

Our country is a “Christian nation”. How do we make sure it stays a “Christian nation”? And what about prioritising helping Christian refugees?

Some argue that their nation is ‘Christian’ and therefore cannot and should not allow too many non-Christians to settle. Much of Europe has been profoundly shaped by the Bible and the influence of Christianity. But this has never meant that all the peoples have had a living Christian faith and have always lived out their faith as Christ would want us to. And increasingly, our nations are pluralist with many worldviews and faiths.

If we wish to live up to our Christian heritage, then the Bible repeatedly commands us to welcome and assist the vulnerable foreigner. Having done so, we will then need to face the challenge of helping those of different faiths and cultures to integrate well. This is a dual responsibility both on the host to welcome and the foreigner to integrate. As our nations face this challenge, there is an opportunity for Christians to enter the discussion about what our nations are asking newcomers to integrate into. What are our nations’ values and culture? Can we seize the opportunity to promote a stronger, biblical vision for society that seeks the wellbeing of all, with freedom of conscience for all, regardless of their faith?

What about just helping Christian refugees? No! Most Syrian Church leaders insist that Christians should not be given special treatment. Assigning refugee status or offering asylum must be on the basis of vulnerability and need. To do otherwise not only violates international refugee and humanitarian law, but also the teaching of our Saviour. (The Good Samaritan looked beyond religious and ethnic labels to show genuine neighbourliness to the one in need).

Are there some Christian refugees who are particularly vulnerable? Undoubtedly – let us welcome them! And are there legitimate security concerns concerning some refugees? Of course – appropriate safeguards must be put in place! However, let us be clear that we accept refugees on the basis of their need – not their religion. And we exclude those deemed to be a security threat on the basis of evidence – not their religion.

Christians from some areas are certainly among the most vulnerable. Heinous atrocities targeting Christians and other religious minorities have been committed, especially by Daesh (so-called “Islamic State”). Christian refugees who have fled from areas controlled by extremists have a strong case for asylum, based on vulnerability. But a balanced assessment must recognize two important factors.

Firstly, many Christian refugees have not fled from areas overrun by Daesh and have not been under direct threat on account of their religion. Of course, many have a genuine fear of extremists, and especially of an Islamist power-grab if the current Syrian government were to fall. The threat they feel is commonly on account of their perceived political affiliation (Christians are assumed to support the regime) rather than because of their religion – threats also felt by other groups.

Secondly, it is not just Christians who have fled from areas controlled by extremists – the majority who have left these areas are Muslims whose values and ways of life differ from those of the extremists. They too have fled because of their extreme vulnerability. While the danger of ill-intentioned infiltrators amongst asylum applicants must be taken seriously, it would be perverse to label all non-Christians who have fled extremist threats as suspected extremists rather than to recognize their vulnerability.

Providing asylum in the West might meet the immediate need for a place of safety (though don't underestimate the challenge of integration, including for Christians). However, what about longer-term aspirations? What about the future of the Church in the home country? Christians long to be able to stay in their homelands. Church leaders are grieved that so many are leaving, even while they fully understand the desperation of those wanting to get out.