

**Right-Wing Populism and Migrant Exclusion: A Christian Theological Critique**

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## RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND MIGRANT EXCLUSION: A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

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**Abstract:** This article will attempt to explain how Right-wing American populists who often pride themselves on their “Judeo-Christian” values have arrived at non-Christian (if not anti-Christian) perspectives on migration. Utilizing Donald M. Kerwin’s contribution to *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, this article suggests that we can better understand the method of constructing anti-immigrant rhetoric on a perceived Christian foundation through scriptural exegesis. Placing Kerwin’s chapter alongside various scriptural passages and other scholars’ work, this article will propose that Right-wing populists have constructed an ascriptural Jesus in order to justify certain tenets of the Right’s political agenda. One primary tenant of this political agenda is the exclusivism and nationalism inherent in the Right’s anti-immigration policy.

Right-wing populists’ anti-immigration policies have demonstrated the centrality of nationalism, nativism, and isolationism to their contemporary political movement. These policies and their underlying philosophical rationale have created an increasingly uninviting environment for immigration to the United States, as reflected statistically in the 2015 and 2019 reports of the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). According to the index, “which measures and compares the integration policies of 38 countries based on 167 policy indicators,” the United States ranked ninth out of thirty-eight developed states for the effectiveness of integration policies. The MIPEX further noted that the United States had created a “slightly favorable path for *some* immigrants to fully participate in society and become like United States citizens.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Donald M. Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration in an Era of Exclusionary Nationalism,” in *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, eds., Silas W. Allard, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 108-109 (emphasis mine).

Especially within the last decade, Right-wing populists' anti-immigration rhetoric has resulted in the promulgation of executive-branch policies which reflect skepticism about certain forms of immigration. From an administrative perspective, the Right's anti-immigration rhetoric has legitimized policies that burden migrants with disproportionately expensive fees, limited access to visas, multiyear court backlogs, and frequent deportations without extensive judicial review.<sup>3</sup> Ideologically, this rhetoric has helped to shape a national migration discourse that is increasingly unwelcoming to new citizens, even if many support bipartisan efforts that aim, for example, to legally protect those children brought to the United States as minors.<sup>4</sup>

For a political movement that often describes itself as “Christian” (or the “Religious Right”) and that prides itself on appeals to “Judeo-Christian” American values, the Right's anti-immigration policy and rhetoric marks a substantial divergence from both American and biblical values, especially those offered by Christ in the New Testament. To understand how the Right has misinterpreted important aspects of the biblical tradition, I suggest we turn to a few examples of major Right-wing figures who have often used the Bible as the impetus for exclusion.<sup>5</sup> First, however, we will engage with other scholarship on this topic to help contextualize the figures we will encounter.

In his *Christianity and the Law of Migration* chapter on immigration, integration, and disintegration, Donald M. Kerwin highlights that the Trump Administration, like some before it, often explicitly claimed that immigrants undermine the success and life of the nation. This narrative provided the foundation for the restrictive immigration policies of Trump's term, policies which are widely shared within the Republican party (and especially Right-wing populist movement).<sup>6</sup> Kerwin terms Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric as a

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<sup>3</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 109.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Americans Broadly Support Legal Status for Immigrants Brought to the U.S. Illegally as Children,” *Pew Research Center*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/17/americans-broadly-support-legal-status-for-immigrants-brought-to-the-u-s-illegally-as-children/>.

<sup>5</sup> On the Right's appeals to religious values, especially ‘Christian values,’ see, for example, former President Donald Trump's 1776 Commission Final Report. Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> On the Right's post-Trump support for anti-immigration policies, see, for example, Michael Tesler, “Republican Views on Immigration are Shifting Even Further to the Right Under Biden” *FiveThirtyEight*, August 17, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/republican-views-on-immigration-are-shifting-even-further-to-the-right-under-biden/>.

“nativist script” to exclude certain types of migrants from what might otherwise be understood as humanitarian assistance to those most in need.<sup>7</sup> As such, Kerwin specifically discusses Trump’s repeated insistence on “Building the Wall” along the United States-Mexico border and his efforts to remove forms of protective migrant status to conclude that Trump’s immigration policies were ultimately aimed at “excluding large numbers of low-income, working-class immigrants from admission and adjustment to permanent residence.”<sup>8</sup> The “nativist script” which defended these policies, Kerwin argues, prompted sharp condemnation from Trump and his allies around the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protective Status (TPS) programs. At the end of his article, Kerwin concludes that Trump and the Right’s anti-immigration rhetoric was successful in instilling fear into Americans about immigrants, and into immigrants about their status in the United States. The effectiveness of this rhetoric, he further proposes, is due to this political movement’s appeals to Christian identity.

In light of the frequency and poignancy of anti-immigration rhetoric amongst Right-wing leaders, Kerwin rightly suggests that resources from the Christian tradition can aid in healing the American people’s relationship with immigration, especially because appeals to the Christian tradition can draw attention to Gospel-informed ethical concepts such as “human dignity, the common good, and reverence for the vulnerable.”<sup>9</sup> Over against the Right’s distortion of the Christian tradition and its goal to “Make America Great Again,” Kerwin rightly notes that a return to a Christian worldview can refocus the nation on “safeguard[ing] the rights of all persons,” a priority shared by most Christian ethicists.<sup>10</sup>

By turning to biblical narratives, Kerwin effectively challenges the demeaning labels like “illegal aliens” employed by Right-wing populists.<sup>11</sup> In his analysis, Kerwin encourages those interested in a Christian perspective on migration to consider how the Christian tradition can help us both understand the perversion of the Gospels necessary to craft these nativist tropes, and forge a new, more authentically Christian approach to migration. Considering the fact that the populist Right in the United States—spearheaded perhaps most

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<sup>7</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 114.

<sup>8</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 112-114.

<sup>9</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 122.

<sup>10</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 122.

<sup>11</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 122.

famously by Trump—provides the most ardent political support for these nativist policies, turning in particular to the populist Right is a worthwhile endeavor for constructing a theological critique of migrant exclusion. Considering the centrality of scriptural appeals to American Protestant Christianity—which comprises the majority of Right-wing populists’ faith affiliations—looking closely at how these populists use the Bible to their political advantage is where this critique must begin.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most obvious examples of how Right-wing populists selectively choose biblical narratives to create a perceived Christian defense of immigration restrictions is in the case of former Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ citation of Romans 13:1 in a 2018 address.<sup>13</sup> This passage, well-known to those interested in the relationship between politics and religion, includes Paul’s exhortation that “let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those who have been established by God.”<sup>14</sup> For Sessions (as other Right-wing populists), this uncontextualized and extremely brief citation to a scriptural narrative would seem to provide a justification of Trump-era anti-immigration policies. As Kerwin notes though, reading further into Romans 13 reveals that Paul actually provides a much more nuanced political theology. Specifically, in Romans 13:10, Paul says that “love does no evil to the neighbor,” which, of course, Sessions fails to mention.<sup>15</sup>

Although not discussed in Kerwin’s chapter, Right-wing populists’ misuse of biblical passages has also been evident in the story of Nehemiah. Referenced by Sessions in a 2017 address to recall that Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to build a wall to protect the city from outsiders, this story, in the Right-wing populist presentation, seems to justify Right-wing isolationism and anti-immigration policy.<sup>16</sup> Because Sessions and many other politicians lack robust theological training, however, Sessions’s citation to the story of Nehemiah fails to capture the full breadth and nuance of the biblical narrative in which Nehemiah is situated.

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<sup>12</sup> According to a Pew Research Center report, 85% of American conservatives identify as Christian, and 59% of those hold a range of Protestant identities. See, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/political-ideology/conservative/> (accessed May 4, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> For a recording of the address, see <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/jeff-sessions-cites-biblical-verse-defense-immigration-policies-55904368> (accessed May 4, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Reproduced in Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 123.

<sup>15</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 123.

<sup>16</sup> See Jerome Socolovsky, “Jeff Sessions Needs a Sunday School Lesson on Immigration,” *Religion News Service*, <https://religionnews.com/2017/01/06/jeff-sessions-needs-a-sunday-school-lesson-on-immigration/>.

For example, reading Nehemiah in light of Sessions's supposed Christian commitments should, at the least, prompt him to consider how Christ's message of love and compassion for even those on the margins in the New Testament can be placed in conversation with this story. Although it is true that the un-analyzed text of the story would seem to support the exclusivist notion of immigration restriction, the question to which Sessions never provides an answer is how to reconcile a passage such as this with other, seemingly contradictory facets of the biblical narrative.

Perhaps the most striking scriptural contradiction to Sessions's use of Nehemiah is Jesus's interactions with Samaritans. In the first-century Jewish-Palestinian context, it was widely-known that Jews and Samaritans were at odds with one another over irreconcilable religious disagreements. With this in mind, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and Jesus's interactions with the Samaritan woman at the watering hole (Lk 8:43-48), show, at their core, how Jesus distinctively calls his followers to put themselves in solidarity with those they have differences with—including on the bases of race, religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.<sup>17</sup> Instances of Jesus serving those who may have been deemed as 'unwanted' by Jewish-Palestinian standards—the poor and oppressed, women, the sick and unclean, to name a few—are sprinkled throughout the synoptic tradition. This acknowledgement is paramount to understanding the meaning and impact of Jesus's earthly ministry. Thus, with this broader biblical narrative in mind, Session's use of Nehemiah surely can surely be contrasted with scriptural narratives about Jesus, thus reflecting his inaccurate representation of the core tenets of the Christian faith.

Instead of having to cherry-pick one passage or the other, Sessions and others must instead attempt to understand how the broader arc of the biblical narrative can help us make sense of the issues involved in immigration policy. Especially considering New Testament writings on issues of exclusion, it is fair to conclude that greater attention must be paid to Nehemiah's particular historical context, for example, one which would place it on the periphery of a broader and much more compelling narrative that extends from the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament. This more compelling narrative prioritizes compassion for others, not mere restrictions for the sake of restriction. Applying this methodology to Nehemiah's case, for example, it is doubtful that Sessions would even acknowledge the

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<sup>17</sup> The story of Jesus healing the woman who bled for twelve years is also discussed in Mt 9:20-22 and Mk 5:25-34.

particular Jewish context in which Nehemiah was authored—one which involved age-old issues of ritual purity that would seem to have justified exclusions on the basis of “cleanliness.” Furthermore, such Right-wing appeals to certain passages have seemed to create a sort of “anti-immigration Bible,” believed by some to be God’s own W/word by many American Christians.<sup>18</sup> Especially considering Right-wing populist appeals to the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament, there seems to be a sense of communal disregard for the fact that the Jewish and Christian traditions are deeply connected to themes of exile and exodus.<sup>19</sup> Context and nuance is key, both of which Right-wing slogans fail to value.

For self-identified Christians such as Trump and Sessions, an additional question can be asked about how they would navigate other passages from the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John (e.g., 11:52, 17:21), which specifically discuss God’s desire for His “scattered children” to be gathered together so that “all may be one.” Placed in conversation with the Christian “Golden Rule” that one should love one’s neighbor as one loves God, reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans and John’s Gospel would seem to suggest that the Christian must conclude that those policies which do evil to one’s neighbor violate God’s interest that all of His children be gathered together spiritually, even if not physically. In the migration context, policies that separate mothers from children, that discriminate on the basis of one’s identity, or that unnecessarily prevent those in need of humanitarian assistance from accessing such assistance certainly violate this Golden Rule and the spirit of Christianity’s biblical heritage.

Another helpful example that Kerwin offers of how Right-wing populists pervert scriptural passages is the story in Matthew 12 about ‘rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.’ Although some populists have used this passage to propose that Americans should simply obey Trump-style directives because he is the Caesarian authority, reading this passage in context reveals a far different, and much more nuanced, message. Indeed, placing Jesus (as described in Mt 12) in his historical and scriptural context, if Jesus would have opposed paying his taxes to Caesar, then he could have been senselessly killed as a political rebel or social revolutionary. In this context, then, this passage reveals that Jesus did not encourage

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Robert L. Tsai, “The Anti-Immigration Bible,” *Boston Review*, June 18, 2018, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/robert-tsai-anti-immigration-bible/>.

<sup>19</sup> Kerwin, “Immigration, Integration, and Disintegration,” 122.

his disciples to merely abandon their faith in God for the purposes of pleasing a political ruler. Indeed, because we owe all that we are to God and thus must orient ourselves ultimately toward the Divine, rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's does not remove us from the connections that we have to God, or the responsibilities that we have to take ever more full part in God's will for humanity. In the case of immigration restrictions, then, while the often-quoted passage about Caesar can be misused by Right-wing populists to demand total submission to governmental directives, this passage actually offers theological motivation to bring the political order into greater accord with the eternal will of God. Given the excerpts that we have already explored, then, a central tenet of this more scripturally sound approach to migration would begin with the love of neighbor as we love God.

In his 2020 monograph *Republican Jesus: How the Republican Right has Re-Written the Gospels*, Tony Keddie—a former believer in Christ—further explores how the populist Right has created a scriptural testament of its own that frequently looks foreign to the actual Christian Bible. In fact, Keddie proposes, because Right-wing populist leaders have effectively leveraged the power of appeals to scripture, they have seemingly convinced an entire political movement that its interpretation (or, at least, its presentation) of the Bible is the only legitimate interpretation.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation, of course, depends on traditional Right-wing talking points. In response to this historiographic analysis, Keddie encourages his readers to consider how some strands of Protestant theology have, over time, helped to 'mainstream' some of these ideas. One such example is Keddie's argument that Protestant thinkers, drawing on Martin Luther's belief in non-institutional forms of theological authority, have been able to create a framework in which appeals to traditional Christian doctrines and scriptural narratives seem to support a 'small government' perspective on politics.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, this would seem to contradict the populist Right's notion that the government should be active in immigration restriction. This is a question that Keddie leaves unexplored, but perhaps it suggests the theological irrationality of the Right-wing populist movement's interest in maintaining some parts of their religious tradition in tension with

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<sup>20</sup> Tony Keddie, *Republican Jesus: How the Right has Rewritten the Gospels* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 26.

others, such that some parts are nearly completely erased, instead of being considered in light of broader religious themes.

As we have seen, it is much more convenient in the immigration context for a Right-wing populist to claim that American citizens should render unto Trump what is Trump's—federal immigration policy—just as it is much more convenient in the economic sphere for a Right-wing populist to claim in light of Luther that “big government” should stay out of American business practices. References to scriptural passages are surely more universally recognizable than appeals to a sixteenth-century Reformation figure, but Keddie helps to further explain how even these very traditional theological strains of Protestantism have been incorporated into the mainstream American consciousness through figures like John Locke and Thomas Jefferson.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, this ‘small-government’ notion supposedly derived from Luther has lost any level of theological nuance, but nevertheless has retained additional appeal because this supposedly Christian ideal is incorporated through the American political tradition into the American consciousness. In other words, by taking two sources of authority—Christianity and major American political figures—and implicitly weaving them together, appealing to the derivative conclusion seems very likely to generate widespread interest, including when this conclusion is actually only supported some of the time, as in the case of immigration and business policies.

Although figures like Locke and Jefferson are sufficiently common in the American conscience for appeals to their likenesses to be effective, even more recent trends have allowed Right-wing populists to nationalize their faith. After World War II, for example, Keddie proposes that conservatives looked to the Christian faith and perceived the Christian foundations of American democracy as a foil to Nazi Germany.<sup>23</sup> In doing so, these mid-twentieth-century figures helped to bring religion and politics together, so much so that some scholars have argued that politics became a sort of religion: a civil religion. Retaining some apparent Christian roots (as in the case of Jeff Sessions appealing to the Bible selectively), it is this particular form of Christianity advanced by Right-wing populists that have been so effective in turning the message of the Bible into a tool of exclusion.

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<sup>22</sup> Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 87.

In the same way that Right-wing populists use Christianity to defend immigration restrictions, those who are interested in a more authentic faithfulness to the spirit of the Gospels should similarly embrace the Christian faith in their immigration-related advocacy. Although, at times, it can be difficult for political moderates and those on the Left-leaning side of the political spectrum to advance religious arguments in the mainstream culture, unless there is a concerted effort to recover the clarity of the Gospels on the issue of migration, Right-wing populists will be able to continue to misuse a Christ-like figure for political gain. This does no service to the faith, nor to God's people on earth. Just as much as the Right is concerned with preserving constitutional originalism within the American legal system—a methodology that prioritizes faithfulness to the original, contextualized meaning of a textual authority—should too they be concerned with being theologically faithful to scriptural narratives in their historical contexts.

Importantly, this faithfulness to Scripture does not obviate the possibility of dialogue between the two extremes of total inclusivism or total exclusivism. Indeed, the Christian tradition does not prescribe a certain set of rules that political leaders must enshrine into civil law, but rather offers tools for considering how best to respond to the practical circumstances in which we find ourselves. In the migration context, the scriptural narratives we have encountered today offer compassion and radical recognition of God's will that His people be "gathered together" as these two leading tools. For those on the Right, populist or otherwise, this provides an invitation to bring Right-leaning thinking about migration more closely in line with Leviticus 19:33-34: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

While the correct application of biblical principles can help re-center Right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric around authentic faith and rectify the relationship between immigration and the American consciousness, the use of such a scripture-centered approach offers a complex constitutional challenge. It is likely that many would perceive this religion-based remedy as a violation of the First Amendment, which reads, in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Although the extent of religious discourse within political rhetoric is a nuanced constitutional issue, Jesuit priest and theologian John Courtney Murray provides brilliant insight into this issue. Applying his thought to the current

American political landscape—especially in regards to migration—is a worthwhile pursuit, and can potentially provide an antidote to the divisiveness the country currently faces.

Murray’s seminal work, *We Hold These Truths*, acknowledges that there are inherent contradictions in a Bible-centered hermeneutic and the First Amendment’s religious disestablishment. Murray argues, however, that certain religious appeals in public square have the capability to build bridges within a diverse polity like the United States. Because various aspects of the Christian faith, for example, proceed from principles accessible through the mere use of human reason, those of different religious traditions are able to find consensus even amidst their other differences. For instance, the Christian call to ‘love thy neighbor’ and to service those in need are applicable to principles shared by Jews, Muslims, and even Agnostics. For Murray, it is essential that such values, many of which are particularly evident to persons of faith, are included in public discourse because: “Political freedom is endangered in its foundations as soon as the universal moral values, upon whose shared possession the self-discipline of a free society depends, are no longer vigorous enough to restrain the passions and shatter the self-inertia of men.”<sup>24</sup>

For Murray, because American democracy is a “spiritual and moral enterprise,” we must consider ethics—illuminated by religion—in our conversations about pressing moral issues like immigration.<sup>25</sup> Applying Murray’s breathtakingly clear work to anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States, appeals to scriptural narratives offer one such way to integrate authentic religious discourse into the public sphere. This will not only confront failed exegetical efforts to defend political exclusivism, but might also build new, inter-religious bridges that have previously been unrealized.

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<sup>24</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1960), 51.

<sup>25</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 51.