

Does 'Compassion' Really Demand That We Accept Refugees?

Does the virtue of "compassion" demand that Western nations accept refugees from war-torn countries?

This question seems to be at the heart of [the controversy](#) surrounding certain immigration policies in Europe and America. The recent New Year's Eve attacks on women in Cologne, Germany—which were likely perpetrated by males of Arab and North African origin—in addition to the November Paris attacks, have left many questioning the wisdom of granting mass asylum.

Proponents of asylum continue to invoke compassion as a primary justification for allowing it. Opponents, however, believe that this exercise in compassion has been wrongly conducted at the expense of citizens' safety and without a clear plan for assimilation.

So what's the answer? Are the proponents of compassion-above-all-else correct? At this point, I'm not sure. But in the interests of arriving at an answer, I think the following two principles apply:

1) One's worldview determines the boundaries of one's compassion.

The word compassion is from a Latin term meaning "to suffer with" someone. It's also associated with having mercy or pity on others. Western nations were founded upon the principles of a Christian worldview. Within this worldview, "suffering with" others is an obligation: God, the Bible tells us, has mercy on

men and women in spite of their sinfulness, and we are supposed to reflect that mercy in our actions toward others—even if it sometimes brings suffering upon us.

Do we believe that this Christian understanding of compassion still informs the worldview of our modern nations in the West? If so, how does this understanding help guide their exercise of compassion? If Western nations are no longer tethered to a Christian worldview, what worldview is helping them determine the obligations and boundaries of their compassion?

2) Compassion should be exercised according to prudence and justice.

Today, compassion is often thought of as an emotion that defies the calculating nature of reason. In the Christian moral tradition, though, that is not the case. St. Thomas Aquinas—perhaps the most influential voice in that tradition—[holds](#) that even compassion must be guided by prudence so that it is undertaken at the right time, the right place, and in the right manner. And, of course, it is not true compassion if it violates that other important virtue of justice, which is defined as giving to each person his or her due.

Do you think that Europe and the U.S. have been rationally compassionate in granting asylum to the refugees? Have they done their due diligence by taking into account the various risks and consequences? Is this asylum compatible with the justice due to both the refugees and each country's own citizens?

Again, just a couple of considerations; there are a number of others. But I think my overall concern is that people go beyond a superficial invocation of compassion when it comes to

granting asylum to refugees. Just like any other human action and virtue, it is subject to rational scrutiny. That scrutiny may result in a determination that compassion demands granting asylum, but it may not, as well.