

Does Assimilation Mean Giving Up Your Ethnic Identity?

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No. Assimilation, properly understood, is not a demand that you forget your dead, your language at the table, or the country that formed your childhood. It is a demand that in public you enter a particular political order: the American Republic. The confusion of those two things—private peoplehood and public law—is why the word “assimilation” now frightens people who would otherwise accept the deal.

Two rooms, one country

Every durable free society has kept two rooms. In one room you may remain who you were: food, feast days, grandparents’ stories, a faith, a mother tongue spoken to children at night. In the other room there is a shared public language, a single criminal law, a constitution that outranks clan and cleric, and a habit of work and contract among strangers. Ethnic identity lives mainly in the first room. Citizenship lives in the second.

The American settlement asked newcomers to cross into the second room without burning the first. Germans kept sausages and Lutheran hymns and still learned English for the courthouse. Jews kept Sabbath and still sat on juries. Chinese kept the New Year and still signed contracts in a language the judge could read. That was not “giving up identity.” That was refusing to turn identity into a second government.

What must be given up is not ethnicity. It is a rival jurisdiction: the idea that your block, your mosque, your party, or your old state’s consulate may overrule the Constitution on this sidewalk. Heritage is memory. Parallel law is secession.

What the word used to mean

In the older American usage, assimilation was political and linguistic before it was culinary. Learn enough English to work and to swear an oath. Accept that the highest public law here is the Constitution, not a throne, a party central committee, or a jurist overseas. Pay taxes. Keep your word. Raise children who can leave the enclave without being punished for it. That is a short list. It is also a hard list, which is why people who want America only as a mine dislike the word.

A later fashion replaced that list with a therapy. “Integration” became a two-way rewrite in which the host was obliged to dissolve so that no arrival would have to change. Identity hardened into a political claim. The republic was recast as a hotel with a guilt desk. Under that fashion, “assimilation” was slandered as ethnic suicide so that the public order would not have to be taught. The slander worked because some earlier Americanizers really did sneer at private custom. The slander still fails as history. The successful pattern was never “become Anglo in your kitchen.” It was “become American in the street.”

Identity is not a constitution

Ethnic identity answers the question: from whom did I come? A constitution answers the question: who may coerce me, in what language, under what limits? Those questions are not enemies. They become enemies only when ancestry is asked to do the work of law—when a surname or a creed is treated as a veto on the statute book.

That is why closed pockets differ. A Chinatown that sells groceries and keeps a festival is a dock. A pocket that tells the police, the school, or a daughter that another law governs here is not a culture. It is a claim of sovereignty. The first is compatible with assimilation. The second is the refusal of it. The same test applies to a street association that polices speech for a foreign party-state. Cuisine is not the issue. Jurisdiction is.

Religions that treat worship as conscience can live easily under the First Amendment. Political theologies that fuse altar and statute cannot, because they deny the ceiling. A believer who accepts the Constitution as the public roof has not given up faith. A movement that wants the roof replaced has not “kept identity.” It has rejected the Republic.

Rights come with duties

People flee unfree systems for a reason. They want a country in which the person is not raw material for the regime. That country cannot remain humane if newcomers—and natives—treat its goods as an entitlement unconnected to contribution. Rights pair with obligations. Benefits pair with devotion. Enjoying this Republic and refusing to inhabit its public habits is not identity. It is extraction.

None of that requires a man to stop being Chinese, Nigerian, Mexican, or Lebanese in the sense that his parents would recognize. It requires him to stop treating that fact as a warrant to ignore English in the workplace, to run a credit card as a getaway car, or to teach his children that the host is illegitimate. The innocent will sometimes pay for the cheats who share their face. That is a consequence of trust, not a reason to damn a people—or to pretend the pattern is imaginary.

What giving up would look like

If assimilation meant the death of ethnicity, America would have no Little Italy left in memory, no Korean church, no Seder, no Mid-Autumn table. It still has those things, including among families who are, in the civic sense, fully American. The grandchildren speak English in public and keep a holiday in private. That is the ordinary success. The failure is the grandchild who has the passport and still believes the public square belongs to the old country's quarrel.

The other failure is the native who tells that grandchild the Republic was stolen, that merit is a mask, that the flag is a threat. A country that teaches its own children to despise the order immigrants crossed oceans to join has not become more humane. It has closed the second room and then called the emptiness "inclusion."

The Foundation's answer

Li and Sun Private Foundation is an educational foundation that promotes immigrant assimilation into the American Republic. That sentence is complete. What follows is explanation, not apology: heritage may remain in private life; the public order is the Constitution, the English language of law and work, and duties joined to rights. We do not prepare immigration forms. We do not run campaigns. We do not ask anyone to become a different people.

We ask the only thing a free country may ask of those who choose it: enter the order that made the country worth choosing. Keep your name. Keep your dead. Do not keep a second sovereign. Assimilation is not the end of identity. It is identity learning where it stops—and where the Republic begins.