Introduction
Throughout US history Americans have imagined the border in many different ways, from impermeable lines of defense to harmless lines on a map. For some, borders are a place of creative diversity; for others, they are a site of profound danger. At one time “the border” conjured up images of Ellis Island and the port cities of the east coast. At another, as new waves of immigrants were first arriving from Asia, popular imagination associated the border with the west coast. Today, the border can be anywhere there is an international airport. But in recent years, most Americans have come to think of “the border” as the southwestern border between the United States and Mexico. Over the past few decades, that border has become the site of devastating violence and loss of life, a political lightning rod, and a symbol of deep cultural divisions in American culture around not only immigration but American identity and governance writ large.

Though often unacknowledged, religion is deeply embedded in how Americans imagine the border. Given the pervasiveness of Christianity in American culture, distinctive forms of American Christianity have especially shaped Americans’ attitudes to and at the border. On the one hand, certain strands of American Christianity emphasize purity and authority, contributing to anxiety about the permeability of the border and the potential for dangerous or disorderly incursions. On the other hand, some forms of American Christianity emphasize radical hospitality and portray Jesus as favoring universal humanity, not national identity, leading to a politics of more permeable, if not radically open, borders. Other religions play active parts as well, from the collaboration of Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, and nonbelievers in humanitarian efforts and the Sanctuary movement, to the long standing presence of Native peoples whose indigenous traditions sometimes merge with and sometimes stand in rebuke to the broader border culture. Understanding these different ways of imagining the border—and how religions foster them—is essential to understanding the current crisis at the border.

Border Patrolled
As early as 1904, U.S. immigration officials patrolled the southwestern border on horseback to prevent migrants from crossing. By 1924, rising concerns over illegal immigration and the smuggling of liquor across both the northern and southern borders led Congress to formally establish the U.S. Border Patrol. In the 1950s, the Border Patrol’s focus again shifted to the southwest border in response to increasing migration. The Border Patrol was granted the authority to arrest and deport undocumented immigrants, leading to the deportation of nearly 50,000 by 1956. In the 1960s, the Border Patrol expanded its reach to aircraft and airports, and it also began work to prevent drug smuggling. The 1980s and 1990s brought new technological advances and increased numbers of agents, particularly after the implementation of NAFTA. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Border Patrol was brought under the control of the newly established Department of Homeland Security. The current opioid crisis in the United States has increased Americans’ fears of illegal drugs crossing the border. Due to these new anxieties of the 21st century, the Southwest border has been increasingly militarized. It is now not a line in the sand but rather a deep network of surveillance towers and checkpoints, a territory not only patrolled by Border Patrol agents but also monitored by a fleet of drones and sensors.

Today, the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol largely embodies the notion that the border is a site of danger and must be defended against unwanted invaders. In point of fact, Border Patrol has jurisdiction not only over the southwest border, but all the nation’s borders. Many Americans do not realize that in fact the “border” over
which USCBP has jurisdiction is not a line in the sand. Rather, it comprises all areas within 100 miles of the border line, coastal or land. This means that roughly two-thirds of US residents actually live under the jurisdiction of Border Patrol, though most are unaware and to date are unaffected by that fact. Given that the US government has determined that Fourth Amendment protections which protect Americans from random and arbitrary stops and searches do not fully apply in border areas, the potential for government overreach in border areas is significant. This, many assert, is the current experience of those now residing under USCBP jurisdiction in the Southwest.

In addition to Border Patrol, the southwest border is also guarded by volunteer members of militias, including the Minutemen, the Oathkeepers, and the Three Percenters. These groups were founded in the decade following the 9/11 attacks in response to new anxieties, however fanciful, about the border being vulnerable to Muslim terrorists operating in league with drug cartels. Many of their members previously served in the military, and they engage in proto-military activities in an attempt to fill what they see as gaps in the work of USCBP. The militias believe that the U.S. government is failing to provide an adequate defense of the border. Volunteer members, who are largely untrained, patrol the border themselves, occasionally coming into conflict with Border Patrol agents in the same area. The rhetoric of the militias is strongly nationalistic, emphasizing the need to protect the border so as to preserve “the American way of life.”

**People Helping People**

The Border Patrol and the militias are not the only groups working at the border. Numerous nongovernmental humanitarian organizations work to help migrants cross a border zone that is mostly desert, a hostile wilderness that makes survival a challenge even without armed patrols. Stringent regulations at the points of entry and the expansion of security fences have driven more border crossers into these wilderness areas and onto ranch land in hopes of escaping detecting. Organizations like No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes and Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas provide direct aid to migrants in the form of water stations, clothing and food supplies, and emergency first aid, as well as advocacy and legal support. Both of these organizations were formed by coalitions of faith groups and community partners with the common goal of creating a more humane, just border.

Another organization specific to the Arizona section of the border is PHPArivaca (People Helping People in the Border Zone), a local group comprised of Arivaca residents who all live in the border zone and must pass through invasive checkpoints every time they leave their small town. In response, they have banded together to work for the demilitarization of the border. The group reports that in the last year alone, the remains of over 150 people have been found in the stretch of desert south of Tucson. The actual number of deaths is likely to be much higher, since so many migrants are never found. PHP works to support local residents in offering assistance to migrants in need. In doing so, they frequently encounter opposition from other residents of the area, including militia members who have vandalized water stations and harassed PHP’s activists. Despite the conflict and the invasive presence of Border Patrol in the town, Arivaca’s residents have continued to offer aid to migrants and to document the dire situation at the border.

The sanctuary movement has also been growing among Arizona’s religious communities, as it has in the greater Boston area and other U.S. cities with large immigrant populations. Today’s sanctuary movements draw on the legacy of similar movements in the 1980s, offering shelter and legal support to undocumented immigrants threatened by immediate deportation. Across the United States, groups from a variety of religious traditions,
including Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs, have formed coalitions to offer sanctuary. Shortly before the inauguration of President Trump in January 2017, nineteen religious congregations in the Tucson area announced that they would join the national movement, Sanctuary Rising, in offering “radical welcome” to undocumented immigrants. Rev. Allison Harrington, one of the leaders of the Tucson coalition, announced that their work was not just about offering shelter in houses of worship. They were called to work together to create “communities that are sanctuary spaces.”

Others in Arizona see the sanctuary movement as undermining the rule of law, a sentiment echoed widely by conservatives and particularly by the Trump administration, which threatened to cut off federal funding to sanctuary cities. Some American Christians, particularly white evangelicals, have stood by this argument for the rule of law, even as they have expressed compassion for the plight of undocumented immigrants. White evangelicals are almost evenly split on whether undocumented immigrants should be offered a path to citizenship, with 49% in favor. Their religious attitudes toward the nation and its laws, as well as their preference for reforming individuals over systems, leads many white evangelicals to oppose the sanctuary movement, despite its religious roots.

Religious Literacy Questions
These opposing attitudes and activities at the southwestern border raise questions about how religions influence Americans’ attitudes toward the border and the actions they take or enable in the border zone.

1. None of the groups discussed above are neutral actors. All of them are motivated by complex visions of U.S. sovereignty, and all believe they have the best interests of the nation at heart. How does religion factor into their understandings of what the nation is and what its borders ought to be? What cultural frameworks fosters these understandings, and how do religions contribute to them via institutions, theological claims, and embedded cultural assumptions?
2. How does the U.S. Border Patrol navigate the competing attitudes toward the border, including those of its own agents? To what degree and in what ways is the US Border Patrol accountable to the public? How and why do the internal interests of the USBP affect its interactions with other actors on the ground?
3. What does the situation on the border reveal about the varieties of American Christianity that exist today? How can religious literacy help us to understand individuals and organizations driven by, on the one hand, a Christianity that venerates law and order, and, on the other hand, a Christianity focused on radical hospitality? How can religious literacy help us to speak across that divide in American Christianity and in the nation more broadly?
4. How can religious literacy help us to better stand not only someone else’s culture, but also our own? How does a religious literacy lens help us to see the contingent cultural norms embedded in our laws and policies? How can it help us to reshape those norms to more effectively pursue peace and justice?
5. Not only do Americans think of “the border” as almost exclusively the southwest border, they also tend to think of the border in myopic ways. For instance, most Americans think of the border as a place that non-Americans enter, rather than recognizing it as a site of both entry and exit, by both Americans and non-Americans. They also tend to think that the US is solely responsible for securing the border, disregarding the role of Mexico in securing a border that it shares. Given these attitudes, how do religious assumptions about the nation (particularly among Christians) inform these ideas about the
How does religion drive or alleviate the anxieties that cause Americans to fixate on the southwestern border, as opposed to other borders?

**Additional Reading | Arizona-Mexico Border**


Paul Ingram, “Churches Promise ‘Radical Welcome’ for Migrants with Revived Sanctuary Movement,” *Tucson Sentinel*, January 18, 2017


