The issue of immigration was highlighted in a critical way during this past election cycle. Immigrant bodies have been “othered” in a very deliberate and a conscious way, especially those of us who come from third world countries. In such a context, how is one to read and reflect on John 17:20-21?

I begin my reflection by situating myself and my context. I came to the United States almost seventeen years ago. As a legal immigrant who was racialized or rather introduced to the concept and history of race and racism in this country, I was immediately made aware of how I was different and therefore the “other.” Thus, immigrants are often forced to “assimilate” in ways that neutralize and naturalize our differences. To assimilate is to find ways to minimize and hide your differences. For example: the ability to speak English with a neutral accent helps minimize the “otherness” of a non-native English speaker. In their book Empire Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write, “Colonialism homogenizes real social differences by creating one overriding opposition that pushes differences to the absolute and then subsumes the opposition under the identity of European civilization.”

Although, both Hardt and Negri’s words refer to the specific context of colonialism their words are pertinent to the experiences of immigrants in the current context. In other words, the “otherness” or the “difference” represented in the body of the immigrant are subsumed as they become “one” with the dominant culture. Thus, one could argue that “to be one” in the current context is to be the same or to be homogeneous.

In John 17:20-21, Jesus tells his disciples that his prayer is for all his believers. The theme that emerges in verse 20-21 is the theme of oneness. John 17:20-21 Jesus says, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, God, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” The theme of oneness in the current context where difference is illustrated as negative and therefore something that needs to be overcome could easily be interpreted through the lens of assimilation.

In verses 20, Jesus calls his believers to be “one” in God but what does it mean to be “one” without being called to be the same? It is very easy for us as people to be united in our similarity but how does one experience unity in our diversity without the pressure of wanting to negate each other’s difference and subsume it through our domination and control of the “othered” body? Thus, rather than being one in our similarity what if John’s Jesus is asking his believers to be one in their difference recognizing that in our ability to be different we are essentially one and the same. Simply put, it is in recognizing our differences that we can be same. The immigrant body is different from the citizen body but rather than overcoming its difference to be the same, acknowledging and the recognition of difference rather than its disavowal can to paraphrase the words of Jesus help us see the divine in the “other” just as the “other” recognizes the divine in us. In the end we are all one in our plurality and our multiplicity in God.

STUDY 2

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