Finding the true convert: Tensions between church and state in asylum appeal hearings based on conversion to Christianity

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Among recent migrations to Europe, asylum claims on the basis of fear of religious persecution following a religious conversion are frequent, especially among Iranian and Afghan asylum seekers. Decision-makers employed by the secular state have to assess the genuineness of the conversion, and risks of practising Christianity in the country of origin of the applicant. The overwhelmingly negative decisions for converted asylum seekers in Germany have led to a conflict between churches who support converts and administrative courts: church representatives lament the lack of consideration of pastors’ letters as evidence for converts’ credibility. While German courts maintain that judges have the right to assess the credibility of an appellant’s conversion (Karras 2018; 2 BvR 1838/15) and possibly override a pastor’s assessment of an appellant’s Christian faith, churches seek to regain the authority over determining the faith status of their members.

This paper draws on case law, ethnographic observations of 30 asylum appeal hearings based on conversion at German courts and theological workshops, as well as interviews with all actors involved to outline the tensions between church and state in the adjudication of asylum claims based on conversion to Christianity. The paper contributes to the scholarship on evidentiary assessment (e.g. Noll 2005) and cultural expertise in asylum courts (Good 2007; Holden 2020) to explore the role of pastors as expert witnesses in asylum appeal hearings based on conversion. It critically explores the crisis of trust between church and state in assessing the credibility of asylum seeker converts to Christianity in Germany.

Keywords: Conversion, credibility, expert evidence, ethnography, Germany
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Sur place religious conversion in the asylum process: What kind of view on religion guides the Finnish state official’s credibility assessment of conversion?

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In Finland, a rising number of asylum seekers from Islamic countries are converting to Christianity. As persecution based on religion is a ground for refugee status, the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) must take a stand on whether a change of religion poses a threat to the asylum seeker in their home country. However, how can it be verified that an asylum seeker has, in fact, converted?

In my presentation, I analyse the grounds on which Migri assesses the credibility of religious conversion in the asylum process. I argue that the credibility assessment of religious conversion seeks to examine the authenticity of the person’s religious identity. The understanding of what is authentic is in turn based on asylum official’s (implicit and normative) understanding of the concept of religion. However, their view on religion does not necessarily overlap with the asylum seeker’s own understanding of religion. This discrepancy makes the credibility assessment potentially unreliable.

In my presentation, I will present the results of a theological analysis of Migri’s view on religion as it appears in a sample of 48 negative asylum decisions of Christian converts. I will also discuss the possible differences between converted asylum seeker’s self-understanding of their religious identity and Migri’s expectations.

Keywords: Religious conversion, credibility assessments, religion, asylum, Finland

Ms. Ilona Silvola is a doctoral student in systematic theology at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Her research combines systematic theology with forced migration studies. In her doctoral dissertation she examines conversion to Christianity concentrating on people who come to Finland from majority Muslim countries as asylum seekers and convert during their asylum process. In the asylum process, the state authorities assess the credibility of the conversion. In her dissertation, Ilona especially deals with this aspect of the phenomenon. Her research approach is qualitative with a special interest in theological and ethical questions.
Fragmented truths in narratives of converted Iranians in a diaspora

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In this paper, I gather data based on ethnographic interviews with Iranian refugees in a diaspora to hear their narratives and understand considerations around their religious conversions. By showing the complexity of conversion, I point out the importance of considering relational thinking and dismantling the binaries of genuine/insincere and authentic/inauthentic claims in the assessment of conversion cases. I don’t place my argument specifically on the aspects of credibility and genuineness of converted Iranians’ claims; instead, I will argue that there are broader structural factors and enmeshed considerations and that push some Iranians to seek asylum through religious conversion in European justice systems. In parallel, if we listen to different and various narratives of such Iranians and consider them as a collective text, we would perceive that the “fact” of the matter is evident in these fragments of truth.

The power relations of the two home and host countries interlace pressures on the lives of such refugees—both in the context of alienation and in the context of connection. The study examines the importance of the non-binary approach in exploring multidimensional elements in religious asylum surroundings, touching on Iranian refugees’ narratives.

Keywords: Intersected restrictions, collective text, fragmented truths, refugee narratives, conversion, Iranians in Europe

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