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Refugees and the Politics of Holy Week

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How should Christians respond to the refugee crisis? Holy Week is an interesting time of year to ask a theologian a question like this. Recognizing the importance of the season, I would like to reframe the question.

In the light of Holy Week, how should Christians respond to the refugee crisis?

My reframing of the question makes the audacious assumption that Holy Week—rightly understood—has *political* implications. Readers who regard Holy Week as a series of private rituals pertaining to their “personal lives” will no doubt find my reframing of the question silly and inappropriate, and they can stop reading here if they wish. However, for readers who believe that the events of Holy Week change everything—literally everything—by all means, read on.

Building Walls and Opening Doors

Two political voices—both simplistic and tired—currently frame the debate about refugees in America. One voice frames it according to a political desire to protect American security, law, and national identity. Meanwhile, the other voice frames it according to a political desire to encourage American diversity, generosity, and openness. Put simply, if one side wants to build higher walls, the other wants to open wider doors.

About seven years ago, my research in Christian political theology began to focus on the intense political fight in Europe over Islamic refugees and immigrants. Europeans have been arguing over this for decades now—far longer than the United States. While my new book explores the political and

religious debate in great detail, the long and short of it is this: the European experience with Muslim immigration, which includes refugees as well, clearly demonstrates the inadequacy of a narrow political focus on “high walls” or “open doors.” To illustrate my point, I’ll use the Dutch experience as my primary example.

Over the past forty years, the Netherlands has tried both approaches to Muslim refugees and immigration to very little positive effect. A set of extremely generous open-door policies from the Dutch left ruled the day in the Netherlands during the 1980s and 1990s, but they ended up failing in a variety of ways. First, once the immigrants and refugees were welcomed through their open doors, left-wing leaders lacked a sufficient plan for how the government would welcome, support, or relate to the newcomers. Second, leftists did not consider the deep cultural challenges their open-door policies would bring to everyday Dutch people or their neighborhoods, schools, organizations, and cities. Rates of crime, poverty, and unemployment rose steadily along with racial, cultural, and religious tensions. Third, during the politically correct reign of the left, those who questioned the open-door policies were quickly dismissed as either Islamophobic or racist. Fourth, while the leftists liked the *idea* of religious diversity, they quickly realized that they were not prepared for the *reality* of living next door to newcomers who had very “diverse” ideas about gender, sexuality, food, religion, politics, and morality. Religious diversity—it turns out—was a lot easier in theory than it was in reality.

Predictably, the failures of the left’s open-door policies in the Netherlands led to fierce political backlash. Dutch political culture quickly took a hard—and nasty—right turn. Ever since 2002, Dutch nationalism and populism have been on a steady rise. Today, only fifteen years later, it is difficult to find any Dutch politicians who will advocate opening wider doors to Muslim immigrants and refugees or openly support multiculturalism. Dutch political discourse is now firmly focused on the construction of higher walls.

Politicians regularly advocate for higher levels of immigrant scrutiny, higher Dutch language requirements, and higher standards for the cultural, moral, and political assimilation of Muslims. Dutch nationalists have proposed all sorts of draconian laws and restrictions against their new neighbors, among them bans on everything from burqas to minarets, from Muslim schools to halal butchers. They have regularly compared Muslims to Nazis. They have proposed that Muslims be forced to watch cultural “integration” videos of nude beaches and gay people kissing so that they might be culturally “assimilated” into Dutch values.

Needless to say, the right-wing rhetoric of higher walls has done nothing but exacerbate the social tensions between newcomers and citizens in the Netherlands. In the end, *both* the high walls and the open doors have failed to construct a sustainable house for citizens or refugees and immigrants in the Netherlands.

The Alternative Politics of Holy Week

If high walls and open doors ultimately fail, let’s consider the alternative political vision of Holy Week. In five critical spaces, Jesus demonstrates his alternative “politics of hospitality.”

First, the streets of Jerusalem. With rambunctious chanting, singing, and waving palm branches, Palm Sunday begins Holy Week with a note of frenetic jubilation. The crowds of Jerusalem loved the “idea” of the Jesus movement. They loved the “idea” of being a part of a popular and charismatic campaign of justice and grace. However, a few days later, when things became difficult and dangerous, when the true cost and sacrifice of the movement was made known, the crowd quickly dispersed.

Today, many Americans, particularly on the left, love the “idea” of a refugee movement for justice and hospitality. But are they prepared to open themselves and their homes up to the true cost and the deep challenge of what will come? Are these liberals willing to have very conservative Muslims living in their neighborhoods or attending their schools? The echoes of Palm Sunday and Holy Week remind us that political movements are often fleeting and deep hospitality will cost something dear.

Second, the upper room. In preparation for the last supper, Jesus demonstrates the true cost of his hospitality. He goes beyond simply opening the door for his guests. He humbly disrobes, kneels, and washes their feet. Christ’s hospitality is not abstract, it is not theoretical; it is embodied, and its subjects are covered in mud, sweat, dust, and animal excrement; it is something that is lowly and unimpressive by the world’s standards. In the upper room, Jesus offers his guests more than an open door or even washed feet; he invites the disciples to share his table, and he ultimately offers his guests his very self—his body and blood. Christ’s hospitality involves more than the “idea” of openness, it involves the actual breaking open of his own body.

Third, the Mount of Olives. After supper, Jesus goes out to the Mount of Olives with his disciples to pray. Soon after, a band of soldiers and servants of the high priest arrive to arrest Jesus. Coming to bind the hands of Jesus, a slave named Malchus is suddenly attacked by Peter, who cuts off Malchus’s ear. How does Jesus respond? He not only rebukes Peter’s violence, he reaches out to heal the ear of the man who came to arrest him. It is not uncommon today for those on the right to claim that Muslims are coming to attack, bind, and “take over” the West, and therefore we need to build higher walls, construct our defenses, and attack our enemies. This story of Malchus offers an interesting rebuke to this politics of fear. Malchus is clearly and openly coming to attack Jesus, to take his freedom away, and lead him to his death. How does Jesus respond to this aggression? Does he respond with violence? Does he build a wall? Does Jesus seek first his own security? No, Jesus reaches out his unarmed hand to heal the one who comes to injure. Jesus reaches out to liberate the one who comes to bind.

Many Christians would quickly argue that national security in a violent world often requires a coercive defense—and they are certainly right. However, the story of Malchus still stands. Christ the new king of Israel faces violent evil and challenges every other earthly king to remember that “security” is not the ultimate end of politics. The ultimate end of politics is relationship. In the shadow of the Mount of Olives, Christians do not seek national security *from the refugee*—no—we seek national security *for relationship with the refugee*.

Fourth, the hill of Golgotha. The early church father, Cyril of Jerusalem, said that on Golgotha, God himself “stretched out His hands on the Cross, that He might embrace the ends of the world; *for this* Golgotha is the very center of the earth.” Likewise, the contemporary theologian Hans Boersma notes “Christ’s death and resurrection constitute the ultimate expression of God’s hospitality.” On Golgotha, the Son of God displays a grotesque and beautiful openness to the pain and injustice of the world. Here Jesus illustrates the ultimate image and cost of hospitality in a world of violence and hatred.

While we often think that human beings stripped Christ naked and exposed him on Golgotha, the theologian Klaas Schilder disagrees. He argues that it was human beings who were bared for all too see in Golgotha. The cross does not expose Jesus—it exposes us. On the cross, humanity is forced to look on its own naked aggression, fear, and violence.

In the West, we like to paint ourselves as civilized and peaceful, and we like to paint refugees (and especially Muslims) as uncivilized and dangerous. The cross exposes *all of us* as a common species that is capable of great evil and violence. While this is certainly sobering news, Golgotha offers words of comfort as well. Christ does not leave humanity naked, shivering, and cold in our aggression and sin. Though we stole his clothes from him in violence, Jesus clothes us with himself in peace.

As Christians, we can be tempted to congratulate ourselves for showing hospitality to refugees, to somehow imagine that our good deeds come from some sort of inherent moral superiority. Golgotha says “No!” We clothe the refugee because Christ first clothed us. We open our arms for the refugee because Christ opened his arms for us.

Fifth, an empty tomb—and a beach. If Golgotha demands that we open ourselves up to a dangerous world, the empty tomb promises that our hospitality is not in vain. The empty tomb ensures that the ultimate end of hospitality is not suffering and pain but joy and delight. Ever the host, Jesus ends the story preparing a meal for his friends on the beach.

From Walls and Doors to a Table

Where are American Christians on the refugee issue today? For the most part, American Christians are doing what they all too often do—they are allowing the polarizing secular ideologies of the right and left to take them by the hand and lead them. They are largely adopting either right-leaning nationalism or left-leaning multiculturalism as the moral guide in their response to refugees. Christians take these secular foundations, sprinkle Bible verse memes on top of them, and declare the discovery of the “Christian response” to refugees.

As a theologian, I am not asked to provide a political answer to the refugee crisis. However, I can offer a *theological framework* through which Christian citizens can start to imagine a faithful response. This rests on the radical assumption that a Christian response to refugees should start with *Christ*.

In fighting over the “American house,” one side has demanded the construction of higher walls while the other has demanded the opening of wider doors. This obsession with walls and doors misses a critical third element, the one thing that can turn this American house into a home.

Tables flourish in homes that are both secure and generous, just and merciful. Tables represent a hospitality that is both ordered and open. In light of this, I would argue that the ultimate end of Holy Week politics is not high walls or open doors; it is a well-set table.

After all, if a house is concerned with nothing but high walls and the security they provide, no one will ever be able to approach the table. Moreover, those left on the outside will begin to resent the table or doubt that it even exists. The law, order, and security provided by walls are important political goods, however, they are not sufficient political ends in and of themselves. The ultimate purpose of politics is not the wall of security—it is the table of fellowship. The walls protect the table, the walls serve the table. If the walls inhibit the functioning of the hospitality of the table, they must be altered.

Likewise, if a house is focused simply on having an open door, no one will bother to set the table, prepare a meal, or sit graciously with the guests. Vague and distant openness ignores the critical importance and deep challenge of life together at the table. Guests wander about inside the house without a place to gather, connect, or build relationships with their hosts. The generosity of open doors is important and good but it is not a sufficient political end in and of itself. The open doors must lead to a well-prepared table. If hosts wish to let people in, they must count the cost of the meal, take a seat at the table next to guests, and be ready to vulnerably share their home with them.

The politics of Holy Week force us as Christians across the political spectrum to train our eyes on the table. This week, we gather to remember and reenact the final days of Christ’s life on earth. Divided by politics, we unite in worship. Together we wave palms, wash feet, light candles, pour wine, and break bread. As one body, we are scattered by Friday’s darkness and as one body, we are gathered by Easter’s light. During this holiest of weeks, Christians retell a vivid story of *both* law and grace, *both* judgment and mercy. If we pay attention, if we listen closely, we will recognize that Holy Week is not merely a spiritual ritual. It is, in fact, a political call to set a table and make space for another.

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