

PROVIDENCE Journal

After Paris attacks, fear is understandable but fear-mongering is not

Edward Fitzpatrick

November 18, 2015

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie says the U.S. should not accept any new Syrian refugees — not even orphans under the age of 5. Even by the standards of a Republican presidential candidate seeking right-wing support, that seems like a bridge too far — and I'm not talking about the GWB.

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, says Muslim refugees should be screened out but that Christians should be allowed in since “there's no meaningful risk of Christians committing acts of terror.” A religious test seems like an odd proposal from a candidate who claims to champion religious freedom, but perhaps he'd change his tune if the refugees vowed to oppose same-sex marriage.

In any case, while fear is understandable following the terror attacks that claimed 129 lives in Paris, fear-mongering is not. The bombs at the 2013 Boston Marathon detonated just 41 minutes after I crossed the finish line, where my wife had been waiting. So I fully grasp the fear and the anger.

But I also understand points made Wednesday by the libertarian Cato Institute: the Boston Marathon bombers never went through a refugee vetting process (they came here as children after their father arrived on a tourist visa and sought asylum); the security threat posed by refugees is “insignificant”; foreign-born terrorists tend to enter on student or tourist visas; and terrorists are unlikely to wait three years in a refugee camp for a slim chance of entering the U.S. “It's clear that the present political panic and calls for a moratorium on refugee admissions from Syria are totally unwarranted,” Cato said.

I also understand points made by Bishop Thomas J. Tobin, the conservative leader of the Diocese of Providence: “It would be wrong for our nation and our state to refuse to accept refugees simply because they are Syrian or Muslim,” he said. “Too often in the past, however, our nation has erroneously targeted individuals as dangerous simply because of their nationality or religion.” When asked about statements by Christie, Cruz and others, Tobin said, “We need to be as vigilant as possible. At the same time, we have to avoid a draconian, hysterical response that probably wouldn't be perfect anyway. We have a relatively open society. We're the United States, not North Korea.”

Listen to fear mongers and you might think all Muslim refugees are threats. Instead, listen to a Muslim refugee, Omar Bah, a journalist who fled Gambia and founded Providence's Refugee

Dream Center. Bah said he supports bolstering security checks of refugees, but he reminds us that Syrian refugees “are victims of ISIS, just like the people of Paris.”

Keith Cooper, executive director of Beautiful Day, a Providence nonprofit that has employed 47 refugees, said there has long been bipartisan support for refugee resettlement, and turning our backs on Syrian refugees “feels like a fundamental rejection of our roots and history.” Syrian refugees are desperate, frightened people fleeing violence, and punishing them for the attacks in Paris would be like blaming the woman who clung to a window ledge at the Bataclan concert hall, he said. “I can understand the desire to go fight and I can understand the fear. But as soon as you punish the victims, then I think terrorism wins.”