

IMMIGRATION AND MORALITY

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What do various faith traditions have to say about immigration? Many leaders advocating for immigration reform draw guidance and inspiration from the moral principles of their religion. Is there an ethical argument for immigration policy reform, or can the ethical argument work both ways, i.e. bolstering immigration restriction and enforcement, as well as legalization and expansive admission policies? This brief attempts to summarize and evaluate the arguments on both sides of this debate.

- **An ethical approach to “migration management” is often lacking among political leaders and governments around the world. Some people believe that human beings acquire rights only through their membership in a particular community. Thus, non-citizens are oftend denied fundamental human rights and dehumanized. Governments deny protection and privileges to unauthorized immigrants and sometimes to legal immigrants as well.¹ This dehumanization process can also be found among advocates for expanded immigration, when they view immigration solely through an economic lens, perceiving immigrants as commodities rather than as human beings.**
- **Just about every issue involving human migration can be looked at through an ethical lens. This point is emphasized in a briefing paper prepared by the Markula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University in California.²**
- **Failure of governments to deal with migration in a realistic and ethical manner leads to serious human rights violations, including incentives for employers to exploit immigrant workers, and for human traffickers to spread a modern form of slavery.**
- **Morality can also be used to justify limiting immigration. Some people, for example, argue that immigration policies designed to attract skilled workers to rich countries impoverish developing countries by depriving them of essential workers in sectors like health care and education.³**
- **Although cherry-picking the Bible for passages supporting a migration ethics is hazardous, and only applies to the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is clear that there are some teachings with possible relevance to today’s immigration policy challenges. The three most frequently cited passages are from the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, and the Holy Family and Good Samaritan stories in the New Testament. In Leviticus, the prophet reminds the Israelites to “love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”⁴ The flight of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus to Egypt to escape persecution has inspired prayers for the plight of exiles around the world.⁵ Jesus’ radical redefinition of “neighbor” to include the despised Samaritans is also cited as an important teaching.**

- **In the Moslem tradition, passages in the Koran and in the various Hadiths also confer dignity and rights on the immigrant. One author argues that the Golden Age of Moslem civilization was the product of relatively free migration of peoples from one end of the Moslem world to the other.⁶**
- **One example of a religious community that has developed a faith-based approach to migration is that of the Catholic Church. That approach is embodied in the Church's "Justice for Immigrants" campaign.⁷ Another example may be found in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which has issued a policy statement on immigration.⁸ An evangelical approach to comprehensive immigration reform is found in a recent report issued by Sojourners.⁹**
- **As active as representatives of the various faith traditions have been in advocating for generous and humane immigration policies, they have often been silent on the question of morally-based limits on the admission of immigrants. For example, when does the principle of the "common good" require limits on the number and/or types of immigrants? As one theologian put it, "Which appeals and claims for admission are morally weightier when an open border is beyond the range of political possibility?"¹⁰ As another writer put it, "the tension between the two moralities becomes exquisite when, for example, the well-being of poor immigrants is pitted against the well-being of poor citizens."¹¹**
- **The role of religious institutions in facilitating immigrant incorporation has attracted the attention of scholars. Deriving inspiration from their respective faith traditions, many religious leaders find ways to live their faith in outreach and service ministries to immigrants. This subject is currently being studied intensively by researchers funded by the Social Science Research Council.¹²**
- **Perhaps, the only sound conclusion that can be drawn from this research brief is that the debate on immigration policy and immigrant integration benefits from a moral perspective, as opposed to one that dehumanizes and villifies immigrants, or one that overlooks the needs of disadvantaged native-born Americans.**

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¹ Fabbio Baggio, "Migration Policies and Ethics in East and South East Asia," in *Migration Management and Ethics: Envisioning a Different Approach*, Fondazione ISMU, 2006, 43-47

² Lynette M. Parker, "The Ethics of Migration and Immigration: Key Questions for Policy Makers," http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/global_ethics/migration.html#1 January 7, 2008.

³ A particularly dramatic example of this trend is the migration of Filipino nurses and doctors overseas. For its impact on the quantity and quality of healthcare in the Phillipines, see a presentation given by Prof. Jaime Z. Galvez Tan of the University of the Phillipines at the 2007 Metropolis Conference, found at: http://www.metropolis2007.org/plenary/Tan_Jaime_Tues_Plenary_1145.pdf.

⁴ For one minister's interesting reflections on the passage in Leviticus, see: "To Love an Alien," A Sermon by The Reverent Forrest Gilmore," http://www.uuprinceton.org/worship/sermons/sermon_2004-10-10.html

⁵ See for example, “A Prayer to Jesus Christ for Immigrants” from a Catholic prayer book:

http://www.uuprinceton.org/worship/sermons/sermon_2004-10-10.html

⁶ Kemal Karpat, “Commentary: Muslim Migration: A Response to Aldeeb Abu-Sahlich,” International Migration Review, Vol. 30, No. 1, 80-81.

⁷ For a good summary of the Catholic Church’s approach, see “Justice for Immigrants: A Faith-Based Perspective.” NEWAmericans, Fall, 2006, 9, 15.

⁸ <http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/immigration/>

⁹ http://www.soj.net/action/alerts/CCIR_T_giving_Report.pdf

¹⁰ Dana W. Wilbanks, “Commentary: Response to Christiansen and Plaut,” International Migration Review, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 1996), 28.

¹¹ Lawrence Harrison, “Ethics, Migration and Global Stewardship,” The Social Contract, Volume 8, No. 1 (Fall 1997), 1.

¹² For information about the Working Group on Religion, Immigration, and Civic Life of the Social Science Research Council, see: <http://programs.ssrc.org/religionimmigration/index.html>