

# GOD'S ANSWER TO A SECULAR CONTINENT: REFUGEES?



Could it be? Could the current surge of refugees into Europe constitute a parallel of the movement of the early Church in Acts, and perhaps God's divine intervention to counter the sweeping wave of secularism in Europe?

## A BIBLICAL MODEL OF CHURCH GROWTH

A perspective not often shared from either the pulpit or secular media in discussions about today's refugee crisis is the fact that the **early Church was established by refugees**, not theologians. Acts 8 tells a dramatic story of believers fleeing for their lives, and as they moved, the Church came into being in new places. This was God's divine strategy to mobilise a Church that had become settled in Jerusalem: *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."* (Acts 8:1b-4)

In some ways, Saul was the 'Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi' of the first century. He approved of the stoning of Stephen and rejoiced in the bloody spectacle, hoping it would put a stop to the growth of Christianity. He did everything in his power to destroy the Church. Like the Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda or Boko Haram, the destruction of all those who opposed his beliefs was his goal.

Yet God had a plan: *"... and as they scattered, they preached the Word."* (Acts 8:4)

A Christian leader recently shared with *INcontext* the testimony of a small Christian community in Kurdistan (Iraq) that exemplifies this model. A year ago, this small fellowship had a membership of 23 believers. After IS moved into their town, the fellowship scattered and 15 members fled to Europe in search of freedom. **"They have all planted small Christian communities amongst the other refugees,"** shared the leader, telling how these believers are now multiplying their ministry as effectively as the early disciples.

But it is not only the Christian faith of some refugees that is finding fertile ground in Europe...

## SECULARISM

The current refugee crisis in Europe has been widely debated, and there are legitimate concerns and good reasons why the influx of Syrians and Iraqis could speed up the 'Islamisation' of Europe. Social media, internet communication and circulating emails are full of discussions about how Europe could be set to change and how something needs to be done about it.

In the past, however, there was little protest against the wave of secularism that swept across the continent – few 'watchmen on the wall' dared to voice concerns about what secularisation was doing to 'Christian Europe'.

The main difference in the two situations (the outcry against Islamists and the deafening silence about secularism) could be attributed to the fact that **secularism does not challenge prosperity and comfort**, while refugees require financial involvement and sacrifice. Yet secularism has had a far more paralysing effect on the Church than Islam could ever hope to achieve.

The reality is that 'Christian Europe' is no longer Christian. It seems like the battle for souls in Europe was lost long before the refugees arrived, and the refugees might be part of God's divine plan to turn the continent back to Him.

According to the latest global poll released by *WIN-Gallup International*, **46%** of all people in Western Europe think of themselves as "not religious" or as a "convinced atheist". Compare this with Africa: only **9%** of people in Africa classify themselves of falling into these categories.

Of the top 10 countries in the world where significant numbers of people think of themselves as non-religious or atheist, **six** are in Europe:

- France 63%
- Netherlands 56%
- Ireland 54%
- Austria 53%
- Germany 48%
- Iceland 41%

## THE 'GOD' OF MAMON

There is another dimension to consider. *WIN-Gallup International* also found that if citizens of the 57 countries surveyed were divided into five groups – from the relatively poor to relatively rich in their own countries – the trend was that **the richer you got, the more likely you were to define yourself as non-religious**.

There is no doubt that wealth and prosperity, and the pursuit for self-sufficiency and independency, often leads to a decline in faith. This is best illustrated in Europe where faith decreased as wealth increased.

Of the top 10 nations where irreligiosity is growing the fastest, **5** are in Europe:

2. Ireland -22%
3. Switzerland -21%
4. France -21%
6. Iceland -17%
9. Austria -10%

The need for a Provider is only realised in times of need, and times of abundance rarely bring gratitude. Secularism will only be conquered by a renewed realisation that the strength of a society is not found in wealth gathered but in abundance shared. The influx of refugees might be the timely reminder that Europe needs to re-evaluate the blessing of sharing in a context of wealth.

No Western European country falls within the top 20 of those in which most people consider themselves religious.

The top five 'religious countries' are

- Ghana 96%
- Nigeria 93%
- Armenia 92%
- Fiji 92%
- Macedonia 90%

Italy is ranked 25<sup>th</sup> and Belgium is 35<sup>th</sup>.

## AN ECONOMIC DIMENSION

Another dimension often ignored in the media is the fact that more than 40% of all refugees are skilled workers like engineers, doctors, craftsmen, etc. These are people who are willing to make a substantial contribution to society – they have no desire to 'sponge' or to use the tax payers' money as a means for living a life of bliss.

Edward Brima, from La Trobe University, argues that **claims that refugees are only a burden to a host nation's economy are often baseless**. Although there may be immediate costs as refugees are resettled and adjust to their new environments, when given the required support and opportunities refugees can (and do) make significant social, cultural and economic contributions to their host countries. They increase consumer markets for domestic commodities, create new markets, bring in new skills, provide employment and fill vacant employment positions. The sooner they are integrated into society, the sooner they will be able to contribute in a meaningful and substantial way.

According to the Refugee Council of Australia, **65%** of current enterprises are comprised of refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds, compared with **55%** from English speaking backgrounds. The 2000 *Business Review Weekly's* annual "Rich 200" list revealed that five of Australia's eight billionaires were people whose parents migrated to the country as refugees. Journalist David Koch recently featured on his blog some of Australia's best-known and most successful refugees: leading scientist Sir Gustav Nossal, global shopping centre entrepreneur Frank Lowy, 'Young Australian of the Year' and successful business woman Tan Le, and Majak Daw (the first Sudanese Australian drafted into the AFL).

In an equalling compelling argument in the *Washington Post*, Jim Yong Kim argues that countries like Turkey have **shown economic progress by taking in refugees**.

Kim notes that about **86%** of refugees worldwide are hosted by developing countries. For example, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan host 3.7 million Syrian refugees combined, more than eight times the number taken in by European countries. In 2014, the major host countries for refugees (excluding Palestinians) were Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Chad, Uganda and China.

Turkey has 1.9 million Syrian refugees, more than any other country, and the Turkish government has spent more than \$7.6 billion on the refugee response. It has allowed the majority of these registered refugees to stay outside of camps, given them freedom of movement and protection against forced return, and attended to their immediate needs. The refugees have access to health care and increasing access to education. How has this affected Turkey's economy? Many of those Syrians who arrived with assets have invested in Turkey. In 2014, Syrians accounted for 26% of the new foreign businesses registered in Turkey.

At the same time, though, the large number of Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon has vastly increased the overall demand for water, electricity, schools and hospitals, placing great strains on those countries. The international community has contributed humanitarian aid to the refugees and, to a limited extent, to the host countries. But much more is needed.

Today, on average, a refugee can expect to remain a refugee for 17 years. So there is a need to move beyond humanitarian assistance to development solutions. If host countries can create a path for refugees to participate in their economies, as Turkey is doing, everybody benefits. These benefits are even greater when rich countries, especially those with declining populations, take in refugees. Most of the evidence suggests that refugees, like economic migrants in general, work hard and contribute more in taxes than they consume in social services.

## CONCLUSION

There are two kind of travellers that arrive on the beaches and at the borders of Europe today: those who flee in search of something new in a free society, disillusioned by the faith they share with their persecutors, and those who find strength in the cross of Christ and are determined to share this with fellow travellers and their hosts.

In Acts, the refugees were small in number but great in heart. Today, the Christians among the vast number of refugees are small in number, weak in strength and young in faith – but so was the early Church. They travel like the first century refugees with the knowledge that they have Christ and the Holy Spirit, they have faith to endure and they have a clear understanding that nothing will separate them from the love of Christ. All they need now is the support of the global Christian community that shares the same faith, the same vision and the same dream. This might be a tipping point for Europe and the Western world that many have prayed for.

### SOURCES:

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