

Commentary: The Refugee Wave

What attitude should be taken when we face an immense refugee wave? Clearly, generosity is in order. Had the world applied this rule in the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of Jews may have escaped from genocide. Had generosity prevailed on all sides in the 1940s and 1950s, the Palestinian predicament, which one of the root causes of the Middle East's instability, may have been solved.

Unfortunately, most citizens are not very open to taking refugees. Except when a dramatic photo like baby Aylan stirs the conscience of the world, or when the refugees are relatively few in number and very similar to the hosts, like the Hungarians of 1956 or the Huguenots in the 1680s; people fear for their jobs, worry about social unrest and simply have other priorities. Never mind that immigration does not increase unemployment, or that most refugees are clearly hard-working, honest people not disposed towards creating unrest. Most people instinctively think the opposite, and this is manifested in the electoral strength of Mme Le Pen, Donald Trump and other anti-immigrant politicians throughout the West. Indeed, the sudden and very admirable openness of Germany could be seen as a kind of atonement, a final erasure of the German elections of 1933. It may thus prove to be a one-time gesture.

Because politicians in modern democracies tend to pander to powerful lobbies and popular indignation in order to win votes, it is harder for them to open the doors than for empires and monarchies. Would today's Polish government be as gracious as King Casimir the Great in the 14th century, when he invited European Jews, persecuted everywhere on suspicion of causing the plague, to settle in Poland? Would today's Turkey take in the Sephardim expelled from Spain in 1492 as the Sultan did? If Canada had an elected government in 1836, would it have opened its doors to all escaped U.S. slaves, as Britain did for it? Yet one thing is clear – Poland, Turkey and Canada all benefitted from the contribution of those they took in, and never had any reason to regret their arrival.

Today, we are on the cusp of one of the great population movements in human history. When the Indo-European moved into Europe around 1000 B.C., when so-called "Germanic barbarians" brought down the Roman Empire around 500 A.D., when Europeans expanded to the Americas, Australia and Siberia, nothing could be done to stop the movement. The Roman Empire and North America's first nations tried hard, but to no avail.

The population balance is shifting to Asia, Africa and to some extent Latin America. Even if we wanted to, and we should not, we could not put on the lid. Clearly, all the defenders of homogenous and traditional cultures and religions are bound to fail. There will be no entirely white Christians in Europe or America. Mixing is the order of the day. This means that generosity and hospitality are not only morally right, but are also the prudent and most advantageous attitudes to take. Certainly, the flow must be regulated so that the health and education systems of home countries are not overwhelmed, and the immigrants are integrated smoothly. Planning is needed at an international level to distribute the new arrivals and to determine the rate of movement. However, the building of walls and the use of military force will cause suffering and achieve nothing.

However, one serious problem remains. When we look at examples cited above – Poland, Turkey, former slaves coming to Canada – we observe one difficulty that caused tremendous suffering in subsequent centuries – the failure to mix and integrate. When Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Viking and Norman French created the English and Gauls, Latins and Germanic Franks created France, the results were permanent and irrevocable because the constituent groups were fused. Those who fear multiculturalism are not entirely wrong. A better model, especially with vast movements like the present one, is complete integration and inter-marriage with a new culture evolving, one that contains contributions from all. If groups co-exist side by side, sooner or later a crisis develops and is exploited by demagogues to breed hate.

When the coming great migration occurs – and the current crisis is only the tip of the iceberg – it will be necessary for the host state to become totally neutral on religious questions but also to provide a single system of schools, hospitals and social services for all. Individual accommodation which encourages attendance at public institutions is a positive thing, but collective or institutional accommodation is not. Further, the host countries should adopt laws similar to Quebec's in order to maintain a common language for all, while encouraging knowledge of other languages. The abandonment of multiculturalism will assuage fears that lead people to support anti-immigrant parties and will create a solidarity around social issues which is often absent in divided societies. It will also encourage individual autonomy and freedom, since everyone will have a different shade of skin colour and an individual family history, free from dogma and from pressure to live in any particular way or to marry any prescribed type of person. Freedom and social justice both depend on our ability to create a society which has, on the one hand, citizens of myriad origins and, on the other, no barriers between them.