



## Being Christians After Paris<sup>1</sup>

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*What does it mean to be a Christian in America after the November 13th attacks on Paris? By now it's clear that Christian identity—even if not actual Christian faith or morals—is what the massacres at the Bataclan theatre and other venues were designed to attack.*

And while the secular and religious West mourn together a tragic, brutal, inhuman loss of life, it is only for Christians to say what impact such tragedy actually makes on the foundations of our civilization and how our creed can and should affect what we do in response to it.

They're interesting times that see President Obama calling Syrian refugees “the most vulnerable” because of war and terror while Republican governors and congressmen push resolutely for measures that would bar such refugees from gaining asylum in the United States. The American Christian political narrative appears to be turned entirely on its head. But national security is a matter of considerable prudence and impossibly hard decisions. And it includes the equally difficult job of interpreting and abiding by American values toward the tired, the poor, and the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Most of us don't have to make this kind of impossible choice. We can be faithful, public Christians without needing to decide whether Muslim refugees can or should live peaceably on our shores and in our towns, without needing to calculate how many tons of explosives our military drops where and on whom and to what end. Yet our choices aren't inconsequential. The simple choices we—average Christians, far removed from the responsibilities of power—face in this regard hold the keys to recovering the real splendor of Western culture that ISIS attempts to obliterate.

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## The West ISIS Despises

The West that ISIS despises is partly Christian and partly not. Paris itself is an icon of that mixed patrimony: It was resurrected from the hulk of an empire in the third century, transformed into a beacon of classical thought by the twelfth and of revolutionary thought by the eighteenth, and is still a vanguard of the authentically European spirit after almost two millennia. But no matter its present form—and, in fact, oftentimes despite it—the West has flourished because of its Christian foundations. Those we can help restore and renew.

The simple choices we face in deciding how to welcome and love “the other” are the same that are required to resuscitate the essential but neglected Christian principles of Western civilization. ISIS presents to us a significant dilemma, one that’s far more realistic than electoral macro-politics would have us believe. This dilemma has remained mostly abstracted for a long time, masked by a focus on “global terror” and “radical Islam” that galvanizes the masses—left- and right-wing alike—to advocate political action rather than consider what they themselves ought to do. That “Paris is burning” means all actions going forward must no longer escape careful consideration, since these actions will more than ever coincide with and affect the meaning and character of our daily lives.

## The charity and vocation of Christians prevented Europe from falling

For our part, the part of the private man or woman attempting to live the Gospel, the only action that makes real sense is to answer first the questions: How do I best love God? And how do I love my neighbor?

When immigrants appear on our shores—and they undoubtedly will—how do I plan to embrace them as sons and daughters of God? What should I do for those who don’t make it out of their home countries? What special responsibility do I have as a Christian for our brethren suffering in Muslim lands? How does my work and my family evince Christian *caritas* that is not afraid of sometimes difficult truths but is neither afraid to be poured out for those who have the least claim on it?

## Our Choices

Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig makes a concrete [recommendation](#) to spend time volunteering with Catholic Charities, who provide many types of resettlement services throughout the country. This is the sort of choice you and I can make—one that’s exceptionally easy to gloss over and talk away, but powerful nonetheless. This doesn’t just apply to helping immigrants fleeing Syria. We can serve others who need our help.

The charity and vocation of Christians, individually and in groups like the family and the monastic community, not the legions of Rome, prevented Europe from falling inescapably to the barbarism of old. The same virtues, lived in the alleyways and monasteries of Europe, created deep pillars in the earth, upon which the world has rested for centuries. Now is our time—the only time we have—to reclaim that heritage and do what we can to restore the West.