

Don't subject refugees to a religious test

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd November 17 2015, Al Jazeera America

Mere days after the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris, several leading Republican presidential candidates have come out in favor of a religious test for refugees from Syria who are seeking asylum in the United States. Sen. Ted Cruz is introducing legislation that would ban Muslim Syrian refugees from entering the country. Cruz also [stated](#), preposterously, that Christians should be allowed in because "there is no meaningful risk of Christians committing acts of terror." Jeb Bush [suggested](#) that "our focus ought to be on the Christians who have no place in Syria anymore." Conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch [tweeted](#) his support for a special exception to the refugee ban for "proven Christians."

At the same time, a large group of mostly Republican governors across the country have said their states will no longer accept Syrian refugees, although legally they have no power to stop it. As MSNBC host Chris Hayes [tweeted](#), "Have people lost their minds?"

We can hope this is only election year posturing, but the grown-ups in the room need to take this poisonous talk seriously and stop it now. Republicans have said that Democrats naively refuse to acknowledge the "religious" dimension of this situation. In a [speech](#) on Sunday, Cruz accused Democrats of "pretend[ing] there is no religious aspect to this."

To their credit, President Barack Obama has [called out](#) this rhetoric as "shameful" and Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton [tweeted](#) that it represented "a new low." But critics of such religious tests need a more forceful response when faced with this issue. Americans who care about the possibility of realizing a pluralistic society need to be very clear: to oppose a religious test for refugees is *not* to ignore or disavow the role of religion in contemporary life. It is to affirm that a democratic society cannot impose a religious test as a precondition for entry into our political community.

Of course there are religious aspects to the war in Syria. Religion is deeply woven into the fabric of human society, politics and history everywhere. But the Syrian war cannot be reduced to religion or religious dynamics. Tens of thousands of Syrians, Muslims and Christians alike are fleeing from threats ranging from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which claims responsibility for the Paris attacks, to the brutal regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

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More to the point, the Syrian people cannot be reduced to their status as believers or non-believers in a particular U.S. government-defined version of Christianity — or any other religion. Such a test would do violence to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits “the making of any law respecting an establishment of religion.”

But beyond the legalities, there is no stable core of any religion that can be identified by the government as “authentic” or “orthodox” for the purposes of a religious test for refugees, or for anyone else. Who decides who is authentically Christian and who is just faking it? Who will determine whether a conversion to Christianity is authentic or not? Which denominations or sects of Christianity qualify as Christian, and which are merely imposters? Which government agency will make these determinations? Immigration and Customs Enforcement? Homeland Security? The State Department’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs?

To subject prospective refugees to a religious test would also do violence to the complex realities of the Syrian war and the millions of Syrian men, women and children who are suffering so tragically as a result of it. The goal of the Syrian opposition in 2011 was to put an end to the state’s brutal treatment and exploitation of the Syrian people. The Syrian war has complex roots in economic deprivation, social injustice and everyday oppression. To reduce this deeply complex regional and international conflict to a problem of “Islamic terrorism” simply misreads reality.

Both the Assad regime and ISIL have benefited enormously from the politicization of sectarian difference. It has made it easier for them to justify their violent dispossession of the Syrian people in the name of fighting Sunni extremism and [Shia](#) oppression, respectively.

A religious test for citizenship also politicizes religious difference. It is something we might expect from ISIL, not a major political party in an advanced democracy. To hear it from U.S. presidential contenders is indeed shameful. The Republican Party is on the precipice, and it is every American’s responsibility to end this nonsense and pull them back from the edge. If we are incapable of that, then maybe Chris Hayes is right. We’ve lost our minds.