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Citizenship, Identity, and Populism

Abstract

"We can recognize that no party or ideology has a monopoly on truth, and that even our political opponents are right about some things."

Posting about our fallen earthly kingdom from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Citizenship, Identity, and Populism

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2017

Jeff Taylor

Citizenship is a legal status conferred on persons who live within the borders of a nation-state by the government of that state. With the status come certain rights and responsibilities. Identity is a type of self-concept which, in a sociopolitical context, links an individual—psychologically and emotionally—to a larger group of people. Populism is an ideology, or political philosophy, which supports the rights, aspirations, and power of the people (i.e., democracy).

In the United States, much has been said in recent years about what it means to be an “American.” Much has been said, and much has been *felt*. Some of the passion is understandable, on all sides of the debate, but an excess of emotion tends to mean a paucity of thought. That’s unfortunate. The emotion of this subject has also led to a polarized society in which people generate lots of heat and little light. They can’t connect enough to communicate. Another unfortunate result of the feeling-soaked climate is that cynical political leaders, who are motivated more by power and profit than principle, have exploited this genuine fear, anger, and hatred for their own selfish purposes.

To me, the words *citizenship*, *identity*, and *populism* bring to mind current debates over illegal immigration and welcoming of refugees. Should non-citizens have the same rights as citizens? Should those who enter a country without permission be forgiven for that indiscretion (law breaking), and be given a pathway to citizenship, if they are otherwise good residents once they’re here? Does everyone in the world have a right to be an American, if they so desire? The populist answers to these three questions are No, No, and No. But, do these answers come from a place of racism? That’s the assumption of many grassroots Americans who stand firmly in the Yes camp regarding these questions. It’s a convenient assumption, but I would argue that it’s mostly wrong.

Sure, there are a handful of hardcore bigots in the United States who openly fear and hate people who are different from themselves—often if they have darker skin, speak a foreign language, or have an alternate religion. Yes, people tend to be more comfortable with those who are like us and tend to have more unease toward those who are not. But, most conservative and tradition-minded Americans are not Klansmen or Nazis... any more than most liberal and progress-minded Americans are demonic, America-hating Communists.

There are two main perspectives when it comes to immigration: melting pot (assimilation) vs. multiculturalism (diversity). It’s never been completely an either/or situation in the U.S. of A. Melting pot is the more traditional approach, but natural freedoms and constitutional rights provided space for those who spoke Dutch in the home, sang German at church, read Norwegian newspapers, or cooked Italian food. Diversity was generally allowed. But, an emphasis on “diversity is strength,” and its enforcement by big government and big business, is recent.¹

Public opinion polls since the 1990s have consistently shown that Americans tend to favor melting pot over multiculturalism, in relation to the practices of immigrants, by about a 2-to-1 margin. The 30% who are diversity supporters tend to be elite leaders of government, business, media, and higher education, plus a smaller contingent of humanitarian idealists. Elite leaders may have an honest repugnance toward prejudice and xenophobia, but they also personally and disproportionately benefit from the globalistic, individuals-as-interchangeable-economic-widgets status quo, especially with its emphasis on low wages and high profits.

It is easy for people to celebrate globalization when their own jobs are not subject to foreign workplace export or replacement by imported foreign workers. A CEO is not going to be replaced by an undocumented Mexican immigrant willing to work for a lower salary. A Wall Street banker is not going to have his job shipped to Vietnam. A *New York Times* or *Washington Post* columnist is not competing in the marketplace with a low-skilled worker from Guatemala. Neither are college professors or church pastors. If less-educated Rust Belt workers or less-well-connected African Americans are hurt by globalism, well, that’s the price “we”—meaning they—pay for diversity

proliferation. Meanwhile, a blind eye is turned to corporate exploitation of illegal immigrants themselves, who collectively are treated more like cheap-labor livestock than neighbors and colleagues.

Elite diversity advocates possess most of the power and money in society. Yet, they remain a numerical minority. That's why the steady spotlight of Democrats and the mass media on candidate Trump's opposition to illegal immigration and support for a border wall actually helped him more than hurt him. What scandalized the minority energized the majority. That's populism... for better or worse.

I recently watched a TV program about Muslims in a Texas community hosted by, of all people, Charles Barkley. They interviewed a stereotypical "white cracker" who spoke with a southern accent and sounded like an ignorant buffoon as he expounded on how dangerous "Muzz-lums" are. Then they showed a response from a Muslim woman who expressed fear about the new climate of hatred toward her and her family simply because they are Muslim. She seemed well-educated, spoke in soothing progressive clichés, and did not use Texas dialect. She was clearly supposed to be the "good guy." But, it occurred to me that the Islamophile woman is just as ignorant as the Islamophobe man.

They both lack an ability to see nuance and see outside themselves. He cannot see that the vast majority of Muslims are not terrorists, do not sympathize with murderous fanatics, and are just looking for a good life for themselves and their loved ones. She cannot see that there is an obvious reason many Americans, and many Europeans, fear an influx of Muslims—because a few *are* terrorists and a significant number of those who aren't may not share traditional western notions of tolerance, equality, and democracy—because often these beliefs are not part of the cultural heritage of their home countries or their religious tradition.²

If we got these two individuals in the same room, no matter how personally nice and well-intentioned they are, they would have difficulty understanding each other because they can't see any value in the other person's viewpoint. They're sure they're right, they're surrounded by social circles that reinforce this confidence, and they despise those who disagree. So, they talk past each other, resorting to emotion and epithets when reason and facts do not serve their argument.³

We don't have to all meet in some mushy middle of pragmatism. We can hold fast to cherished values while recognizing that life is complex.⁴ We can recognize that no party or ideology has a monopoly on truth, and that even our political opponents are right about some things.

There is a nation-transcending, benevolently global aspect to Christianity. "After this I looked, and behold a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..." (Rev. 7:9-10). Contrary to the dogma of American Exceptionalism, the United States is not the indispensable nation, the shining city on the hill, or the hope of the world. Such misplaced messianic language turns our land into an idol. God can do just fine without the United States (which is, historically speaking, a relatively recent invention). I love my country and I'm glad I was born here, but it's not the Kingdom of God.

However, the Kingdom is also not the same as worldly globalism. One is righteous and eternal, the other is fallen and temporal. Love and cooperation that transcend national borders are beautiful and godly when they are voluntary, organic, and from the bottom-up. Togetherness and uniformity as top-down tools of international power-mongers are as ugly and wicked as Babel and Antichrist. Kuyper called uniformity "the curse of modern life," and it's even more true today. Kuyper and his spiritual allies preferred multiformity, including political manifestations of decentralized power, thought, and practice like [sphere sovereignty](#) and subsidiarity.

God is not only a god of nation-transcendence, but also of tribalism and the specific. That's what the nation of Israel was all about. And respect for tribal or national distinctives is not just an Old Testament concept (Rev. 7:4-8, 21:12). We can appreciate the genealogical and earthly while simultaneously appreciating the spiritual and heavenly. Likewise, we can value national customs, borders, and sovereignty while simultaneously seeing the peoples of all

nations as neighbors worthy of love and respect not so much because of who they are but because of whose they are.

We all have the same Creator. And, regardless of our ethnicity and the circumstances of how we got to the place of our earthly residence, those of us who have been redeemed by Christ share a heavenly citizenship now and for ever.

Footnotes

1. By the way, “diversity is strength” is a half-true mantra. While diversity can often be a source of strength—using freedom of conscience, marching to the beat of your own drummer, not putting all your eggs in one basket, avoiding groupthink, and so on—diversity can also be weakness because it can produce division and error. This is evident in the counter-mantra “united we stand; divided we fall” (which echoes the words of Jesus) and in the spiritual/theological dangers of apostasy and heterodoxy as opposed to “our common salvation” and “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). ↩
2. In contrast, there is no pattern of Methodists or Lutherans—representing a zealous minority of the religion—committing acts of terrorism in multiple countries, proclaiming the greatness of God as they do so. ↩
3. Ironically, racism and multiculturalism both overemphasize our differences. Ethnic inclusiveness is a better response to U.S. pluralism. Inclusiveness acknowledges differences and respects the right to be different—even when it is seen as less-than-ideal—but stresses what we have in common. ↩
4. Not in some way that only academics and experts can figure out, but in a rich, sometimes paradoxical way that we all understand in a myriad of other, less-politically-polarized contexts. ↩