Do Christian refugees matter more?

By Lauren Turek
February 23, 2016

Shortly after the terrorist attacks in Paris in mid-November, Texas senator and Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz set off a flurry of controversy when he announced that he believed the federal government should bar Muslim refugees fleeing violence and civil war in Syria from resettling in the United States. He stated on Fox News, "on the other hand, *Christians* who are being targeted for genocide, for persecution, *Christians* who are being beheaded or crucified, we should be providing safe haven to them."

After President Obama described these sentiments as "shameful" and "un-American," Cruz doubled down, arguing that by virtue of their minority status and Christian faith, Syrian Christians face exceptional persecution from ISIS and pose no security threat to the United States. Cruz claimed that Muslims fleeing ISIS violence do not face "genocide" and pose a security risk. Thus, he argued, they should be resettled elsewhere in the Middle East.

This story faded quickly from the news cycle. But Cruz is a leading contender for the Republican nomination, one who holds great appeal for many evangelical voters. Meanwhile, negotiators face great challenges in implementing a truce in Syria and reducing the flow of refugees. So we should continue to reflect on the questions Cruz's statements raise.

Christians do face particular persecution in Syria, yet so do Yazidis, Shiite Muslims, and other religious minorities. How should religion and religious persecution factor into U.S. foreign relations and refugee policies?

For American evangelicals, concern about the suffering church abroad is nothing new. In the years following World War II, as the ideological rift between the United States and the "godless" Soviet Union hardened into the Cold War, evangelicals testified in Congress and founded advocacy organizations to help combat religious persecution behind the iron curtain. Some Christians who had fled communism and settled in the United States formed activist groups such as Jesus to the Communist

World and Religion in Communist-Dominated Areas. These groups released a steady flow of public reports to raise awareness about the abuses Christians faced in China and the Soviet bloc. The religion news media, including Religion News Service, the *Christian Century*, and *Christianity Today*, reported on religious persecution regularly.

By the 1970s and 1980s, this activism began to have some effect on U.S. foreign policymaking. The passage of Senator Henry Jackson and Representative Charles Vanick's amendment to the 1974 Trade Act, which limited trade with communist countries that persecuted Jews and other religious groups, inspired politically conservative evangelical activists. They called on Congress to use similar economic and diplomatic pressure to compel Soviet bloc countries to release religious prisoners and ease restrictions on religious practice. These groups brought sustained public attention to religious persecution cases in the Soviet Union, such as the Siberian Seven and the jailed Baptist preacher Georgi Vins. This publicity led policymakers to address the cases in diplomatic exchanges and to intercede on behalf of individual prisoners when possible.

Although at times these interventions helped persecuted Christians escape from their home countries, evangelical activists generally focused on compelling governments to respect religious freedom (in part so that foreign evangelicals could evangelize safely). This broad goal remained in force even after the collapse of Soviet communism, as persecution against Christians persisted throughout the world.

During the Clinton administration, evangelicals lobbied for the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, which created mechanisms to monitor and sanction nations that persecuted religious groups. Evangelicals expressed support for all persecuted religious minorities. But like Cruz, they focused their attention almost entirely on protecting their co-religionists.

If evangelicals believe the United States has a moral obligation to support religious freedom worldwide, then why this narrow lens? In a situation like Syria, plagued by civil war and lacking a functional government with which policymakers can negotiate, how can the United States best protect those fleeing oppression—religious or otherwise? Should American policymakers elevate religious persecution, or the persecution of one specific faith community, above other human rights and freedoms in their calculus of foreign relations? What does limiting

sanctuary to one religion convey to the world about American values? Such questions command our continued reflection.

Our weekly feature Then and Now *harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with the Kripke Center of Creighton University and edited by Edward Carson, Beth Shalom Hessel, and John D. Wilsey.*