

THE MORALITY OF REFUGEE INTEGRATION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE WESTERN CULTURE

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Abstract

The morality of refugee integration has become a profound ethical and cultural question in contemporary Europe. The unprecedented influx of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade has challenged the foundations of Western moral and cultural identity. Western civilisation has been shaped by Christian ethics, which emphasise compassion, hospitality, and the sanctity of human life. These moral imperatives have historically guided Europe's humanitarian responses to global displacement crises. However, the growing openness of European borders, motivated by both moral conviction and political obligation, has generated significant cultural and religious consequences. This study examines the moral principles underpinning refugee integration within the context of Europe's Christian heritage, exploring whether the moral ideal of universal compassion conflicts with the preservation of Western cultural and religious values. It analyses the ethical frameworks that justify refugee acceptance including the Christian duty of love (agape) and the secular humanitarian ideal of human rights while also interrogating the moral dilemmas that arise when integration leads to cultural tension, Islamisation, and social instability. The research employs ethical theory to evaluate how Europe's moral posture, originally rooted in Christian humanitarianism, is being tested by the psychological, religious, and cultural transformations that accompany refugee resettlement. It argues that the West now faces a moral crossroads: whether to uphold an inclusive universalist ethic that transcends boundaries or to reaffirm a contextual moral order grounded in its Christian cultural legacy. The study concludes that sustainable integration must balance compassion with prudence, preserving both moral integrity and cultural identity in an increasingly pluralistic Europe.

Keywords: Morality, Refugee, Integration, Effect, Western Culture

Introduction

In recent years, Europe has witnessed an overwhelming movement of refugees, especially from the Middle East and North Africa. Wars, terrorism, political unrest, and poverty have forced millions of people to seek safety and a new beginning within Europe. This crisis has not only tested Europe's political systems and economies but has also raised serious moral and cultural questions. It has become one of the most defining issues of our time, forcing many to ask what it truly means to be moral, compassionate, and responsible in a changing world. Western civilisation has, for centuries, been shaped by moral values that grew out of the Christian faith. These values include love for one another, kindness to strangers, fairness, forgiveness, and respect for human life. From the teachings of Jesus Christ to the moral writings of early Christian thinkers, the West learned that to act morally means to show love and care to those in need. The Christian message, especially the commandment to love one's neighbour, became the foundation for humanitarian ideals, charity, and social justice in Europe. Over time, these values helped shape laws, human rights principles, and the general sense of moral duty that many Western nations still hold today. It is because of this moral background that many European countries have felt compelled to open their borders to people fleeing danger and hardship. Their decision is often seen as a continuation of Christian compassion and moral duty. However, the same moral openness that once made Europe a symbol of kindness and refuge has now created new and complex problems. The arrival of large numbers of refugees, many of whom come from Islamic societies, has brought deep cultural and religious changes to Western countries. Nations such as Germany, France, and Sweden are now facing new social realities, with increasing cultural differences, religious tensions, and debates over national identity. Many citizens have begun to worry that the Europe they once knew is slowly disappearing.

The sorry state of affairs in some European societies shows that moral decisions, even those made with good intentions, can have unintended consequences. Reports of social division, rising insecurity, and conflicts between cultural groups have become common. In some communities, people feel like strangers in their own homeland. At the same time, those seeking refuge often face discrimination, rejection, and misunderstanding. Both sides experience fear and frustration. What began as an act of compassion has, in some places, turned into a source of tension and moral confusion. This situation provides a strong motivation for this study. It is no longer enough to debate refugee issues only in political or economic terms. There is a need to return to the moral roots of the question. Why does Europe feel morally obliged to accept refugees? Is this moral duty still guided by the Christian values that once defined the West, or has it become a secular moral code that lacks direction? Most importantly, what happens when moral compassion collides with cultural preservation and social order? These questions lie at the centre of this research.

The morality of refugee integration is, therefore, not only about welcoming people but also about defining what kind of society the West wishes to remain. Morality without balance can lead to chaos, and compassion without wisdom can cause harm. Christianity teaches love and mercy, but it also teaches prudence, justice, and responsibility. True morality does not simply follow emotion; it requires good judgment. Europe's open-border policies, while grounded in good intentions, raise the question of whether moral compassion has been separated from practical wisdom. This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing debate on the moral responsibilities of Western nations in times of crisis. Through looking at refugee integration from a moral and cultural point of view, the study offers an understanding of why Europe acts the way it does and what the results have been. Second, it highlights the need to balance moral duty with cultural preservation. A society that loses its moral courage becomes selfish, but one that loses its cultural identity becomes directionless. The study therefore helps identify a middle path one that promotes compassion while protecting the values that make Western civilisation unique. Finally, the research is significant because it speaks directly to the present state of confusion in Europe, where fear, division, and cultural anxiety are growing faster than moral clarity.

Across the continent, people are divided on what morality should look like in this situation. Some argue that moral duty means opening doors without conditions, while others insist that morality also requires protecting one's own people and traditions. Governments and churches have taken different sides, and the debate has touched the heart of European democracy. For example, many Christian leaders see the acceptance of refugees as a continuation of biblical teaching, while others fear it may unintentionally weaken the Christian moral spirit of Europe. This disagreement shows that the issue is not simply political; it is moral and spiritual. The purpose of this study is to examine the moral reasoning behind refugee integration in Europe and to explore its cultural and religious consequences. It will discuss how Europe's moral ideas, built over centuries through Christianity, have shaped its response to modern migration. It will also look at how these same moral ideas are being challenged by the reality of living with people of different faiths and traditions. The study will explore whether the current wave of migration is strengthening or weakening the moral and cultural identity of the West.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Morality

Morality refers to the principles, standards and values that guide human behaviour in determining what is right or wrong, good or bad. It concerns how people ought to live and how they relate to one another. Morality gives direction to human actions by appealing to conscience and reason rather than force, shaping everyday decisions about justice, kindness, honesty and responsibility. According to Curzer (2012) throughout history, societies have developed moral codes based on religion, tradition and philosophy. In Western civilisation, morality has been strongly influenced by Christianity. The Christian moral system is grounded in the belief that all humans are created in the image of God and therefore deserve dignity, compassion and care (McCrudden, 2013). It emphasises love for others, forgiveness and a sense of duty towards the weak and suffering. The teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly the Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Good Samaritan, illustrate a morality centred on mercy and selfless service, encouraging individuals to act beyond mere obligation and to consider the wellbeing of all human beings (Turner, 2015).

Philosophers have also provided systematic perspectives on morality. Aristotle argued that morality is the cultivation of virtue the habit of performing good actions to achieve a balanced and flourishing life (Annas, 2011). Virtue, in this sense, is a stable disposition enabling individuals to act rightly and achieve *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. Immanuel Kant later presented morality as obedience to a universal moral law derived from reason. According to Kant, moral agents must treat others as ends in themselves and never merely as means to an end (Kerstein, 2009 and

IEP, 2021). Kant emphasises rationality and duty as the foundation for ethical action, providing a framework that complements the compassionate principles of Christian ethics. Modern moral philosophy often combines religious principles with rational reflection to promote universal values such as justice, fairness and respect for life. In the context of this study, morality refers specifically to the ethical reasoning that guides Europe when admitting and integrating refugees. It questions whether these actions are grounded in genuine moral duty or political convenience and whether they reflect the Christian ethical tradition that has historically shaped Western thought. Furthermore, it examines how these moral principles influence cultural cohesion, religious identity and the stability of Western societies. Thus, in this study, morality serves both as a guiding principle and as a lens through which the cultural and ethical implications of refugee integration can be analysed. It provides the framework for understanding the tensions between compassion, justice and prudence in Europe's response to contemporary migration challenges, highlighting the interaction between ethical ideals and social realities.

Concept of Refugee

According to Lister (2013), the concept of a "refugee" should centre on the core definition articulated in the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which he defends against calls for expansive re-definitions. Lister argues that broadening the label risks diluting the moral and legal clarity of who qualifies for refugee protection. He writes that to extend the term to all those in need threatens the integrity of the refugee status (Lister, 2013). Scholars such as Chimni (2021) and Behrman as cited in the study by Thomas (2023) argue that the conventional legal definition of refugee is embedded within structures of sovereignty and state power, rather than a straightforward moral response to forced displacement. Chimni (2021) contends that the 1951 Convention's focus on persecution by states may privilege Global-North concerns and exclude persons fleeing complex humanitarian crises in the Global South. This points to a tension between legal categories and lived experiences of displacement. In this study the term refugee is used both in a legal-technical sense and as a moral category. Broadly speaking it adheres to those who have fled their country owing to a well-founded fear of persecution or loss of state protection (Lister, 2013) but it also recognises the critiques raised by Chimni (2021) regarding structural invisibilities. Employing this dual lens allows for an analysis of how Western societies respond morally and culturally to refugee integration, not simply as policy recipients but as ethical subjects testing the coherence of humanitarian and cultural values.

Concept of Integration

According to Ager and Strang (2008), integration is a multifaceted process that encompasses key domains such as employment, housing, education, health, citizenship, social connections, and the removal of structural barriers. Their conceptual framework highlights that successful integration involves individual achievement and access, as well as the interaction between newcomers and the host society (Ager & Strang, 2008). Integration is not simply about newcomers adapting; it also involves the host society changing and making space for newcomers (Phillimore, 2012). Phillimore (2012) further clarifies that integration should be understood as a two-way process of mutual accommodation between immigrants (or refugees) and the host society. She argues that the focus must shift from solely the newcomers' responsibility to recognition of the role of receiving communities, institutions, and opportunity structures in facilitating or hindering integration. Moreover, Spencer and Charsley (2021) emphasise that the concept of integration must be approached critically, recognising that it carries normative assumptions, risks of objectifying newcomers as 'others', and tends to favour assimilation models rather than genuine mutual adaptation. In the context of refugee integration in Western societies, this study uses the term *integration* to refer to a dynamic, multidimensional process that includes structural, social, cultural and psychological dimensions. It means newcomers gaining fair access to rights and opportunities, forming meaningful connections with members of the host community, and participating in society while the host society adapts, offers support, and addresses institutional barriers. Integration therefore serves both as an analytic framework for understanding refugee settlement and as a measure of how Western societies respond morally and culturally to the presence of newcomers.

Theoretical Framework: Ethical Theory

This study is based on ethical theory, which helps us understand what is right and wrong and guides moral decision-making. Ethical theory is useful for examining how European countries decide to admit and integrate refugees, and whether these decisions are morally sound or mainly politically driven. Two main types of ethical theory are important for this study: deontological ethics and consequentialist ethics. Deontological ethics, as proposed by Kant (1785/1993), argues that actions are morally right if they follow duty and universal moral rules, no matter the outcome. From this view, Europe has a moral duty to protect refugees because every human being has intrinsic dignity and must be treated

as an end in themselves, not just as a tool for political or economic goals. This is similar to Christian ethical principles, which emphasise compassion, care, and helping the vulnerable (McCrudden, 2013).

Consequentialist ethics, such as utilitarianism, judge actions based on their results (Mill, 1863/2001). This approach considers whether integrating refugees benefits or harms both the refugees and the host society, including effects on culture, social stability, and security. It highlights the challenge of balancing moral duties with practical consequences. Using ethical theory in this study helps explain refugee integration as both a moral and practical issue. It shows that how Europe responds to refugees is not only about policy but also about ethical choices that affect culture, social harmony, and the moral integrity of society.

The Morality of Refugee Integration in Contemporary Europe

The integration of refugees in contemporary Europe raises complex moral questions, as host societies are confronted with both ethical obligations and practical challenges. At the heart of refugee policy is the moral responsibility to assist those fleeing persecution, war, and extreme hardship. Scholars such as Benhabib (2004) argue that states and societies carry a humanitarian duty to protect vulnerable populations, a responsibility that goes beyond legal requirements. Integration is not merely about granting entry; it involves providing refugees with access to education, healthcare, housing, and opportunities for meaningful participation in society. Fassin (2012) notes that the degree to which European countries fulfill these obligations reflects their ethical consistency and commitment to human dignity. Ethical theory provides a framework to understand the morality behind refugee integration. Kantian deontology, for instance, emphasizes duty and respect for human dignity, suggesting that refugees should be treated as ends in themselves rather than as tools for political or economic purposes (Kant, 1785/1993). From this perspective, the moral act is to welcome and support refugees based on their intrinsic worth. Utilitarian ethics, on the other hand, consider the outcomes of integration, weighing the benefits to both refugees and host societies (Mill, 1863/2001). Policies guided by utilitarian reasoning may seek to balance humanitarian support with social cohesion and security, reflecting the tension between ideal moral principles and practical considerations.

Political and religious influences further shape the morality of refugee integration in Europe. Betts and Collier (2017) explain that political considerations often intersect with moral duties, as states may accept refugees to maintain international credibility, fulfill treaty obligations, or enhance social stability. Similarly, Christian ethics, which have historically informed European moral values, emphasize compassion, mercy, and care for the vulnerable (McCrudden, 2013). These religious principles continue to inform public discourse and policy debates, highlighting the moral dimension of integration beyond legal obligations. However, the coexistence of secular human rights norms and Christian moral teachings sometimes creates tension. Secular frameworks prioritize equality, law, and practical governance, while Christian-inspired morality emphasizes unconditional compassion. Reconciling these approaches is a central challenge for European societies seeking to uphold both ethical ideals and social stability (Donnelly, 2013 and Fassin, 2012).

In practice, the morality of refugee integration in Europe involves a careful balance between ethical duty, political considerations, and societal capacity. Humanitarian principles demand protection and support for refugees, while ethical reasoning calls for respect for their dignity and rights. At the same time, states must consider the social, cultural, and economic impacts of integration. The moral evaluation of refugee policies, therefore, is not only about what governments do but also about how societies respond ethically to the presence of vulnerable populations. Successful integration reflects a host society's commitment to justice, compassion, and human dignity, illustrating that moral responsibility extends beyond policy and into the broader social conscience.

The Cultural Consequences of Refugee Influx

The arrival of refugees in Europe has led to profound cultural changes, influencing social norms, religious practices, and community life. Refugees bring with them distinct languages, traditions, and beliefs that interact with the host society's culture. According to Berry (1997), such interactions can result in acculturation processes, which include integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalisation. Integration occurs when both refugees and host societies adapt and accommodate each other, whereas tension and conflict may arise when cultural differences are not effectively managed. One notable cultural consequence is the religious transformation in European societies. The influx of refugees from predominantly Muslim countries has contributed to the increased visibility of Islam in public life (Foner & Alba, 2008). This shift challenges long-standing Christian norms and practices, creating both opportunities for interfaith dialogue and sources of social tension. Cultural pluralism, when embraced, can enrich

societies through diversity in cuisine, festivals, music, and art, but it may also provoke resistance among host communities that fear cultural dilution or loss of national identity.

Refugee influxes also affect social cohesion and community dynamics. Studies by Ager and Strang (2008) suggest that newcomers often face barriers in accessing social networks, leading to the formation of ethnic enclaves. While these communities provide cultural support and preserve traditions, they may slow broader social integration and foster perceptions of “otherness.” Additionally, the psychological effects of displacement on refugees such as trauma and adjustment stress interact with host societies’ responses, affecting cultural exchange and social participation.

Christian Ethics and the “Islamization” Debate

The debate around the perceived “Islamization” of Europe has intensified in recent years, particularly in response to large-scale refugee inflows from predominantly Muslim countries. Christian ethics, which have historically shaped Western moral thought, provide an important lens for understanding this debate. Central to Christian moral teaching are the principles of compassion, care for the vulnerable, and hospitality to strangers (McCrudden, 2013). From this perspective, welcoming refugees aligns with long-standing ethical obligations, emphasizing mercy and protection over fear or exclusion.

However, the “Islamization” debate often frames refugee integration as a threat to the cultural and religious identity of Western societies. Critics argue that the growing presence of Islam challenges the historical Christian moral and cultural foundations of Europe, influencing public policies, social norms, and religious practices (Cesari, 2013). This tension highlights a moral dilemma: Christian ethics encourage open-hearted hospitality, yet fears of cultural erosion provoke calls for stricter immigration and integration controls. As such, European societies are caught between the ethical imperative to protect and assist refugees and concerns about preserving traditional cultural and religious identities.

Scholars like Modood (2019) argue that the Islamization debate is frequently exaggerated and politically charged, reflecting anxieties about multiculturalism rather than objective demographic or cultural shifts. Christian ethics, when properly interpreted, do not conflict with social cohesion; instead, they provide a moral framework for balancing hospitality with prudence, encouraging ethical engagement rather than antagonism. By promoting dialogue, interfaith understanding, and inclusive policies, Christian moral principles can guide societies toward integrating refugees without compromising social harmony or fundamental values.

Psychological and Religious Transformations in Western Societies

The influx of refugees into Europe has triggered notable psychological and religious transformations within host societies. Psychologically, the arrival of large groups of refugees can evoke both empathy and anxiety among native populations. According to Verkuyten and Martinovic (2015), exposure to cultural diversity may foster increased intergroup contact, promoting tolerance and openness. However, it can also heighten feelings of threat, insecurity, and social anxiety, particularly when refugees are associated—fairly or unfairly—with crime, terrorism, or economic strain. These psychological responses influence public opinion, policymaking, and the willingness of communities to support integration initiatives.

Religiously, refugee inflows, especially from predominantly Muslim countries, have contributed to the growing visibility of Islam in Western societies. This shift challenges the historical dominance of Christianity, altering religious landscapes, public rituals, and community life (Foner & Alba, 2008). For some, the increased presence of Islam has prompted fear of cultural erosion, contributing to debates around “Islamization” and identity politics. For others, it has facilitated interfaith dialogue, fostering understanding and pluralism. As Cesari (2013) notes, these religious transformations are not unidirectional; they involve negotiation, adaptation, and sometimes tension between different faith communities.

The psychological and religious impacts are closely intertwined. Changes in religious demography influence perceptions of social cohesion, national identity, and moral values, while psychological responses affect attitudes toward policy, civic engagement, and intercultural cooperation. As Modood (2019) argues, successful integration depends on both societal openness and the capacity to manage cultural and religious pluralism without compromising shared social norms. Understanding these transformations is essential for assessing the broader consequences of refugee influxes and for developing policies that balance human dignity, social stability, and cultural identity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The integration of refugees into contemporary Europe presents both moral and practical challenges, with far-reaching cultural, psychological, and religious consequences. European societies face a moral responsibility to assist vulnerable populations, grounded in ethical principles such as human dignity, compassion, and justice. Refugee integration requires balancing duty, rights, and societal well-being while considering the cultural, social, and psychological impacts on host communities. The cultural consequences of refugee influxes include shifts in social norms, increased religious diversity, and changes in community dynamics. While these transformations can enrich societies by promoting pluralism and intercultural dialogue, they can also generate tensions surrounding identity, integration, and social cohesion. The “Islamisation” debate reflects societal anxieties about cultural change and highlights the need for ethically informed responses to refugee integration. Psychological impacts on host populations ranging from empathy and solidarity to fear and anxiety shape public attitudes toward refugees and influence the success of integration efforts. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- a. European governments should ground refugee integration policies in ethical principles that prioritise human dignity, fairness, and moral responsibility, rather than relying solely on political or economic considerations.
- b. Promote interfaith and intercultural programmes to foster understanding between refugees and host communities, reducing fear and prejudice while strengthening social cohesion.
- c. Invest in education, healthcare, housing, and psychosocial support to enable refugees to participate meaningfully in society and to mitigate potential social tensions.
- d. Engage citizens through awareness campaigns that highlight the moral, cultural, and economic contributions of refugees, countering misinformation and fears about cultural erosion.
- e. Continuously evaluate integration programmes and societal impacts to inform policies that balance ethical responsibility with long-term social stability.

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