

“Sanctuary,” “sacred,” and “holy” are some of the terms that cities, universities, and religious institutions invoke to define their position and alignment regarding the Sanctuary Movement. In broad terms, the Sanctuary Movement is concerned with protecting the rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States under a protective, written or unwritten, policy which prevents the cooperation of local authorities with assisting federal immigration agents with deportation (Bagelman 2016). Regardless of how they call themselves – sanctuary, sacred, or holy – these spaces typically seek to protect and defend the rights of undocumented immigrants.

While each space may declare itself as an advocate for undocumented immigrants, the ways in which various institutions uniquely identify themselves within this movement raises several questions. Why are there different names to spaces that seek to protect undocumented immigrants? Why do some institutions align themselves with sanctuary beliefs and ideals, but refuse to call themselves “sanctuary?” How important are the ways in which institutions identify themselves in the Sanctuary Movement? What factors influence the ways they call themselves? This paper places the aforementioned questions in the context of recent political developments, current sanctuary policies within institutions, and the political, economic, and social factors that influence the ways that these institutions self-identify. Ultimately, this paper seeks to better understand the ways that cities, universities, and religious institutions navigate a contentious environment for their constituents, students, and congregation members through the ways that they identify themselves in terms of “sanctuary,” and how their own interests influence their decisions.

An examination of sanctuary cities, universities and religious institutions is especially relevant in regards to recent actions under the new Trump administration. In January of 2017, Donald Trump signed a series of executive orders relating to refugees, the National Security Board, and undocumented immigrants. One of these executive orders seeks to expand the ways in which immigrants are determined for deportation, specifically “by directing federal immigration agents to target a broader group of immigrants for deportation” based on any chargeable criminal offense. This is an important change in policy because, previously, crime-based removal depended on conviction, not just a charged offense (Cameron 2017).

In the wake of these actions, cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and other counties/communities in California, Vermont, and Rhode Island have declared themselves as sanctuary zones. In particular, this means that they instruct their local law enforcement to not assist or comply with federal law agents in the deportation of undocumented individuals, meaning that they will not detain undocumented immigrants based solely on their citizenship status. In addition to identifying as a sanctuary city and not working with federal immigration agents, San Francisco also went further legally and, in response to Trump’s executive order, began a lawsuit against the administration arguing that “the order is an unconstitutional overreach of the president’s power (Green, Tarlton 2017).”

In the context of identity and space-naming, Los Angeles serves as an interesting example for sanctuary cities and the role of identity. The Los Angeles police department worked for years since the 1980s with an unspoken sanctuary policy where they would not detain or provide undocumented immigrant to federal authorities. Only recently when sanctuary policies and undocumented immigrants became increasingly under threat with President Trump’s recent executive orders did the city declared itself a sanctuary city officially (Green, Tarlton 2017).

In response to the rise in officially declared sanctuary cities, Trump’s administration characterizes sanctuary cities as harmful and threatening spaces that harbor criminals and threaten the national security of the nation. In the order that expanded immigration deportation, or the “Executive Order: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States,” Trump stated “Sanctuary jurisdictions across the United States willfully violate Federal law in an attempt to shield aliens from removal from the United States.” Further, Trump threatened billions in federal funding to cities that call themselves sanctuary cities (Cameron 2017).

Like cities, universities are beginning to take a stand as spaces where undocumented immigrants as students and academics seek protection. For example, the University of California school system president Janet Napolitano declared in November following the election that universities in California “are ordered not to undertake any efforts to enforce federal immigration laws, including disclosing any information about students unless ordered by court.” However, similar to the consequences threatened to sanctuary cities, universities who declare themselves as sanctuary institutions face political funding backlash, too. For example,

a California legislator, Dunken Hunter, proposed a bill to strip self-identified sanctuary universities/campuses of federal financial aid (Dinan 2017).

In addition to cities and universities, religious institutions like churches and synagogues play a role in the Sanctuary Movement. In fact, the movement was spurred by religious institutions offering sanctuary in the 1980s for displaced immigrants from violent regions in Central America who were denied refugees status in the United States. Religious institutions often refer to themselves as places of sanctuary, but they take a more religious tone and stance by characterizing themselves as “sacred grounds”, and alluding to their role as “holy institutions.” For example, the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles recently identified itself as a “sanctuary diocese,” suggesting that it is a “holy resistance.” However, while churches don’t receive federal funding in the same manners as cities and universities, they still fear political, social, or economic backlash as sanctuary institutions and “can’t assume that churches and houses of worship will remain safe locations” under President Trump (Goodstein 2017).

In light of federal funding threats, political alignment risks, and new executive orders, some spaces and institutions are hesitant to identify themselves as sanctuary even if their beliefs and practices align with the policies of sanctuary. While they may make clear in their rhetoric their positions for human and civil rights, they sometimes hesitate to name their position as a “sanctuary” for fear of funding, political, and social risk. For an example, in recent events Vanderbilt University issued a statement addressing student concerns about immigration and requests for Vanderbilt to be declared a sanctuary campus. The university statement did not specifically call Vanderbilt a sanctuary campus – for reasons that are not specific whether they be political, funding, or social reasons. However, the statement did frame Vanderbilt’s role in the discourse on sanctuary campuses and framed it as a “sacred” space (perhaps a call to religious sanctuary institutions), and that the university, while unable to outright deny federal law, was not a law enforcement office and would not work for or under immigration law (Zeppos 2017). One issue with this kind of position, whether it be from a university, city, or religious institution, has the effect of making constituents, students, and members wary of the institution if it will not publically and officially call itself a “sanctuary” space.

Ultimately, the process of space-naming becomes increasingly important in the Sanctuary Movement and as new laws, orders, and policies are created under a new administration. Whether cities, universities, or religious institutions identify their spaces as “sanctuary,” “sacred,” or “holy” – officially or unofficially, immediately or with hesitancy – they send a message about their position on the issues relating to undocumented immigrants and place themselves in the center of this evolving discourse.

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