

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 6, 2013 at 6:40am

Nativism Still Lives

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The National Review ran an editorial on the subject of comprehensive immigration reform last week. It was repulsive and it was repulsive in a particular way. It is Exhibit A in the argument that the sin of nativism is alive and well in America today.

The new nativism lacks the specific anti-Catholicism of its nineteenth century iteration, but it is clear that Calvinistic values still are the only values acceptable to real Americans. The editors write:

While many [Latino voters, not undocumented immigrants] are in business for themselves, they express hostile attitudes to free enterprise in polls. They are disproportionately low-income and disproportionately likely to receive some form of government support. More than half of Hispanic births are out of wedlock.

The message? Entrepreneurs are good, providentially listed among the Elect. Those who might need a bit of help from the society they have endured innumerable sufferings to join, those who put values like family or faith ahead of entrepreneurialism, they are a blight.

The very next sentences demonstrate the residual racism of today's nativism. The editors write:

Take away the Spanish surname and Latino voters look a great deal like many other Democratic constituencies. Low-income households headed by single mothers and dependent upon some form of welfare are not looking to join forces with Paul Ryan and Pat Toomey.

Hmmm. I wonder whom they mean by "many other Democratic constituencies"? Could they mean Jews

who live on the Upper West Side? Members of the UAW? Ethnic Catholics committed to the Church's long tradition of social justice teachings? No, this is a racial slur against blacks, pure and simple. You know, the "takers" in society, the 47 percent, people not like you and me and the editors of the National Review, people who don't know their fathers, people on welfare.

This is not only racist. The complete absence of any human sympathy for the plight of a single mother is astonishing. And, you would think that maybe it might dawn on these purveyors of intellectual opinions that maybe the fact these single Moms are not lining up to support the Republicans tells us more about the Republicans than it does about those Moms. And, NRO should recognize that Mr. Ryan may be a bit more complicated, in a good way, than they are when it comes to poorer constituents, at least some of his recent speeches indicate that he is more willing to embrace the concerns that animated his hero Congressman Jack Kemp whose voice is still missed with contemporary conservatism.

The use of the word "illegals" as a noun throughout the editorial shows how little the editors understand Latinos. During the debate about closing the U.S. proving ground on the island of Vieques, a debate which consumed the politics of Puerto Rico after a civilian guard was killed by a stray bomb in 1999, a Puerto Rican priest explained to me the source of agitation. In part, he said, the opposition to the proving ground was rooted in a certain suspicion of warfare, to be sure. But, the real issue was that the Navy had lied to the people of Puerto Rico before. They had promised to clean up a military installation on the nearby island of Culebra and they had not done so. "They treat us like pendejos," he said, using a slang word for "jerk." The Navy had disrespected the people of Puerto Rico, whose love of the natural beauty of their islands is well known. And disrespect is a mortal sin my priest friend explained.

The use of "illegal" as a noun also shows how little today's National Review understands the best traditions of conservatism. On other issues and in other contexts, we have heard a lot from conservatives about the fact that human rights are given by God, not by government. It goes without saying that the designation "illegal" is not of divine origin. Nor, really, is the designation "American," unless you buy into a variety of American exceptionalism that is exceedingly racist. The dignity of those who are here "illegally," as an adverb, do not abandon one bit of their God-given dignity, or the rights that flow from that dignity, when they cross the border without papers.

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The National Review's editors also issue the plea for "making economic skills rather than the reunification of extended families the main criterion for legal immigration." I am dying to hear former Senator Rick Santorum address that ambition. Is not the family the "basic unit of society"? Do we not believe that the traditional family is older than the state? Or is it only Anglo families that count? To see this coming from a self-described conservative magazine is truly shocking. Edmund Burke was many things, but an economic reductionist was not among them.

The editors make a plea for better border security. I have no objection to this in principle. But, when they advocate a "technological system for monitoring and preventing visa overstays" I get a bit nervous. It is true that visa overstays account for almost 40 percent of those in the U.S. without documents, which is one reason a really big fence won't matter much. But, just what would such a technological fix look like? It is common, now, to put a microchip in a pet, so that if they get lost, they can be identified by whomever finds them. Is that the plan? Of course, immigrants did not get lost and end up in America, they came here on purpose. But, if they are really not like us good Calvinistic, non-welfare using, entrepreneurial, Paul Ryan-supporting Americans, maybe they are more like our pets and the chip idea might work. It is hard to dismiss any idea as too outlandish for today's Republican Party on the day that Congressman Paul

?evolution and embryology are lies straight from the pit of hell? Broun is set to announce his candidacy for the U.S Senate from the great state of Georgia.

I hope that my conservative Catholic friends will call out the National Review's editors for this new version of nativism - and that those Catholics who simply detest the Democrats will think twice before thinking such dislike for the Dems requires a warm embrace of the GOP. Nativism was ugly the first time round and it is just as ugly this time. They may not be burning convents, but the animus is the same. It is unchristian, obviously. It is un-American, obviously. But that doesn't mean it won't sell to an off-year electorate in those parts of the country where bigotry is a source of pride. But, I confess, I was shocked to see such bigotry coming from the mouths of the editors of the National Review. It was once a great magazine, one that I did not agree with to be sure, but a great magazine nonetheless. Now, it traffics in this kind of venom. It is a shame.

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