

Obama: “The Time Has Come” for Immigration Reform

During President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address Tuesday night, he highlighted the importance of faith leaders as he urged a joint session of Congress to tackle immigration reform.

Although the most explicitly religious of Obama’s State of the Union addresses other than his 2011 speech, he primarily referenced God in a few typical, ceremonial ways.

“Our economy is stronger when we harness the talents and ingenuity of striving, hopeful immigrants,” Obama [stated](#) in his annual address as he urged immigration reform.

“And right now, leaders from the business, labor, law enforcement, faith communities - they all agree that the time has come to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Now is the time to do it. Now is the time to get it done.”

Among the recent faith-based immigration statements stands the declaration [issued](#) earlier this month by leaders of the ecumenical group Christian Churches Together.

At the group’s gathering in Austin, Texas, attendees also watched “[Gospel Without Borders](#),” an ecumenical film produced by EthicsDaily.com.

Senator Marco Rubio of Florida also addressed immigration reform in his Republican response to the State of the Union.

Although touching on the topic only briefly, Rubio offered support while also utilizing generic talking points about border security.

“We can also help our economy grow if we have a legal immigration system that allows us to attract and assimilate the world’s best and brightest,” Rubio [noted](#)

after earlier referencing that his parents immigrated to the U.S.

“We need a responsible, permanent solution to the problem of those who are here illegally. But first, we must follow through on the broken promises of the past to secure our borders and enforce our laws.”

Although Rubio did not address the faith community’s role in immigration reform, he did offer several religious references in his speech.

Rubio noted that he prays for those in the armed forces serving around the world and prays Republicans and Democrats would work together.

Rubio also argued that the answers to the nation’s challenges would be found “primarily in our families and our faiths, not our politicians.”

Elsewhere in his speech, Rubio argued against governmental efforts to promote green technology since “God also blessed America with abundant coal, oil and natural gas.”

Obama also offered a couple of religious comments other than his immigration remark, but he did not make nearly as many religious references as Rubio.

Obama argued for the importance of protecting the right to vote, which he called one of “our God-given rights.”

Obama ended his speech with a typical modern presidential speech close: “God bless you, and God bless these United States of America.” Rubio also closed his speech with “God bless” statements.

The only explicit religious references in Obama’s 2010 and 2012 State of the Union speeches - and his 2009 speech before a joint session of Congress that served as an unofficial State of the Union - came with the closing “God bless” line.

In his 2011 address, Obama also spoke twice of the importance of working

together across faiths and religions, and urged prayer for then-Congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who was seriously injured in a shooting two weeks earlier.

Obama's 2013 speech, on the eve of the start of Lent, represented the 100th anniversary of the revival of the tradition of an oral address.

Although George Washington and John Adams offered oral State of the Union reports to Congress, Thomas Jefferson instead sent written reports to meet the constitutional demand of an annual message. Presidents over the next century followed Jefferson's model.

In 1913, Woodrow Wilson verbally delivered a State of the Union to Congress. Presidents have followed his example even as a few sometimes instead submitted a written report.

The last president to offer a written State of the Union without a verbal address before Congress was Jimmy Carter, a Baptist, in 1981 as he left office.

Although modern presidential State of the Union addresses primarily include generic proposals instead of detailed policy proposals, the speeches signal which issues a president believes should receive more attention.

By addressing an issue, a president signals they believe the issue is more pressing than other issues left out of the speech.

Additionally, when a president discusses an issue, it helps make that issue a higher priority for congressional representatives, journalists and the public.

Obama's highlighting of immigration reform - along with issues like national debt, climate change, education and gun control - will likely bring more discussion of the issue than if he had omitted the topic in Tuesday's remarks.

Noting the importance of faith leaders on that issue - and not on other issues - will also likely increase the visibility of the faith community on the topic.

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Although attention does not guarantee congressional action, presidential comments increase the likelihood of legislation.

What remains to be seen, then, is if faith leaders can take advantage of Obama's speech to push immigration reform through Congress.

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