

'Good Muslim/ bad Muslim' and 'good refugee/bad refugee' narratives are shaping European responses to the refugee crisis

The growing importance of religious identity in the politics of migration and refugees has led to increasingly harsh immigration policies. Erin K. Wilson and Luca Mavelli argue that the focus needs to shift from religious identity to solidarity with fellow human beings.



Syrian and Iraqi refugees reach the coastal waters of Lesbos in Greece, after having crossed from Turkey. Image: Wikimedia, Ggia

As of the end of 2015, **65.3 million people were displaced globally at a rate of 24 per minute**. This is the largest number on record, and is expected to have grown in 2016. Despite the dramatic enormity of the situation, responses from Western countries (who host a mere **14% of displaced persons** in comparison to the **86% hosted in countries surrounding conflict zones**) have been inadequate, to say the least. Despite the notable exceptions of Germany and, to a smaller extent, Italy, European responses to the crisis have privileged exclusionary and securitizing policies, leading many commentators to observe that, rather than a refugee crisis, this should be more properly described as a crisis of solidarity.

A key catalyst for these increasingly harsh immigration policies and discourses has been the question of 'religion', and in particular, 'Islam'. Religion has become the primary characteristic by which refugees are imagined and understood, resulting in three main false assumptions:

1. Since the majority of refugees are from countries where Islam is the dominant religion, they must therefore be Muslim. The reality is that **many refugees** are Christian, Atheist, Baha'i, Druze, Yazidi, as well as Muslim;
2. Not only are all refugees assumed to be predominantly Muslim, but they are all Muslim in the same way. This ignores the numerous variations in beliefs, rituals and practices across understandings of what it means to be 'Muslim';
3. The concurrent rise of mass displacement and violent extremism (stereotypically associated with Islam), has resulted in a complicated entanglement where 'refugee' equals 'Muslim' and 'Muslim' equals 'terrorist' in public discourse and consciousness. This is contributing to the belief that all refugees are

potential terrorists, prompting narrow policy responses primarily concerned with security rather than solidarity and humanitarianism.

Two overlapping 'good/bad' discourses further exacerbate the situation: 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' and 'good refugee/bad refugee'.

Following 9/11, the dominant discourse that has emerged regarding Islam does not just emphasize the connection between Islam and terrorism, but also urges us 'to distinguish **"good Muslims" from "bad Muslims"**'. Good Muslims are peaceful, law-abiding and abhor acts of violence that threaten the authority of the secular Western state. Bad Muslims commit acts of violence and, according to political leaders like George W. Bush and Tony Blair, blaspheme the name of Allah and do not adhere to the proper teachings of the Koran. While these statements could be cast as attempts to de-essentialize Islam by emphasizing that violence is not an endemic feature, but only the product of some 'bad Muslims', this 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' narrative has contributed to constructing 'good Muslims' as devoid of agency, as potential victims of a growing 'radicalised and politicised view of Islam' (as **Tony Blair argued in 2014**) whose only hopes rest on external salvation from the West.

This narrative draws on an Orientalist tradition that is also reproduced in Western approaches towards refugees. A case in point is the **UK decision** in September 2015 to take 20,000 Syrian refugees over a period of 5 years directly from camps in Syria's neighboring countries and that the refugees would be selected, as then Prime Minister David Cameron **explained**, on the basis of need by privileging 'disabled children, ... women who have been raped, ... men who have suffered torture'. In this policy, 'good refugees' and 'good Muslims' are women, children and male victims of violence who patiently wait in refugee camps to be rescued by Western saviors. 'Bad refugees' and 'bad Muslims' are those who exercise agency by engaging in 'proactive livelihood and survival strategies' such as crossing Sub-Saharan Africa or the Mediterranean in order to seek refuge in Europe. Bad refugees challenge the script 'refugee=victim' thus becoming a 'swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean', as David Cameron **stated** earlier this year, and as "queue jumpers" and "bogus asylum-seekers" who are jeopardising the protection claims made by 'real' (i.e. 'good') refugees'.

The 'good Muslim/ bad Muslim' and 'good refugee/bad refugee' divides contribute to explaining the growing importance of religious identity in the politics of migration and refugees and the hierarchization of refugees according to religious-racial attributes. At the top of the hierarchy are Christian refugees, ideally victims of religious (Muslim) persecution. This is evidenced in statements from politicians in **Eastern Europe, the US** and in **Australia** that only Christian refugees should be accepted. Next are Muslim refugees, who wait patiently in camps for Western salvation, and the 'woman and child' or child refugee, who symbolize the quintessence of vulnerability. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the 'bad refugees', mostly represented by those who escape the 'victim script' by taking matters into their own hands, venturing to the 'North' across dangerous and illegal routes.

This hierarchy is essential to understand Western policy responses to the crisis, such as the **suspension and scaling down of search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean, taking refugees directly from Syrian camps**, and the **EU-Turkey deal**. These initiatives have often been justified in 'humanitarian' terms. In 2014, for example, UK Foreign Office Minister Lady Anelay **announced** that the British government would stop supporting search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean by saying it would reduce "an unintended 'pull factor'" that encourage "more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing and thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths". This explanation is tenuous to say the least. Refugees are fleeing for their lives, by introducing harsh measures to reduce irregular migration, whilst not at the same time opening up more legal pathways for greater numbers to be resettled, does little to actually prevent people dying.

The EU-Turkey deal, for example, has succeeded in closing down the shortest and **safest** sea voyage into Europe from Turkey to Greece, but has meant that migrants are now **focused** on the

central crossing from Libya to Italy, which is **longer and far more dangerous**. Already this year, as of 1st December, according to the **International Organization for Migration figures**, 4699 migrants have died in the Mediterranean, nearly 1000 more lives lost than in the whole of 2015, which was **3777**. In other words, the EU-Turkey deal has not stopped people trying to come to Europe, it merely made their journey options more life-threatening. As **William Maley** has forcefully observed, such policies are not about 'saving lives' or preventing 'unnecessary deaths', their real message is a simple one: "Go and die somewhere else".

What seems to have been forgotten in the dominant narratives around the refugee crisis is that, to put it simply, refugees *are* people. Commentaries and policies that overly emphasize religious identity or focus on whether someone is a 'genuine refugee' or an economic migrant – a **distinction that is largely meaningless on the ground** – willingly or unwillingly neglect that those who are currently displaced are not just 'Muslims' or 'refugees'. They are parents, children, brothers and sisters, doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, citizens, activists, friends – in other words, fellow human beings whose complex and multifaceted identities cannot be reduced to simplified categories of 'Muslim' or 'refugee'. Scholars and public intellectuals must continue to stress the diverse nature of Islam, delink 'Muslim', 'refugee' and 'terrorist' in broader public consciousness, remind people of the humanity of those who are currently displaced, and we must all push our politicians, policymakers and media to do the same – shifting focus from religious identity to solidarity with fellow human beings – in order to generate new venues for alternative political and societal responses.

*This essay is a summarized version of the introduction from the forthcoming volume **The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question** (2016, Rowman and Littlefield International). A variation of this essay also appeared on *The Immanent Frame*.*

About the authors



Erin K. Wilson is Director of the **Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain** and Senior Lecturer in Religion and Politics, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands.



Luca Mavelli is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, UK. His research focuses on **neoliberalism, biopolitics, security, secularism, and migration**.

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