

The 2020 Census Part II: The Politics of Belonging

On June 27, 2019 the United States Supreme Court determined in the case of the *Department of Commerce v. New York* that the Trump administration cannot reinstate a citizenship question asking households about their citizenship status on the 2020 census questionnaire.

The Census Act requires the Secretary of Commerce to conduct a census every 10 years in order to “apportion the members of the House of Representatives among the States.” The census is used for a number of purposes. For instance, it is used by Congress and the Federal government to draw up electoral districts and to help them allocate funds for social services.

The Trump administration presented evidence that the citizenship question has been included on the census questionnaire in the past, specifically from 1820 to 1950, and that including such a question in the 2020 census represents a return to the “traditional status quo.” However, according to historians, although a citizenship question has been included in the past, such a question was limited to only some households and it did not include the question on a universal as was proposed on the 2020 census.

The court ultimately ruled against the Trump administration’s citizenship question on administrative and procedural grounds. They firmly rejected Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross’ explanation that the citizenship question would help the Department of Justice better enforce the Voting Rights Act. Furthermore, the court stated that the Secretary’s rationale for the question was for some other unnamed goal. While the Court did not discuss this at length, many presume that the question preemptively seeks to fragment and destabilize immigrant communities who tend to vote Democratic.

Although the Court rejected the Secretary’s justification, it did not exclude the question altogether leaving an open door for other reasons to still include the question. Yesterday, Trump announced that he will drop his efforts to include the question in the 2020 census and will alternatively procure the citizenship data using existing records. But his administration has instructed “the Commerce Secretary to consider beginning the process of including the question on the 2030 census count.”

The Politics of Belonging

Data collected by the Census Bureau shows that minority and immigrant communities are less likely to respond to census questionnaires for fear the information will be used against them and their families. The citizenship question in particular solidifies this fear. If immigrant communities and communities of color refuse to fill out the census this will produce less accurate census data along with an undercount of the population. This could result in the defunding of key social services in those communities, and even the loss of seats in the House of Representatives.

Contrary to the justification given by Secretary Ross, such a question would

adversely undermine the communities the Voting Rights Act protects. While the Trump administration will not be able to include the question in 2020, Trump's politicizing of the census may still deter participation in the census.

The public discourse surrounding this case highlights a pertinent question shadowing the country since 2016 (and arguably since the colonization of the Americas): *who belongs?*

True Belonging

Citizenship is an exercise in community creation. It's the government's way of determining who belongs where, and with whom. In a world changing so rapidly, I couldn't help but ask what does it mean to belong? Where do I belong as a Christ follower? And where does the Church belong in today's society?

Brené Brown says this about belonging in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection: Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.*

History shows that the question of belonging has confounded humanity since Genesis. We have always attempted to create arbitrary barriers between one another in order to make sense of our imperfect nature. To do this we created rule-based cultures and societies, and have sought to classify others based on our differences. But the mission of Christ and the early Church was to redefine what it means to belong. In the New Testament, we see Christ standing firm against the political actors of that day by intentionally including those persons and groups considered undesirable and immoral by the religious and political leaders of the time.

This means that true belonging looks like a Church having the courage to create spaces of acceptance, love, and belonging for all people despite their background. It means everyone is welcome and no one, not even the Church, has to sacrifice its authenticity or who they are.

Identity Crisis

It's when the Church is preoccupied with protecting its identity that she alienates the very people Christ has called her to connect with, love, and protect. By taking a count (or a census if you will) of who and what does or does not belong churches produce a fragmented, divisive, and compassionless body of believers.

We cannot return to the "traditional status quo." In order to find and practice true belonging in Christ, the Church must address the uncomfortable questions people are wrestling with today. We must be willing to dialogue about what it means to open ourselves up to those in the LGBTQIA+ community. How can we say we believe in the belonging Christ demonstrated when we refuse to address the injustices of structural racism and bigotry within and outside the church? Furthermore, true belonging means trusting in the call and leading of the Holy Spirit over women ministers.

Can the Church reconcile standing true to her message if she remains

exclusive, protectionist, and divisive? How can we as believers truly “seek the lost” when we create arbitrary justifications for excluding anyone who challenges our preconceived ideas about who should and should not have access to experiencing God’s grace? Is not everyone deserving of hearing and experiencing the grace that Christ freely extends? It’s time we stop trying to determine the spiritual citizenship of others, and start demonstrating the kind of self-sacrificing, all-inclusive belonging that Christ practiced when He was on Earth.