

In God We Trust

Vincent Rougeau

Is there a unified Catholic voice in the American public square, and if so, what is it saying at the moment? As the United States celebrates Independence Day on 4th July, Professor Vincent Rougeau of the University of Notre Dame, describes the past and present tensions experienced by Catholic Americans as a result of the support and opposition encountered in various other religious and political voices.

On 4th July, the United States will mark the 234th anniversary of its independence from Great Britain. For most Americans, Independence Day is a time to revel in the glories of mid-summer, and the holiday offers a chance to enjoy longstanding traditions like family barbecues, fireworks displays, and patriotic parades. Any emotion associated with throwing off the colonial yoke dissipated so long ago that few people still associate 'independence' with freedom from colonial rule (recent attacks on BP as a result of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico notwithstanding). Today, independence is a cultural and political statement about the unique way many Americans see themselves in the world, and it forms the foundation of the nation's 'freedom story'. Being American is about being free – free from the shackles of hierarchy and tradition, free from poverty and despair in the 'old country', and in some cases, free from the slavery and discrimination imposed by other Americans. Yet, on a less positive note, some Americans see freedom as relief from responsibilities to others, rejection of claims of community, and single-minded devotion to self-interest. There are enough Americans in this latter group to create viable political movements that routinely elect candidates to political office at the local, state, and national level.

For Catholics, these more libertarian understandings of freedom in American culture and public life create rather jarring tensions with their faith, which at its core is communal, profoundly committed to the

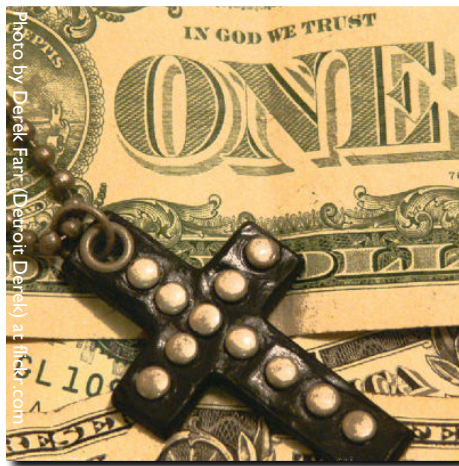


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dignity of the 'other', and bound to tradition and hierarchy. Being American and Catholic has never been easy, and throughout the nation's history Catholics were routinely viewed as unsuited for democratic citizenship. It has only been during the past forty years or so that Catholics have fully integrated into the mainstream of American life. Nevertheless, and despite a bit of lingering hostility, the assimilation process has been wildly successful. Catholics

are now represented in all the important venues of power and influence in American life, including the White House (Vice-president Joseph Biden) and well over half the members of the Supreme Court. Much more significant than any external prejudice Catholics face in the United States is the widening gulf within American Catholicism between liberals and conservatives, and the increasing alienation of the laity from the hierarchy. In the years to come, the influence of American culture on American Catholics may be far more profound than any influence Catholicism has on American culture.

A platform for faith

Unlike what is typically the case in Britain, religious faith and religious identity tend to be given a prominent platform in American public life. Americans tend to speak rather openly about their religious beliefs: most candidates for public office are expected to identify publicly with a religious denomination, and references to God are routine at public gatherings,

particularly during celebrations of significant national holidays like the 4th of July. Rabid secularism tends to be rare and when it is in evidence, it is most often associated with the intellectual and cultural elites of the east and west coasts. Although many of these people are highly influential in the government, the media, and academia, their numbers are relatively small and the public platforms for their views are somewhat limited.

Americans value religion and believe in God, but many are somewhat dubious about the substantive content behind the ubiquitous references to God in public life. When there is meaningful content to religious remarks in politics, it tends to be from an evangelical, Protestant perspective, and most often socially conservative, arguing for instance for prayer in the public (state) schools, an end to legal abortion, prohibition of same-sex marriage, and a return to an understanding of the United States as a 'Christian' nation. One notable example of the last point has been the efforts by the state board of education in Texas to revise textbooks used by school children in ways that minimise or eliminate references to religious and cultural pluralism in the United States, and elevate a story of the American founding that glorifies the Christian 'founders' of the nation, celebrates American individualism, and champions the wisdom of free-market liberalism. Particularly stunning, given that Texas was a part of Mexico until the mid-19th century, has been an effort to minimise the role of men and women of Mexican heritage in the making of modern Texas, based on the view that such an emphasis panders to left-wing, 'Godless' multiculturalism.

Although the public voice of faith in the United States tends to be Protestant, it was not always the case that this voice was dominated by social reaction or conservatism. From World War II until the 1980s, politically progressive views emanated from what are known as the 'mainline' churches – Episcopal (Anglican), Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian, among others. Members of these churches, many of whom were from the nation's wealthiest and most influential families, became major supporters of the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and a host of other legal and cultural changes that transformed

the United States into a much more egalitarian society during the post-war economic boom. The 1980s brought a backlash supported by socially conservative American Catholics and theologically conservative Protestant evangelicals, most of whom were strongly opposed the legalisation of abortion in 1973 and were instrumental in the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. Beginning in the 1980s, Catholic voices became much more prominent in the 'God-talk' of American public life. This new voice of assimilated American Catholicism – increasingly identified with political neo-conservatism – sounded very American, but for many, it did not sound particularly Catholic. Their prominence and the stridency of their public message also made the divisions within the Catholic Church that had been festering since the Second Vatican Council much more obvious to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

There is overwhelming pressure on all American religious groups to embrace the ethos of American exceptionalism, which is rooted in the notion of the United States as a unique, perhaps even chosen, nation. This is particularly true in public life, and it is extraordinarily difficult for a faith or ethnic community to assimilate if it takes issue with America's freedom story or its status as a nation apart. Unlike in European countries, it is not seen as beyond the pale to question someone's patriotism if he or she criticises the nation in any way. So, no American was surprised (although many were disgusted) when Michelle Obama was vilified in certain circles for 'hating her country' when she had the audacity to say that the first time she was 'really proud' of America was when it became clear to her that her husband's race would not prevent his election to the presidency. There are still many people in the United States who refuse to acknowledge the contradictions most African-Americans must negotiate in order to accept the American freedom story or the myth of American exceptionalism. Neither reflects the reality of their experience as Americans. This does not mean they do not love their country or that they are any less American than anyone else, but as the Texas text book controversy makes clear, the centrality of non-Europeans to American identity is an inconvenient truth that many Christian and political conservatives in the United States would prefer to ignore.

Indeed, a closer examination of American history reveals the right-wing alliance of conservative evangelicals and conservative Catholics as a story of strange bedfellows. Protestant evangelicals were long one of the most anti-Catholic groups in the American population, but their strong fear of cultural change has made their political alliance with similarly disposed conservative Catholics very powerful. Traditionally, evangelicals have provided bedrock support for the idea of American exceptionalism, not only as a religious and political matter, but also as an economic one. American evangelical churches have used the free-market model to win souls and build churches, with wealth and success routinely viewed by ministers and congregants alike as evidence of God's favour. What is true for individuals is also true for nations, and the success of American capitalism and the rise of the United States as the world's most powerful nation is one way God has demonstrated that the American way is His way.

It would be very difficult for Catholics to align themselves politically with evangelicals if any of this was subject to sustained critique, for the 'prosperity gospel' bears little resemblance to anything that Catholics believe. Assimilation has brought, however, an increasing desire among some American Catholics to 'claim the state', and in the United States this goal cannot be accomplished without cooperation from Protestant evangelicals, who from time to time have nursed similar aspirations and would normally see Catholics as a significant threat. The resulting alliance has meant that more Catholics embrace a sort of homogenised American civil religion that would have been anathema to their grandparents because of its strong associations with the anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant nativism that was prevalent in the United States prior to the Second World War. It also means that more Catholics find themselves supporting a political rendering of America that is increasingly hostile to immigrants, despite the nation's settler origins and, perhaps most ironically, the strong ties most Catholics have to the heavy waves of immigration from the mid-19th through to the early 20th centuries.

Immigration may prove to be the crucible for this conservative Christian alliance. As the American political right becomes more and more antagonistic to the Mexican and Central American migrants who dominate America's most recent immigration wave, Catholics in this partnership must come to terms with the unseemliness of assuming a political position taken by those who vilified and discriminated against their forebears just a few generations ago. The Catholic Church, unlike many of the evangelical churches, has always aligned itself firmly with immigrants and continues to do so. In recent weeks, and to widespread approval among American conservatives, the legislature in the state of Arizona passed a law giving police the right to stop any person who 'reasonably appears' to be an undocumented migrant. What this means in practice is that anyone whose physical characteristics connects them to Mexico or Central America can be stopped by the police and asked to prove his or her citizenship status. Other than passports, Americans never have been issued identity papers, and there is a long tradition of strong political resistance to national identity cards. The Arizona law will force people with dark skin and/or Spanish surnames to be prepared to demonstrate their American citizenship on demand within the borders of the United States. The almost unanimous opinion of the American legal profession is that the law is unconstitutional, but this did not stop its passage, and it has not stopped yet another blatantly unconstitutional bill from wending its way toward law in Arizona. This most recent proposal would prevent children of undocumented migrants from claiming the American citizenship automatically conferred on them if they are born on American soil.

In the current American political environment, undocumented migrants are often configured as law-breakers and 'criminals'. Because of their criminality, it is legitimate to deny them the reward of American citizenship, no matter how long they have been in the country and regardless of the circumstances that caused them to enter or remain illegally. Standing for the human dignity of the migrant and against the

injustices of global capitalism that drive many men and women to break the immigration laws is sure to draw hostility, so much so that Congress has been rendered powerless in its attempts over the last decade to pass meaningful reform of the immigration laws. Other than a scattering of Catholic bishops and members of ethnic communities most affected by the immigration crisis, very few prominent public figures have been willing to support pathways to regularisation or conditional amnesty for undocumented migrants.

In years past, Catholic conservatives accepted the burden of unpopularity when they took a counter-cultural stand on abortion, but thus far they have been very reticent to break with their political allies to

demonstrate support for the Church's position on immigration. Many politically liberal Catholics behaved similarly when discord over abortion was at its height, which seems to suggest that the political self-identification of American Catholics has become much more significant than religion as a predictor of their views on controversial public issues. This will be a major challenge for the Catholic hierarchy in the years ahead, and it may even suggest that American Catholics no longer see a unified Catholic voice in American public life as attainable or even desirable.

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