

Church asylum

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Church asylum, or sanctuary, is a practice to support, counsel and give shelter to refugees who are threatened with deportation to inhumane living conditions, torture or even death. This practice can be located at the interface of benevolence and politics.

Giving refuge, or more specifically, giving sanctuary or church asylum, is a specific form of benevolence that has a centuries-long tradition. What is known in Germany as 'church asylum' has mostly been inspired by the American Sanctuary Movement and by movements in other European countries, leading to the Charta of Groningen in 1987 and eventually to a common Charta of the New Sanctuary Movement in Europe in 2010.¹

In 1983 a Berlin parish granted church asylum to three Palestinian families threatened with deportation to Lebanon during the civil war there, and since then church asylum has been established all over Germany and is practised in the Protestant as well as the Catholic Church. Both churches have taken a stand for refugees and their rights in numerous public statements and have used church asylum as an instrument to protect refugees and support them in claiming their rights.

A snapshot: In the small town of Braunschweig lives a family of eight: mother, father, six children. The children go to school and to vocational training. All of a sudden – after eight years in Germany – the family receives a letter from the Aliens Authority (Ausländerbehörde): they are requested to leave the country a few days later. They will be deported back to Pakistan, back to the country where they have been and will be persecuted, because they belong to the Muslim minority of Ahmadiyyah. One day before their planned deportation a small protestant congregation opens the church to the family. The next day the Aliens Authority will receive a letter from the church: "This is to announce that the family is now in church asylum and is therefore protected by our congregation."

Church asylum is very hands-on and tangible. People are challenged to forget about their plans and everyday routines, to react immediately and in a most practical manner: to open doors, to create spaces to sleep and eat, to spend time with people,

to simply be there. Church asylum protects people from the authorities, from police officers who come at the crack of dawn to pick up and deport people. This protection happens not in a symbolic but in a physical way. It is the closed doors of churches and parsonages that stand in the way of state power; it is church grounds that are – usually – respected by state authorities as a space not to be entered; and it is volunteers – church members and neighbours – and pastors who keep these doors shut, who talk to police officers and authorities, and who do whatever is necessary to protect this safe space and by doing so protect people whom the state does not regard as deserving of protection.

Although there is no official right to church asylum, the state most often respects sanctuary. But there are exceptions and police might, after all, enter and clear a church. However, this never happens without public attention – without press releases and negotiations between church and state officials. Usually, there are extensive discussions between the pastor of a church and the bishop on the one hand, and the political authorities on the other hand. In doing so, they try to make sure that in future the police will neither enter church grounds nor forcibly remove people. However, for individuals and families who have been deported despite being in church asylum, these negotiations come too late.

In consequence, church asylum is to a certain degree based on the church as a powerful institution. It is the institution of the church that is respected by the state when agreeing not to invade church sites and when the church demands negotiations. However, it is also a grassroots church practice. Furthermore, sanctuary is not



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only a place, and not only a practice; it is a community that is not provided for in the laws by which refugees are accommodated in detention centres rather than allowed to live independently. It is this community that supports and accompanies refugees in their struggle for “the right to have rights”.²

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1. www.kirchenasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Charta-english1.pdf
2. Arendt, H (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, p296.