

'Christian Left' Revival in USA , Appalled by Treatment of Migrants

Friday 27 September 2019, by [ALEXANDER Laura E.](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2019).

Christians in USA are increasingly protesting against Trump's immigration policies and his politics of hate.

Holding pictures of migrant children who have died in US custody and forming a cross with their bodies on the floor of the Russell Senate Office Building, [70 Catholics were arrested](#) in July for [obstructing](#) a public place, which is considered a misdemeanour.

The protesters hoped that images of [90-year-old nuns](#) and [priests](#) in [clerical collars](#) being led away in handcuffs would draw attention to their moral horror at the US's treatment of undocumented immigrant families.

American Catholics, like any religious group, do not fit neatly into left-right political categories.

But ever more they are visibly joining the growing ranks of [progressive Christians who oppose](#) President Donald Trump's [anti-immigrant rhetoric](#) and federal agencies' negligent, [occasionally deadly](#) treatment of immigrants on his orders.

Religious activism

American Christianity is more often [associated](#) with right-wing politics.

Conservative Christian groups advocating for public policies that reflect their religious beliefs have conducted extremely visible campaigns to [outlaw abortion](#), keep gay marriage [illegal](#) and encourage [study of the Bible](#) in schools. Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis, an Apostolic Christian, was [jailed](#) for refusing to issue marriage licenses after the US legalised same-sex marriage in 2015.

But there's always been progressive Christian activism in the US.

I have [studied](#) religious thought and action around [migrants and refugees](#) for some time - including [analysing](#) the New Sanctuary Movement, a network of churches that [offers refuge to undocumented immigrants](#) and advocates for immigration reform.

Black churches were central [in the civil rights movement](#) in the 1960s, and [black Christians](#) have continued to engage in advocacy and [civil disobedience](#) around [poverty](#), inequality and [police violence](#). [Latinos](#) and [Native Americans](#), too, have for centuries fought for "progressive" causes like [labour rights](#), [environmental protection](#) and [human rights](#).

So it's not quite right to [herald](#) the "rise" of a religious left, as several [think pieces](#) have done since Christians began openly resisting Trump's immigration enforcement and other policies. That erases the historic resistance of religious communities of colour.

Why immigration

Still, Trump's hardline immigration policies seem to have spurred a [broader population of Christians into action](#). And their civil disobedience crosses racial, ethnic and even party lines in new ways.

One reason for this is simple: Migration has become increasingly visible in recent years, especially under Trump.

The [number of undocumented immigrants](#) in the US peaked at 12.2 million in 2007. Presidents [George W. Bush](#) and [Barack Obama](#) approached this issue by using relatively pro-immigrant language while [deporting hundreds of thousands](#) each year.

Though immigration at the US's southern border has actually been [decreasing](#) since 2000, the number of Central American [asylum-seekers](#) has [grown](#). In 2014, an unprecedented [surge](#) in [Central American children](#) seeking asylum protections got [significant media attention](#).

Donald Trump began his presidential campaign the next year with a [speech maligning migrants](#). During his administration, his [rhetoric](#) has slowly become [policy](#).

But the primary reason Christian groups are now focusing on immigration, I'd argue, is simply that the notion of [welcoming strangers](#) and caring for the vulnerable are [embedded in the Christian tradition](#).

In the Biblical text [Matthew 25](#), the "Son of Man" - a figure understood to be Jesus - blesses people who gave food to the hungry, cared for the sick and welcomed strangers. And in [Leviticus 19:34](#), God commands: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you."

These [texts](#) help explain why support for immigrants crosses traditional left-right religious boundaries.

Denominations that are generally considered left-leaning, like the [United Church of Christ](#) and the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) publicly oppose Trump's harsh treatment of immigrants. So do the [Catholic bishops](#) and [Southern Baptists](#), which are typically more socially and politically conservative.

Welcoming the stranger

Beyond directly [assisting](#) migrants [at the US border](#) by offering [food, shelter](#), translation and [legal services](#), [many](#) of these Christian groups [also believe](#) that in democratic societies they should pursue laws founded on Christian moral teachings.

After all, they point out, God's command in Leviticus was to the [nation of Israel](#) - not just individual Israelites. And Jesus often told [religious and political officials](#) how to [act](#) and [criticised](#) the oppression of foreigners, widows and orphans by those in authority.

Faith-based [support for immigrants](#) is [not limited to Christian groups](#).

[Jewish](#) and [Muslim](#) organisations have both provided humanitarian aid to Central American asylum seekers and [protested](#) a [federal ban](#) on travel from Muslim countries.

And 40 [Jewish](#) leaders were [arrested in New York City](#) on August 12 for protesting the Trump administration's detention policies.

Connecting to politicians and interfaith cooperation

The 2020 election season has brought Christian faith-based activism into the political fore. Several Democratic presidential candidates have spoken openly about the faith-based roots of their progressivism.

Senator Elizabeth Warren has [referenced](#) the biblical text of Matthew 25 as a touchstone for her critique of wealth inequality and insistence on universal health care.

In pushing for criminal justice reform, Senator Cory Booker [speaks about](#) the Christian tradition of “grace.” He’s also been known to quote the Prophet Muhammad, Buddha and the Hindu god Shiva.

Mayor Pete Buttigieg is a [devout churchgoer](#) who is also gay. He [says](#) that his sexual orientation is God-given and that his marriage, in the Episcopal church, to another man, has brought him closer to God.

Talk of an emerging “religious left” is ahistoric. American Christianity has always had its liberal strains, with pastors and parishioners protesting state-sponsored injustices like [slavery](#), [segregation](#), the [Vietnam War](#) and [mass deportation](#).

But the high profile, religiously based moral outrage at Trump’s immigration policies does seem to be spurring some long-overdue rethinking of what it means to be Christian in America.

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