Identity and Assimilation

Luma Simms

In our politically polarized society, there are few topics that are more controversial than immigration. There are valid arguments for loosening or strengthening immigration restrictions based on economic, national-security, and cultural concerns. Of the cultural concerns lodged by those who want tighter restrictions, the most common is immigrants’ seeming inability or unwillingness to assimilate to American society. Many do not speak English, and prefer to live in enclaves populated by immigrants from their home countries rather than taking on the difficult task of weaving themselves into their new communities. Many do not wish to become American at all, and would gladly return to their homelands if only they could live there in safety.

One of the most difficult barriers to assimilation is religiosity. Observant non-Western immigrants especially find it difficult to adapt to the predominantly secular American culture. For those who come from cultures defined by man’s relationship to God—even when the state religion is not their own—conforming to the anti-metaphysical philosophy that implicitly informs everyday life in the modern West can be a bridge too far. Assimilating would require giving up the defining aspect of their cultural and individual identities.

The struggle to live in accordance with one’s religious beliefs likely sounds familiar to many conservatives, who have had to fight in recent years for special “conscience clauses” to exempt them from laws that impinge on their right to live according to their convictions. This is merely another front in the same battle that some immigrants face: that between a dominant universal secularism and a culture that recognizes God—a culture populated by infinitely plastic identities versus

Luma Simms is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.
one based on metaphysically informed identities rooted in reality, as George Weigel described in the Spring 2013 issue of this magazine.

Modern life in the secular, anti-metaphysical West has been bled dry of meaning beyond the material, and it is leading to an identity crisis not just for immigrants but for modern man in general. As an immigrant, I have felt acutely the identity crisis that comes from being a speck in a global system, untethered from any nation or people, and I know how intimately this experience is connected to a metaphysical understanding of the world.

To see this is not to argue for one particular immigration policy over another. It is merely to shed light on the immigrant experience in a way that might lead to a better understanding of the larger struggle to find identity and meaning in the modern, secular West.

**Identity Under Construction**

Every person at some point in his life will ask the big questions for himself: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” “What am I supposed to do with my life?”

Most likely, he’ll find the answers to those questions in the institutions and relationships that connect him with other people and (in many cases) with his God. He’ll find his identity and purpose in the roles he plays in these different relationships and in the responsibilities those roles demand of him. Every healthy human person is formed in this way, though each must find his own answers in his own time and place.

For a believer, the most fundamentally formative relationship is that with his Creator. Having been created by God in His image imbues all human beings with dignity; as St. Pope John Paul II described it, “For God and before God, the human being is always unique and unrepeatable, somebody thought of and chosen from eternity.” The foundation of each unique individual thus starts with the metaphysical and continues through the ties he forms with others.

The most basic and most significant of earthly relationships is the nuclear family. This is the first sphere of belonging for most people, and the unchosen role of son or daughter the first role of one’s life. It is as a family member that one learns responsibility and recognizes one’s own value as an individual. From the beginning of life, it is the venue for the most consequential relationships and formative experiences. Each family has its own traditions, rules, habits, jokes, and history that make
it distinct from all other families. And the family is where one gets the first sense of being a part of a larger, distinct whole.

From the nuclear family, the spheres of belonging grow larger: extended family relationships and friendships; community institutions like school, work, clubs, religious communities, and other organizations; even one’s city and state. The shared bonds between the people in these overlapping spheres shape one’s identity and sense of self. These roles and relationships all come with responsibilities and imbue life with meaning and purpose. The cords of attachment to family, one’s religious home, one’s community, as they are strengthened, weakened, or exchanged during one’s lifetime, make up one’s identity. Without them it’s hard, if not impossible, to answer the big questions.

Just as each individual is defined by these attachments and his own history, and each family has its own identity with its own rules, history, and traditions, so every nation has its own identity. Different peoples have always had their own stories, myths, music, and gods, and they have taken pride in what makes their people special. For the individual members of a nation, to see these differences is to identify one’s fellows and to see where one belongs. Just as belonging to a particular family gives an individual a sense of himself as a family member, being part of a nation also forms an important aspect of an individual’s sense of self.

In many enlightened, elite circles today, this recognition of group difference (or sameness within one’s own group) is frowned upon, and sometimes condemned as nationalist or even racist. Such charges are deeply wrongheaded and damaging to the public discourse; there is real evil in racism, and it is counterproductive to pretend it is the same as the mere recognition of difference. Western society has forgotten that such distinctions are at the root of human identity. Spartans knew they were not Athenians, and the British understood that they were different from the French. People have long grasped personal and national identity; they haven’t been scandalized by their differences. Indeed, their differences defined them and made them part of something larger than themselves.

In his 1941 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius,” George Orwell made the observation (unpopular then as now) that national identities are rooted in real difference. Contrary to arguments that attempted to erase national distinctions, he wrote,
One must admit that the divisions between nation and nation are founded on real differences of outlook. Till recently it was thought proper to pretend that all human beings are very much alike, but in fact anyone able to use his eyes knows that the average of human behaviour differs enormously from country to country.... Yes, there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization.... And above all, it is your civilization, it is you. However much you hate it or laugh at it, you will never be happy away from it for any length of time.

Each people or nation has a particular framework of life out of which it operates. Each has its own history, culture, and institutions that link its members together. And it is within this imbedded structure that individuals understand who they are both as human beings and also as members of a community.

National Identity

Just as individual identity begins with creation by God, so may national identity. This claim was more commonly accepted in antiquity, and it is easier to understand today in religious cultures where metaphysics is more commonly discussed in a serious way; it is difficult for secular Westerners to contemplate.

Yoram Hazony, in a 2016 essay in Mosaic entitled “Nationalism and the Future of Western Freedom,” argues that one of the first sources for the idea of the nation is the Hebrew Bible. In the establishment of Israel, “The Bible... puts a new political conception on the table: a state of a single people that is united, self-governing, and uninterested in bringing its neighbors under its own rule.”

Hazony seems to share with Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain a common definition of “nation” — it is a people united around a shared language, tradition, history, culture, and (often) religion. These elements have an inherent, unifying force that brings a people together. A people united by these forces, and at the same time shaped in mind and heart by these very forces, will form a political body working toward its common good.

A people can be united in this way without sharing the same religion, though the situation is more complex. There are Iraqi Muslims and Iraqi Christians, for instance, and yet they are both Iraqi. But even in such cases, the same model of evolution and formation of a people still holds.
In Biblical terms, then, we see that the metaphysical source of a nation is made up of two horizons, the vertical and the horizontal: the vertical being the bond between a given people and God; the horizontal being the bonds among the people, such as language, tradition, history, culture, and religion. Without the vertical bond, the horizontal bonds disintegrate.

This idea of a “nation” is not the same thing as a “state.” The nation is the people, and as Jacques Maritain says, “The people are the very substance, the living and free substance, of the body politic. The people are above the State, the people are not for the State, the State is for the people.” He continues, “The State is a part and an instrumental agency of the body politic.” Put simply, the state is the governing mechanism of the nation—that is, the people.

The clearest example of such national formation is ancient Israel. The Israelites were told by Moses not to worship the gods and idols of the surrounding nations— their one and only object of worship was to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He instructed them:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. [Deuteronomy 6:4-7]

This instruction, called the shema, is foundational for Jewish identity. While the commandment requires repeating it in prayer twice daily, observant Jews say it three times each day. The Mosaic laws include elements such as food and its preparation, physical as well as ritual cleanliness, and so on; the Lord’s instructions are built into every aspect of life, every social interaction, and every institution. The nation of Israel had its own language, religion, and sense of history, passed from parent to child. The children of Israel knew who they were. They were not Egyptians, nor were they Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites, Perizzites, or Jebusites. They were the sons of Abraham. They knew because their Creator told them so.

Thus the question of one’s nation can be seen in large part as a metaphysical question, though this idea of a nation is nearly always
misunderstood. This view of a nation is no abstraction; it’s rooted in physical reality. A people needs a land of its own, a place to practice its traditions and nurture a sober national identity.

This idea of the nation is not aggressive and is not based on the biology of the people; it is not a matter of race. The nation is not defined by its conquests but by its own character. It stands out not as deserving to dominate others or command the world but as possessed of its own distinct identity.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, this older ideal of the nation became confounded with a more militaristic and imperialist form of the idea—a conquering nationalism that asserts its own superiority, partly due to the conflation of nation and state, and the desire of the state for supreme power over the body politic. That idea of nationalism found its ultimate expression in Germany and Japan during the Second World War, and came at least implicitly to be understood as the inevitable direction of any confident nationalism.

In the post-war era, therefore, the idea of a national identity has been an uncomfortable one for many, and defenses of nationalism are often met with concerns about resurgent fascism. But the false dichotomy of global citizenship or Nazism stifles important conversations about national identity. After the violence of the 20th century, it is unnecessary to remind ourselves that nationalism can be taken too far. But it is undeniable nonetheless that there are unique national characters, based on crystallized wisdom that is the product of centuries, even millennia, of lived history.

Because of these unique characters, not everyone wants a borderless world. There are large numbers of people in the Western world who celebrate their national identities and their nation’s sovereignty, and think there is value in a nation being distinct from other nations. The fault line between the largely elite class of people who prefer a more global approach and those who prefer to maintain a national identity is one of the most important social dynamics of our time. This was clear in the Brexit vote that shocked the world in the summer of 2016 and again in the U.S. presidential election later that year.

Even among those who defend a healthy nationalism, there are misunderstandings about religion’s role in the building of a national identity. Philosopher Roger Scruton, for instance, pits religion and national identity against each other in a Wall Street Journal essay, “The Case for Nations.” He writes, “In the world as it is today, the principal threat to national identity
remains religion, and in particular Islam, which offers to its most ardent subscribers a complete way of life, based on submission to the will of God.” This misunderstands both national identity and religion. Religion is a part of any national identity, at the metaphysical and cultural levels. The urge to separate the two and pit them against one another is a very recent phenomenon, and misleading at best. In the United States and most other Western countries, where there is no official religion, there need not be any conflict between loyalty to the nation and observance of a religion that subscribes to a particular way of life and demands humility before God.

In fact, a firm basis in religion is what allowed liberalism to grow in the West. Classical, secular liberalism grew organically out of the Christian world and is based on a Christian metaphysical tradition that recognizes the dignity of each human person as a child of God. This dignity is the foundation of the individual rights that government exists to defend. This classical liberalism espoused the idea that religion cannot be imposed; the right to worship as one pleases is one of the foundational rights of modern liberal nations (though one that is not evenly protected everywhere). The power of the church and the state were to be separated. In the classical secular society, there was a legitimate place for religion in the public square. Religion was not viewed as a threat to the social order but an integral part of it. Without the basic morality and the obedience to a higher authority that religion teaches, liberal democracy would not be possible.

The contemporary secular order, on the other hand, which is based on positivist humanism and is devoid of the metaphysical, too often denies even the legitimacy of religion.

**Freedom and Tolerance**

Believers’ adherence to a metaphysical framework has become controversial in today’s secular world. This is increasingly true in the United States, though the problem is most stark in Europe. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger confronted this issue and its consequences for contemporary secular Europe in a lecture on April 1, 2005, the day before St. Pope John Paul II died. Entitled “Europe’s Crisis of Culture,” the speech addressed the roots of Europe’s ongoing identity crisis. It clarified the sources of Europe’s Muslim assimilation problem in the larger civilizational clash between European nations and their Muslim populations. (The same analysis applies to the United States, though to a lesser extent thanks in part to the greater religiosity of native-born Americans.)
According to the future Pope Benedict XVI, the source of Europe’s problem can be traced by this logical sequence: The Enlightenment and secularism matured organically in Christian Europe; Europe denied its Christian heritage, espousing a universal secular culture; this universal secular culture broke down national identity and imposed an identity that was “determined exclusively by the Enlightenment culture,” a culture with internal contradictions and an “ill-defined or undefined concept of freedom.” Most significantly, this culture excludes God from the public conscience in the name of tolerance.

But the experience of Europe shows that banishing God from the public square does not create a more tolerant world. Instead, it absolutizes “a pattern of thought and of life that are radically opposed… to the other historical cultures of humanity.” Despite what the secular thinkers have argued, Cardinal Ratzinger says, people of other religions “do not feel threatened by our Christian moral foundations, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundation.” He clarifies, “It is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions, but rather the attempt to build the human community absolutely without God.”

Cardinal Ratzinger goes on to ask whether this Enlightenment-inspired secular philosophy can be universally valid, as it claims. He shows that it cannot. While the current thinking may be secular, it grew in Christian soil. Despite having severed its roots, “depriving itself of the regenerating forces from which it sprang,” it is not infinitely adaptable; it cannot be transplanted into Muslim ground. Enlightenment culture is based on Enlightenment philosophies, which “are characterized by the fact that they are positivist and, therefore, anti-metaphysical, so much so that, in the end, God cannot have any place in them” (emphasis added).

Given the metaphysical foundations of human identity discussed above, it should be clear that, despite its lofty rhetoric about tolerance, a Western, secular, anti-metaphysical society is not a hospitable place for a large mass of immigrants who come from cultures where the metaphysical is the very foundation of understanding human nature and the universe. Ratzinger articulates the exact nature of the problem:

The real opposition that characterizes today’s world is not that between various religious cultures, but that between the radical
emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on one hand, and from the great religious cultures on the other. If there were to be a clash of cultures, it would not be because of a clash of the great religions—which have always struggled against one another, but which, in the end, have also always known how to live with one another—but it will be because of the clash between this radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures.

In other words, it is a clash between the secular West and the world that has not capitulated to an anti-metaphysical worldview.

This radical emancipation is profoundly isolating and against man’s nature. In the *Summa Theologiae Secunda Secundae Partis*, St. Thomas Aquinas writes that, by virtue of our creation into the relational spheres discussed above, we owe devotion and honor first to God as our Creator and sustainer, then to parents and kinsmen because of the bonds of love and life we share with them, and finally to our country and fellow citizens because of the metaphysical bonds we share as a people. The anti-metaphysical philosophy of our time breaks these bonds and isolates the individual from his Creator, from his immediate family and kinsmen, and even from his fellow citizens.

This modern anti-metaphysical philosophy atomizes individuals and breaks the links that make a nation cohere. This break forces man’s natural tendency toward devotion to center itself on the state—which exacerbates man’s isolation, as the state is incapable of providing man with meaning greater than himself. This is happening to everyone right now in the secular West, not just immigrants.

**THE PRICE OF GLOBALIZATION**

Throughout history, people have traveled from country to country, trading with one another over long distances, returning home with the goods, habits, and even the idols and religions of far-off peoples. People knew that crossing a border was not a neutral event. They were fearful of change, knowing some changes become assaults on the spheres that define their identity. They expected that the exchanges of goods and ideas would sometimes lead to conflict. Whether they were superficially about religious differences, greed for land and treasure, or lust for power, fundamentally the clashes were always about identity: people fighting to maintain who they were and to reject what they were not.
Our current civilizational clash is also about identity, but the terms of the conflict are different. Though many argue that globalization has improved the world economically, it came with a price that no old-fashioned trade route ever demanded from a people: the breakdown of national barriers. The universal secular ideal assumes that all people are more or less the same, deep down—or would be if they were better informed. Likewise, the modern ideal of a world without borders denies that there are profound differences between peoples. In attempting to break down barriers to bring people together, it denies the validity of the differences that define cultural and individual identity, and demands that they be set aside in the interest of a peaceful, unified, global society. But this denial leads to a far deeper conflict than the acknowledgment of difference ever did.

Invalidating differences invalidates people, diminishing the human person’s dignity and identity. Demanding that Jews and Catholics, for example, conform to an anti-metaphysical social structure does not make them better neighbors. Instead, it breaks the bonds between them and their God, and so between one another. As discussed above, the bond between a person and his God gives that person his foundational identity, on top of which everything else is built. That relationship may look a little different for the Jew and the Catholic, and they may confront obstacles on their way to being neighbors in light of those differences, but their personal identities centered on their relationships with God are absolutely necessary to living peacefully together. And that is because respecting their differences reinforces their human dignity. They become healthier people knowing who they are and what they believe, which leaves them better able to respect and love others who are not like them.

In an anti-metaphysical culture, these differences are denied. And so for devout immigrants, this clash of cultures becomes a personal identity crisis. An immigrant has already left family, community, and state, moving and attempting to adapt to a new community and state. More often than not in the modern world, the immigrant is also crossing a civilizational boundary from a society steeped in metaphysics to one that is disdainful of it. Therefore, in order to assimilate to his new world, most if not all of the spheres that make up his identity must be broken down, including not just his national identity, but also, to some extent, the individual’s relationship with his Creator, of which his national identity is a part. These ties are the very foundation of a believing person’s identity, which is part of why immigration is so wrenching for the individual immigrant.
To take an example from literature, in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri has been unjustly convicted of murdering his father, so his brothers plot to help him escape to America. But Dmitri tells his brother:

I hate this America even now! And maybe every last one of them is some sort of boundless machinist or whatever—but, devil take them, they’re not my people, not of my soul! I love Russia, Alexei, I love the Russian God, though I myself am a scoundrel! But there I’ll just croak!

Dostoevsky’s Dmitri typifies the ontological drive for personal and national identity. People flourish when they know who they are; they need to know who they are, and they are dehumanized when it is taken away from them. Dmitri’s reaction can be confusing to modern readers who know only the universal secular philosophy of the self, with its infinitely plastic identities shaped wholly by one’s own will.

But there is a metaphysical difference between being tethered to a nation and being unmoored from everything familiar. With one’s people, there is a sense of belonging and purpose; without one’s people, a person is a speck, floating alone in a global system, attempting to create a meaningful life from scratch.

**THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE**

My life has embodied this identity crisis. I’ve lived in America for 39 years since immigrating as a child, and I have spent those years trying to understand the world around me and who I am within that world. There is an Arab proverb my mother often repeated: “He who renounces his origins renounces himself.” It was a cause of strife between us as I struggled against my Iraqi heritage. The more she embedded herself within the Middle Eastern subculture here in the United States, the harder I struggled against my roots. I pulled and pulled until I became rootless. I spent years in that state, testing and probing the world around me for answers. In the end, I had to go back to my origins—to my ties to family, religion, culture, and nationality—to understand myself.

A person cannot remain untethered, and so I sought to attach myself to my new community and country. But in order to become American,
I had to change what I did, what I thought, and even how I thought about what I did, and how I thought about what I thought.

What did it mean to be an American? It went beyond learning to speak English, and dressing and acting like an American girl, all of which could be mimicked easily without changing my identity. To really be American required absorbing the *cultus*, the heart of culture.

What is the American *cultus*? What does America worship and believe in? This is a religious question; it explains why a person’s religion shapes how and to what extent an individual assimilates. Each religion carries with it a particular way of knowing about God, man, and the world; religion gives man an epistemology. To become internally American requires an epistemological shift.

To understand what is meant by an American epistemology, consider the words of the Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

One has to think about God, man, and the world in a particular way in order to believe these statements. If one’s understanding of God, man, and the world are orthogonal to this, or in any way contentious with this worldview, it will be difficult to fully assimilate without undergoing an epistemological shift.

Abraham Lincoln beautifully articulated the positive formulation of this straightforward fact. On July 10, 1858, in a speech in Chicago, he spoke of the Americans who were not connected by ties of blood to the nation’s founders:

> We have besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men. They are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot
carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us. But when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.

This beautiful sentiment, however, is the other side of the coin of a more complicated fact about American identity. It raises the question of how Americans themselves understand the words of the Declaration of Independence, and so understand their own national character. When that character comes to be understood as defined by a shallow idea of freedom, as opposed to Lincoln’s deep idea of it, it presents to traditionalists — both those who are native to America and those who immigrate here — an ethic to which it is difficult to assimilate.

My parents made it clear that my family didn’t espouse the American version of freedom and individualism, as they understood it. We are different. We don’t wear immodest clothes, or wear makeup and have boyfriends in elementary school. We don’t go to American churches that worship in ways we disagree with. And we don’t get too involved with institutions whose values run contrary to ours.

It wasn’t that the concept of the equality of man as articulated in the Declaration of Independence was scorned or regarded with suspicion by my Iraqi Christian subculture. To the contrary, not only was it in line with our Christian beliefs, but we embraced it gratefully, knowing it was the reason we could live peacefully in this country. But there were two hurdles. First, it seemed to most of us that there was some kind of disconnect between the words of the founders and the extreme atomization we saw in the culture; things we regarded as beyond the pale were considered matters of individual freedom. The document guaranteed liberty, but many people seemed to believe that it meant there were no limits to freedom. That interpretation was a stumbling block to my family and others in my subculture.

Second, there were residual effects coming out of the Middle Eastern culture dominated by the Islamic conception of the human person, where
non-Muslims were considered *kuffar*— unbelievers who could be killed with impunity. Not only were Christians used to their *dhimmi* status as second-class citizens, but most were also very attuned to the assimilation hurdles within the Arab subculture here in America, as Christians and Muslims struggled in different ways to adapt to this country.

The looser the American culture became, the more firmly my parents pressed into their Middle Eastern subculture. The harder I tried to fit into the American world around me, the tighter their restrictions became. My U.S. history teacher at school taught us that the American founders had certain ideas, and those ideas created a particular country—our country, America. I knew that if America was going to continue to be America, then we needed to think as they did. We could not live in America but continue to think like Iraqis. There lay the existential rub.

But my parents were adamant. “We are not Americans!” they insisted. “We are Christian Iraqis. We work hard, we pay taxes, we vote, we obey the law and become good citizens—but we are *not* Americans.” For them, it was metaphysical warfare: We abide, but we do not assimilate.

**Richness in Difference**

This feeling of being “strangers in a strange land,” and the refusal to submit to a culture that denies the truth as one knows it, is not limited to immigrants. It is increasingly becoming true for all people living in America who find themselves on the believers’ side of the metaphysical war.

The last few years have seen devout Christians legally persecuted and run out of business for living in accordance with their beliefs. Even religious orders are not immune from the diktats of the secular state; the Little Sisters of the Poor had to go to the Supreme Court to win an exemption to live their faith. These native-born bakers, florists, and nuns were forced to choose between their faiths and the demands of the universal secular culture—an all-too-familiar experience for so many Eastern immigrants.

So what is to be done? In *The Benedict Option*, Rod Dreher goes so far as to suggest that believers establish their own separate communities, wholly apart from the rest of the corrupted, anti-metaphysical culture. But this is not much better than my parents’ retreat into their own subculture.

In his 1943 essay “On the Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists and The Principle of the New Order,” Charles De Koninck wrote that we live in an age where “the singular person and his singular
good [is] the primary root, [is] an ultimate intrinsic end, and consequently [is] the measure of all intrinsic good in the universe.” Devout native-born Americans sense the spiritual vacancy of this secular dogma just as immigrants from metaphysically driven cultures do. They too feel beleaguered by the bread and circuses of the surrounding culture—a social and intellectual regime foisting counterfeit identities on the devout. They are called bigots for believing in a sexuality grounded in holy scriptures. The women among them are deemed backward for wanting to stay at home to raise their children. They are accused of persecuting women because they affirm the right to life for the unborn.

The situation immigrants and devout native-born Americans face could serve as a bridge between these communities. Bonds can be created between these groups based on their shared values, like the relationship between an individual and God, and the belief that this vertical relationship is necessary if the horizontal relationships of family, friends, and countrymen are to be maintained. These two communities, even despite their differences, can come together to rebuild the metaphysical structures of society on the local level.

There are spaces in American society where the work can be done to regain our identities, and where believers can live faithfully and unapologetically. This work will occur from the bottom up, in the middle layers of society. This is where the ties between people and their communities will be reestablished and religious communities will regain their strength. As people recover their faith in local institutions, they will more easily see how hollow the promises of the universal secular culture are. And they will rediscover the richness to be found in recognizing both our differences and the important things we all share as Americans.

It is through such a recovery of American identity that our capacity to assimilate immigrants can also be revitalized. Assimilation has proven so difficult lately not because our culture is too cohesive and self-confident but because it has lost the capacity to tell its own story coherently. Immigration will become easier, not harder, when we become more self-assured as a people with a firm national identity rooted, as all national identities are, in metaphysical as well as in historical and cultural commitments.