

Anti-immigrant rhetoric nothing new, historians say

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By Ken Camp

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If American Protestants today have trouble knowing how to accept and assimilate a new wave of immigrants, they at least can take comfort in knowing their forebears wrestled with similar issues.

“Americans have always struggled with immigrants. Non-conformist immigrants like Quakers and Baptists were exiled and sent back to England or the Caribbean by the colonial religious establishment,” [church historian Bill Leonard](#) noted. “Roger Williams (who founded the first Baptist church in the colonies) was an unacceptable immigrant.”

With the Statue of Liberty as his backdrop, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act on Oct. 3, 1965. The law, which ended restrictive national origin quotas, ushered in an era of mass immigration of unprecedented diversity.

A “terrible animosity” fueled by anti-Catholic prejudice often characterized the response of the dominant Protestant culture in the United States toward a later influx of Irish, Italian and eastern European immigrants, said Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School.

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Protestants often stereotyped Irish Catholics, in particular, as “lazy, clannish people who went to mass on Sunday morning and drank beer all Sunday afternoon,” he noted. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan coincided with the growth of the immigrant population in the United States, Leonard added.

“We must not forget that the KKK was not simply anti-black; it was also anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish and made a lot out of their immigrant status,” he said.

But anti-Catholic sentiment was not confined to the radical fringe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, historian Barry Hankins added.

“You didn’t have to be in a Klan meeting to hear anti-Catholic rhetoric. In polite Protestant circles—whether evangelical or liberal—anti-Catholic statements were viewed as acceptable and aboveboard,” said Hankins,

professor of history and church-state studies at Baylor University.

To a large degree, Baptists and other Protestants sometimes disguised their anti-Catholicism by couching it in arguments regarding the separation of church and state, Leonard maintained.

“You could make a case that Baptists in the South in the early 20th century gave greater attention to separation of church and state language and issues because they feared the numbers of Catholic immigrants and their desire to have state funds for parochial schools,” he said.

Like those earlier waves of immigrants, the current influx of Hispanics from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America includes large numbers of Catholics. But today, resistance to immigrants seems to stem less from their religious background and more from issues of language and economics.

“One hundred to 150 years ago, it was assumed that one would want to learn English and, in fact, would have to learn English to become assimilated as an American,” Hankins said. But the United States today—particularly in the southwest—has moved toward a bilingual society, both Hankins and Leonard noted.

Roman Catholic attitudes toward immigrants have varied across the years, Leonard noted.

“Generally, Catholic churches have been welcoming places, as have synagogues,” he said. However, with the shortage of priests in the Roman Catholic Church now, some parishes are struggling to assimilate new Spanish-speaking members, and they are unsure how to respond to the growing number of Pentecostal and charismatic Hispanic immigrants, Leonard said.

Regardless of their feelings about immigration as a political issue, Baptists

frequently have viewed various waves of immigrants as opportunities for evangelism, both Leonard and Hankins noted.

Baptists generally have been successful in starting churches for distinctive ethnic and language groups, he said. Their track record at assimilating immigrants into established churches has not always been as exemplary.



[Click to view pdf](#) of history timeline of legal immigration to the United States. (Graphic by Andre Malok/Newhouse News Service)

“It’s hard to live out biblical principles. Therein lies the struggle,” said [Jon Singletary](#), director of the Center for Family and Community Ministries at Baylor University.

Baptists believe the Bible, and the Scriptures mandate love for neighbors and command God’s people to “welcome the stranger among us,” Singletary said.

But when the stranger speaks a different language and comes from an unfamiliar culture, fear of the unknown presents a barrier to ministry—a barrier that becomes greater when many immigrants lack legal documentation, he acknowledged.

Even so, Singletary remains optimistic. Working with the Baptist General Convention of Texas Immigration Services Network, he has seen churches

in the Waco area begin to seek ways to “walk alongside people, including the strangers among us.”

Tihara Vargas, a graduate student in Baylor University’s School of Social Work and Truett Theological Seminary, works with the network to help dispel stereotypes about undocumented workers and encourage churches to see their responsibility to immigrants—regardless of their legal status.

“We try to help people get the documentation they need to come under the protection of the law and into compliance with the law,” she said.

She points to Jesus’ parable about the Good Samaritan as motivation for ministry.

“If Jesus were telling the story today, he’d probably talk about a migrant Mexican worker instead of a Samaritan,” Vargas said.

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