generally. Nor have the lessons that this history offers for immigration policies and programs outside the U.S., in Europe especially, been much explored. The current essay offers a modest and provisional step towards opening up these areas of discussion. The first part of the paper presents a historical perspective on religion and immigration in the U.S. context, from the 1920s through the 1970s, including comparisons to the very different role of religious institutions in a European setting. The second part of the paper will look more in depth at the growing role played by faith-based entities and advocacy coalitions in the U.S. debate around immigration reform from the 1980s forward. The last section offers a short set of lessons learned and potential models that might be applicable to the role of faith-based actors and religious perspectives more generally in shaping policy frameworks for immigrant integration in a European context.

1. Faith-based Perspectives on U.S. Immigration: History and Conceptual Framework

Given that America's Constitution famously made separation of church and state part of the country's democratic principles, it is notable that there are few places in the developed world where faith-based discourse and faith-based affiliations have come to play larger role in politics

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and civil society than in the United States. The comparisons in this respect with Western Europe—where polls regularly show much lower levels of religious attendance, even as some form of an established church retains a legal and institutional presence in many countries—represent an apparent paradox of common remark and considerable scholarly analysis.

With this background it should be no surprise to note the important and growing role of faith-based entities and religious viewpoints in shaping U.S. immigration policy and immigration politics, as well as the impact of religious institutions more broadly in immigrant integration and identity formation.² As much scholarship have shown, faith-based communities are key settings in which newcomers negotiate their passage into American social and economic life, drawing on churches, mosques, temples and synagogues not just for a sense of community and spiritual identity but resources from job networks to citizenship classes. Religion serves here both as an “institution” and as “a system of meaning”—i.e., “a cultural scheme that [immigrants] can use to interpret their experiences and guide their actions” (Alba et al., p. 2). Centers of worship that reflect a group’s traditional religious affiliation are among the first institutions created or accessed by immigrant community members upon their arrival in the U.S. In turn, many established religious institutions, most notably the Catholic Church, have very deliberately and strategically engaged with and sought to include co-religionist immigrant communities among their flocks, expanding their own structures to accommodate them. The presence in many U.S. cities of parish churches serving different ethnic and language groups, often only blocks apart, are just one very visible instance of this process (*ibid.*, p. 6).

The role of religious identity and religious ideology in shaping U.S. public policy and politics around immigration—both at the grass roots level and in legislative arenas—is in many important ways an outgrowth of this complex process of engagement between faith-based

² In this paper we use the terms “faith-based” and “religious” somewhat interchangeably, especially with reference to ideas and values rather than specific institutional structures or affiliations. Within the U.S. policy arena, at least, the expression “faith-based” has come to be preferred to “religious” when referring to individuals, groups, and coalitions engaged in action on behalf of immigrants and immigration reform, since as used it focuses more on underlying moral and intellectual perspectives rather than a denominational identity or overt religious purpose. As such it can extend to goals that are not strictly speaking “religious” ones and also holds the potential—when referring to a group or coalition—for including actors from across a wide range of formal or for that matter informal religious affiliations. The fact that this label is a flexible and inclusive one should not, of course, disguise the potential for tension and complications (some productive, some not) in the relationships between members of such a group or coalition. We address this issue tangentially in the discussion below but it certainly deserves deeper analysis when exploring the dynamics of faith-based advocacy and policy formation. Finally, it is worth noting that the term “faith” itself in this context comes freighted with a certain Western bias, especially when used to refer to religious traditions as different as Buddhism and Hinduism—an issue well beyond consideration here.

institutions and immigrant communities. As with respect to the process of integration, policy advocacy by religious entities extends on behalf of immigrants well beyond the religious frame of reference. As a recent comprehensive collection of studies on this issue notes: “From the perspective of civic life, religious institutions of immigrant populations and their leaders have frequently played an important role in representing the groups interests to non-ethnic audiences and making claims on its behalf.... The interests involved may be religious...[b]ut, even more frequently, they involve overtly secular concerns, such as the legal and political rights of immigrants” (*ibid.*, p. 5). From the 1930s through the 1940s, for example, Jewish leaders and Jewish civic and religious institutions advocated strongly in both public and private arenas for changes to policies that restricted the immigration of Jews from Europe, though the policy changes they sought were not restricted to Jews alone (Breitman and Kraut 1987). Many other faith-based groups, especially those that represent a strong immigrant constituency, from the Lutheran Church to the Catholic Church, have a similar history in the U.S. going back many decades—in the 1920s, for example, when 75 percent of U.S. Catholics were immigrants (Kerwin 2006). Of course, even this more “secular” version of the faith-based narrative is typically framed in larger religious terms and with reference to these organizations’ larger social mission—embodying, for example, biblical injunctions to care for the stranger, as well as, in the case of both Catholic and Jewish traditions, a mission to gather or identify with those in exile. This history and this organizational vision are also reflected in the central role played by faith-based NGOs as “voluntary agencies” in the refugee resettlement process. More recently, we see the Catholic Church, the nominal home for millions of Latino immigrants, becoming an increasingly strong and engaged voice on a wide range of questions touching the rights of all immigrants, regardless of ethnicity.

The story of the relationship between faith groups and immigrants is not without its complications, of course, like any aspect of immigrant integration. For all those organizations that have supported immigrants, institutions speaking for other denominations—especially many Protestant groups—have been home to strong nativist positions, directed against Catholic and Jewish immigrants in particular. Nor has the support of religious organizations for the civil rights and social inclusion of immigrants, Catholic, Jewish or otherwise, necessarily been predicated on valuing and preserving the cultural perspectives and social norms that those immigrants brought with them. Historically, the growth and success of Catholic and Jewish religious institutions in

the U.S. has in fact been premised on many levels on their entering into the “mainstream” of American life and civic identity—an “assimilation” process that in many ways defines the demands placed on immigrant communities themselves. Finally, post 9/11 and in the context of U.S.- led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a new strain of nativist religious bias, this time focused on Islam, has come to shape public opinion as well as public policy (Cesari 2010). While directed more towards external as internal actors, this line of thinking has often driven bias-related attacks, real and symbolic, on individuals and institutions within the U.S. Muslim community—a relatively small and often isolated one, even in parts of the country with large immigrant populations. Anti-Muslim bias has also increasingly infected the discourse of opponents to comprehensive immigration reform. The most recent example is this was the occasion of the Boston Marathon bombings this April in our organization’s home city, when the involvement of two suspects of Chechen Muslim origin brought new fears of “terrorist” infiltrators to an already fraught discussion of border security in the halls of the U.S. Congress. The focused and coordinated response of many U.S. Muslim organizations and broader faith-based immigrant advocacy coalitions to such accusations speaks, in turn, to the growing engagement and sophistication of Muslim voices in this debate.

Scholarly discussions of the changing role of religious groups and religious values in immigration policy has also in many ways been shaped by that very history. Into the 1960s, much of the literature faith-based institutions focused on their role as settings within which immigrants and immigrant communities—particularly those from Western Europe—could negotiate their engagement with U.S. civic, social and economic life and values, with much attention paid to the social and political dynamics among mainstream Western religious entities, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish (Herberg 1960). In the late 1960s and on into the 1970s and 1980s—even as changes in federal immigration policy and U.S. politics more broadly (including the Cold War) heralded the influx of diverse immigrant populations from Asia, Africa and the Middle East—considerably less academic attention on the whole was paid to the religious setting into which these new immigrants arrived and how that setting shaped the process of their incorporation into American life (Alba et al. 2008). It is doubly ironic that this should have been the case even as African-American religious groups and religious leaders, from the 1950s on—both by themselves and as part of larger coalitions of political actors—became leading advocates for struggles on behalf of civil rights and social and economic opportunity for their own

communities, and the focal point of community organizing. The role that African American churches played in the long fight for civil rights—sometimes in opposition to white churches of their own denominations—was a development that both civil rights activists and civil rights scholars of politics at the time and since have noted (Lincoln 1990). As the following section of this paper notes, the historical lessons and faith-based institutional alliances forged in the context of the civil rights movements have had a direct impact in the movement for immigrant rights, starting in the 1970s.

Before turning to that more recent history, it is worth making some initial comparisons between the U.S. setting and that of Europe, especially with the developments both in terms of migrant populations and changing religious perspectives in recent decades. Given the marked differences mentioned above between the U.S. and European policy contexts on the role of religion as well as immigration—whether at the European Union level or with regard to individual member states—any comparisons must, of course, be highly conditional. When looking at countries with institutions and histories as different as the United Kingdom, Germany or Denmark, for example, one has to acknowledge common starting points that include an established role within government for a particular church and a more ethnically defined nation state. A notable distinction too, compared to the U.S. situation, is the dominant share of Muslim migrants among the “third country nationals” in many EU settings, the same migrants who often also face the greatest socioeconomic challenges as well as systemic discrimination (Carrera and Parkin 2010). At the EU level, another profound difference lies in the development since 2005 of well-established and regularly updated legal, programmatic, research, and funding regimes focused on immigrant integration needs and challenges, including linguistic, economic, social and civic integration initiatives; formal protections for the civil rights of “vulnerable groups”; and promotion of intercultural dialogue between various constituencies and across different levels of the system (Carrera and Parkin 2010).

Within EU structures, we do in fact see a significant role played by coalitions of religious organizations in at least some areas of policy formation. For example, of 13 NGO umbrella groups operating in a formal advisory capacity to the European Union to promote “inclusion of vulnerable groups,” two have an explicit religious dimension: Caritas Europa and Eurodiaconia. Their very presence, however, underscores some of the tensions just mentioned: the first of these is a confederation of Catholic relief and social service organizations, the second a federation of

churches, social service organizations welfare organizations and NGOs that offer social services and education based ‘on Christian values’” (*ibid.*, p. 13). At same time, as a recent European Commission funded study of the role of religion in European Union law and policy has noted, many of the EU as well as EU member social and civic integration initiatives are addressed implicitly at Muslim populations—though often avoiding mention of religious issues per se (*ibid.*). While the limited policy role here for civic society actors who directly represent affected migrant populations might seem very much in contrast to U.S. trends discussed earlier, the challenge of including voices beyond more culturally established religious groups—Muslim voices in particular—remains an issue the U.S. and the EU have in common, as we will discuss further below.

2. U.S. Faith-based Advocacy and Immigration Reform: 1970s to the Present

Any discussion of the role of religion and religious groups in U.S. immigration policy in recent decades needs to take account of the increasingly public and politically engaged role of religious groups in U.S. civic and political debate in general since the 1970s, as well as the increasing willingness of U.S. politicians, of all political stripes, to run for office and stake out policy positions based on personal religious histories and values. We see these developments, for example, in what have been labeled the “culture wars” over issues like abortion, school prayer, or creationism, as well as in the willingness of politicians as different as George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to invoke their “born again” fundamentalist Christian experiences while campaigning for president. The issue of conflicting religious and cultural values, as a feature of both external and internal public policy, has of course increasingly become a part of this story in the U.S. post 9/11. While this history is too complex to go into here, it represents a pervasive fact of the national context that any deeper research on the role of faith-based groups in shaping U.S. immigration policy—as well as ongoing political engagement by faith-based actors in this arena—needs to take into account.

As suggested earlier, the role of U.S. faith-based organizations in advocating for immigration policy reform and acting on behalf of immigrants goes back many decades. In the case of the Catholic Church, perhaps the leading faith-based actor both on its own and in its engagement with broader pro-immigrant coalitions, the “bully pulpit” has been the United States Council of Catholic Bishops, notably in advancing an agenda on behalf of the rights of the unauthorized immigrants. In 1986, when Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control

Act (IRCA), the bishops—nominally the spiritual leaders of 78 million U.S. Catholics, or 25 percent of the U.S. population—argued that, “It is against the common good and unacceptable to have a double society, one visible with rights and one invisible without rights—a voiceless underground of undocumented persons.” In the wake of IRCA, the Bishops Conference was instrumental in mobilizing the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., the nation’s largest network of “qualified designated entities”—voluntary or community-based groups with permission from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to help those unauthorized apply for adjustment of status (Kerwin 2006). While officially supporting the right of the U.S. to secure its borders, the Bishop’s Conference has since the 1990s strongly opposed enforcement only policies, advancing a position that supports in principle the rights of workers to find employment outside their own country if they need to, as well as a pathway to earned citizenship, a worker visa program, strengthening family-based immigration, and support for the DREAM Act (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2013).

Other influential, reformed church hierarchies representing a considerable part of the U.S. population, including the Episcopal Church,³ the United Methodist Church⁴, and the United Church of Christ,⁵ have staked out similar positions, as have faith-based social service entities such as Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services. Even groups representing more traditionally conservative Christian denominations, such as the National Association of Evangelicals, have recently begun to speak out on behalf of more inclusive immigration reform policies (Jenkins 2013). Evangelical groups across the country have recently joined two other unexpected allies of immigration reform—conservative law enforcement and business groups—in a national “Bibles, Badges and Business” alliance to lobby for comprehensive legislation in the U.S. Congress.⁶ A steady chorus of Jewish religious and civic society groups—including some traditionally more supportive of conservative social and political views—have also joined the wide range of faith-based organizations calling for immigration reform (Weiner 2013). Community-based coalitions like the PICO National Network—founded in 1972 by a Jesuit priest, and now including 8 statewide networks and 44 affiliated federations working in 17 states⁷—have brought a

³ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/notice/episcopal-church-elca-presiding-bishops%E2%80%99-statement-senate%E2%80%99s-passage-comprehensive-immigration>

⁴ http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.7679333/k.6E87/The_Church_and_Immigration.htm

⁵ <http://faithandimmigration.org>

⁶ <http://bbbimmigration.org>

⁷ <http://www.piconetwork.org>

“community organizing” model to their work rooted both in labor organizing and the civil rights movement. PICO promotes a model where congregations of diverse denominations and faiths (including many Muslim groups, as well as Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh organizations) form the institutional base for community groups. Finally, the Immigrant Interfaith Coalition⁸ has built a far-reaching partnership of diverse faith-based civil society and social action groups—from the Americans Friends Service Committee to the PICO Network to Interfaith Worker Justice to the Muslim Public Affairs Council—creating an issue and advocacy oriented resource that includes media outreach, stakeholder training, legislative lobbying, field campaigns, and toolkits for community and public engagement.

What these and other faith-based entities and faith-based coalitions bring to the campaign for comprehensive immigration reform, it becomes clear, is not only their spiritual authority, strong institutional resources, and a mission-driven policy platform that can add moral weight to advocacy. They also bring increasingly sophisticated policy and advocacy tools, including the ability to activate large and influential grass root networks, build coalitions of activists across both denominational divides and religious/secular barriers, and launch and sustain large-scale strategic media, lobbying and political action campaigns at both state and federal levels. The ability of these faith-based actors to engage such a diverse set of grass roots community supporters certainly reflects, in many ways, the historical importance of religious institutions—as discussed earlier—in providing both social connections and a system of social meaning for their immigrant membership. It also speaks, of course, to the increasing widespread awareness of the incoherent and unsustainable character of U.S. immigration policy as a whole. At the same time, the success of groups like the Bishops Conference in launching advocacy and political action campaigns on behalf of immigration reform deploys a machinery and an organizational *modus operandi* that was refined in those “culture wars” of the 1970s, 1980s, and after, most often on behalf of far less “progressive” viewpoints such as opposition to abortion and more recently same-sex marriage. The much publicized resistance of the Bishops Conference to legislative proposals on behalf of the rights of gay and lesbian immigrants (Lochhead 2013) speaks to the ongoing tensions here, both across different sets of actors in the immigration reform arena, and with regard to the moral and institutional logic of faith-based policy advocacy in general.

⁸ <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org>

One final notable historical irony here, and another deep tension underlying the role of faith-based actors and coalition members advocating for U.S. immigration reform, has to do with the role of the African American church in this process, and indeed of African American voices as a whole. As discussed earlier, it was African American church leaders, church-based community organizing, and interfaith coalitions led by these churches that together helped drive the civil right movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and that in many ways served as a model for later faith-based activism aimed at reforming the U.S. immigration system—activism in which veterans of the civil rights movement (from the Bishops Conference to the Union of Reform Judaism) continue to play a part. What has been striking to many observers, however, is the extent to which African American churches themselves have not been strong or visible participants in this effort (Tune 2010). This situation echoes in many ways the broader challenges that immigrant advocates have faced engaging with civil rights leaders and African American communities as a whole, despite some effective local efforts in building “black-brown” alliances around specific issues, especially by organized labor (Bacon 2008).

3. Policy Lessons for Europe?

For an audience interested in exploring a future role for faith-based engagement and coalition building in support of the rights and integration of migrant communities or “third country nationals” within the European Community, there are a number of at least provisional lessons to be drawn from the U.S. experience discussed here. As already stressed, any such comparisons must acknowledge the very different historical, institutional and legal contexts in which this process is taking place in Europe compared to the U.S., including both more fully developed immigrant integration regimes within the EU, and a formal consultative role for two European faith-based NGO networks (both Christian) with regard to the inclusion of vulnerable immigrant populations.

In a great many respects, the EU approach to migrant integration represents an enviably comprehensive, institutionalized, and rational policy framework, especially from a U.S. perspective, where immigrant advocates are still fighting to keep integration language and aims included in any final reform legislation. At the same time, a 2010 European Commission funded study of “The Place of Religion in European Union Law and Policy” concluded that those religions and religious groups active in the policy-making process are not, on the whole, the same religious groups that are the targets of policy actions in the fields of “integration, social

inclusion, anti-discrimination and education and culture”—specifically Muslim groups, which in turn “lack a voice in policy dialogues at the European level” (*ibid.*, p. 37).

With these considerations taken into account, we would argue that the following areas deserve attention by European researchers, policymakers, faith-based interests, and civil society actors in the light of the U.S. experience:

1. At the European Commission level, a stronger effort to foster a more inclusive set of faith-based civil society actors in EU wide policy deliberations (endorsing one of the key recommendations in the European Commission report just mentioned).
2. Increased attention by all stakeholders to the role played by faith-based groups and houses of worship at the local and community level in promoting migrant social and economic inclusion and civic engagement. This is especially important with regard to religious denominations and ethnic communities, especially Muslim groups, lacking an institutionalized and broadly recognized policy voice at the EU or national levels.
3. A strong and sustained effort by non-governmental actors to build and maintain diverse coalitions of faith-based, civil rights and civil society actors both within EU member states and across the EU as a whole. This is both a challenging and particularly critical goal given the failures of nations with policies (and migrant populations) as diverse as the United Kingdom, Germany and France in promoting the socioeconomic progress and civic inclusion of their immigrant communities, and the uncertain impacts in these very different national contexts of existing EU integration frameworks, strong as these are in many respects.
4. In the context of all three prior recommendations, a greatly heightened effort at directly engaging with Muslim communities and their faith-based leadership and civil society organizations, as well as an acknowledgement of the very different character of these populations and the different social and policy issues that have arisen here in various member states. This is a broad lesson that the U.S., it goes without saying, needs to learn as well, but it has a particularly vital resonance in the EU context given the very large populations of Muslim descent in many member nations and the disproportionate levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and discrimination they face.

Despite the profound differences between U.S. and EU settings here, it is worth noting, in closing, how much the aims, challenges and potential impacts of faith-based activism and coalition building have in common on both sides of the Atlantic. This commonality speaks, certainly, to the common problems and the common social and institutional barriers that immigrant groups confront in Western receiving communities more generally. But it also underscores the unique opportunities for faith-based groups to create new alliances and new centers of power that begin to bridge those barriers—even as they bridge differences between faiths themselves.

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