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Choosing Heresy
How Muslim-background Unaccompanied Refugee Minors do identity and belonging in the Church of Sweden

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Abstract

Between 2014-2016, Sweden received an influx of some 44, 617 unaccompanied refugee minors (UMs), under 18-year-olds who enter the country and seek asylum without a parent. Taking a short-term ethnographic approach, this study looks at identity (re)construction and fictive kinship among Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors who convert to Christianity in the Church of Sweden, challenging some of the pre-conceived outsider categorisations of this phenomenon. By taking an exploratory stance, I seek to understand conversion processes from the perspective of the UMs themselves, as they narrate their own identity processes and attribute meaning to them. I utilise Butler's *performativity* and the concept of *fictive kinship* as lenses for understanding constructions of identity and belonging with particular focus on process and practice. The data reveals the curiosity-driven nature of UM conversions, the sense of belonging which plays an important role in UM identity formation, and the ways in which participants transition from community-coerced religious practices to individual, self-directed spiritual journeys.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Afghans, belonging, Church of Sweden, Christianity, conversion, fictive kinship, identity, Iran, Islam, migration, Performativity, religion, Sweden, unaccompanied refugee minors*

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

UM   Unaccompanied refugee minor

UMB Unaccompanied refugee minor background: a person who came to Sweden as a UM, but has since turned 18 and is no longer considered a child

CofS The Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan)

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1. Introduction

I leave the cold autumnal air and enter the warmth of a dimly lit sanctuary. Sitting in several rows are individuals quietly readying themselves for the beginning of a Taizé mass, a short service interspersed with prayers, songs, and Bible readings. I find a bench and sit down. The church bells ring shortly before the mass begins and the empty rows start filling up. Behind me sit twenty or so young men who appear to be from somewhere in Asia. They greet one another with handshakes and smiles. The service begins, songs are sung, readings read in five or six languages as everything culminates towards the breaking of bread. The young men get up and greet everyone present with handshakes, "*Guds frid*" (God's peace), they say as they meet the other churchgoers. They form an orderly queue and, one-by-one, receive the bread and wine from the priest. Those who have not yet been baptised place a hand on one shoulder to show that they will receive a blessing instead of the sacraments. The young men then make their way to the front of the sanctuary, where they light candles and stand for a moment of reflection before making the sign of the cross and returning to their seats.

I am on my first visit to a CofS church in one of Sweden's coastal towns. The young men are from Afghanistan and come from a Shia Muslim background. They arrived in Sweden as UMs. Presently, they account for one third of the congregation of this church and are engaged and active members of the community. Prior to arriving in Sweden, most had no experience of church, knew little of Jesus, and had rarely interacted with people of European descent. Their stories represent a phenomenon which has emerged in churches in Sweden since these young people began arriving. It gained momentum in 2014 when the numbers of children arriving alone reached unprecedented levels. The phenomenon of Muslim young people converting to Christianity is striking as it takes place within a church whose relationship with Islam is usually focussed on interfaith dialogue rather than attempting to convince Muslims to become Christians. Prior to this time, it was rare to hear of people joining the CofS. In the past, new members were born into the church.

This study began with the desire to understand the challenges faced by newcomers to Sweden as they embark on processes of identity formation and belonging in their host society. I wanted to look at what it means for those who are not Swedish to become part of Swedish society, and to

explore some of the hurdles encountered in finding a meaningful sense of belonging. In order to observe the intersection of these different cultures, to see what it looks like for newcomers to engage meaningfully in an environment that is 'typically Swedish,' I sought out institutions which embodied, in one way or another, the highly contested concept of *Swedishness*. One institution that has been of major importance to the discussion of Swedish identity is the CofS. With its 500-year history, its large membership, and its ongoing close relationship with the Swedish political system, the CofS is an obvious choice. For this historicity to coincide with the large number of conversions and baptisms of groups of foreign-born individuals makes the church an excellent space in which to explore belonging in Sweden.

As I interviewed young men who told me, often with great passion, of their decisions to leave behind the religion of their birth and embrace Christianity, I reflected on the media portrayals of this group of people and how they are so often depicted as posing some kind of threat (see for e.g. Hedlund 2015). As I retold these stories, I was met with a cynicism that increased my curiosity. The question I was most frequently asked was, "Aren't they converting to improve their chances of being granted asylum?" Far from allaying my interest, this question, juxtaposed with the frankness of my research subjects' descriptions of difficulties faced post-conversion, convinced me that there was more to this phenomenon than a misguided attempt at securing 'asylum capital' (Skodo 2018). As I looked more deeply, I came to believe that the convergence of UMs and the CofS has the potential to shed light not only on the plight of UMs, but on the ways in which human beings create a sense of belonging in new and unfamiliar settings. This may be a story about UMs becoming highly engaged members of a church that is in decline, but it is also the story of how people from different continents enter Swedish society.

The title of this thesis, *Choosing Heresy*, is not intended as a value-judgement of the decision of my informants to become Christians. It refers instead to how they are now perceived by members of their home community as a result of this decision. This is illustrated by the experience of one of my participants, Amir. When he told his family about his decision to convert, they rejected him: "they got very angry and could not understand it," he told me. They said, "God will be angry with you," and cut off contact with him because they believe that he is on the "wrong path." When I spoke to him, he lamented, "I'm sad that you can't have both your parents and your faith," expressing hope that one day they might accept him again. Experiences like this are

commonplace for those I have spoken to who choose to convert, and my title is an important reminder of the implications of these decisions.

1.1 Purpose of my study

In today's fast changing world, a world which is seeing both the emergence of deeply polarised identity politics and the mass migration of those fleeing war and poverty, understanding the processes that individuals go through to build their lives in new, vastly different, host cultures is vital to building cohesive societies. Looking at the processes that UM Christian converts go through may offer some insight into the role of spirituality and religious institutions as stakeholders in society.

This thesis contributes to literature on the role of religion in migration by looking at processes of identity and belonging among UMs from Afghanistan who convert to Christianity and perform their religion in the context of the CofS. While their family origins are in Afghanistan, most participants grew up in Iran, and have thus been immersed in Iranian religious norms prior to arrival in Sweden.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how UMs who have converted to Christianity construct identities through the performance of religion and the impact this has on their sense of belonging. The CofS is a social field within Swedish society which has experienced an influx of such newcomers and has some experience of developing strategies for incorporating them into the community of the church. By drawing on theories which deal with identity processes and belonging, I look at how the new circumstances of my participants impact the malleability of their identities.

This study also contributes to literature on the role of religion in migration, as I seek to understand the lives of my participants in the context of their experience of moving from the norms of one political context to the entirely different norms of another.

In light of this, the questions guiding this study are:

1. *How do unaccompanied refugee minor converts to Christianity construct identity and belonging within the Church of Sweden?*
2. *Why do they choose to do this as Christians?*
3. *In what ways do conversion processes shed light on post-migration identity formation among unaccompanied refugee minors?*

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1.2 Disposition

This thesis begins with a context chapter, which situates the different aspects of the study in order to give background to some of the general questions surrounding UMs and their involvement with the CofS, where they come from, the current political climate in Sweden, Swedish identity, and some background to the CofS as an institution with close ties to the state.

Following this, in the literature review I present the state of the art on research relating to the gap left by institutional caregiving, the different types of external categorisation that UMs are subjected to, and the role of religion, in particular Christian conversion processes, in the context of migration. By bringing together these themes, I demonstrate the gaps that exists in current literature on the matter and to which this study contributes.

In the theory section, I unpack key theories which have emerged during my research process and which provide an insightful lens through which to understand identity and belonging processes. Using Butler's *performativity* I introduce the concept of religious identity as something performed rather than owned.

The methods chapter describes my particular approach to fieldwork, which follows a short-term ethnographic design. I describe my approach to research, how my questions emerged, and the processes by which I collected data. This chapter concludes with a description of ethical considerations and looks at the validity and reliability of the study.

Following the methods chapter, findings introduces the participants in the study, before presenting the data I collected during my fieldwork.

My chapter on analysis focusses on the journey that my participants make towards greater agency, how the fictive kinship of the church provides them with a sense of belonging, and what it means to perform Christianity as an individual living between norms.

In my conclusion to this thesis, I draw together my findings and analysis into a coherent set of observations and suggest further opportunities for related research.

2. Context

In this section I introduce the environment in which I am carrying out research, who my research subjects are and the new context in which they are building life. This includes a look at Sweden's relationship with religion, and an introduction to the subject of religious conversion.

2.1 Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

Unaccompanied refugee minors (UMs) are under-18-year-olds who seek refuge in a country that is not their own without a parent or legal guardian (Herz and Lalander 2017; Vervliet et al. 2014). Between 2014 and 2016, Sweden received 44,617 of these young people. Of these, 25,692 (57%) were from Afghanistan, while 5,190 came from Syria, and 3,597 from Iraq. Among those UMs seeking asylum in Sweden during this time, 10% were female and 90% male (Migrationsverket 2017c).

Unaccompanied refugee minors in Sweden face a unique set of challenges which influence their experience of life here. They are away from any familiar support networks they once enjoyed, their status here is uncertain, and they could be denied the right to stay (Hedlund 2017). Many have gone through traumatic experiences as they travelled to Europe and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rousseau 1995; Eisenbruch 1990, 1988; Ramel et al. 2015; Reavell and Fazil 2016). UMs must develop new support networks in a place where social practices differ from their homelands, and where religion and individual freedom have different degrees of influence. Added to this are the media discourses on unaccompanied minors, who are portrayed as "Beard Boys" who lie about their ages and pose a threat to the rest of society (Hedlund 2015; Gustafsson Lundberg 2018).

State caregiving for UMs differs from country to country within the EU. In Sweden, state provisioned care is offered through the appointing of legal guardians (*God man*), the provision of accommodation, usually in institutional care homes, and through access to education, all of which is overseen by social workers. Guardians are responsible for ensuring the legal, medical, educational, and financial provision of these young people (Migrationsverket 2017b). It is

common that UMs wait a great deal of time to receive a response to their claim for residence (Human Rights Watch 2016), and while there is a two stage appeal process in place for reviewing decisions, it is unusual for the appeal courts to go against the initial decision made by a Migration Office official (Hedlund 2017).

2.2 The Church of Sweden

The CofS was, until 2000, Sweden's state church. It has 6.1 million members (Svenska Kyrkan 2018), who belong by virtue of being baptised and confirmed within the church. While the Church has been disestablished since 2000, one percent of the income tax paid by its members goes directly into its budget (Bäckström and Davie 2010, 39–56). Although 6.1 million sounds like a lot of members, a considerable number leave the church each year, the top three reasons being: not believing in God (40%), not finding membership meaningful (18%), and financial reasons (17%) (Svenska Kyrkan 2018). In 2016, 90,000 such members left the church, while 8,000 people joined (Svenska Kyrkan 2018). Membership should not be understood to mean 'active' membership. Of the 6.1M members, approximately 80,000 are actively involved, by means of participation in weekly worship services (Ekenberg 2016).

For those born in the church, membership begins with infant baptism, which usually takes place within the first year, followed by confirmation, which usually takes place during the confirmand's fourteenth year, after a season of preparation. For those who are not born in Sweden to parents who are members of the church, the process of belonging is a process that can take one year or more. Before being baptised, newcomers must spend one year attending church meetings, Bible studies and other events in order to satisfy the priests that they are ready to be baptised.

Sweden is a country ambivalent towards religion. According to the results of the World Values Survey, Sweden is the most secular and most individualist country in the world (World Values Survey 2016; Andersson 2018). It is a country which has deliberately sought to limit the influence of religious institutions on its politics and public life. Sweden is a country that prides itself on its secular normativity, with the idea that your average Swede may celebrate traditions that are derived from historical tradition, but not view themselves as religious. Research has

shown that children born in Sweden to one or more parent born in Sweden are the more likely than any other group to be not only atheist, but anti-religion (The Living History Forum 2014). This is in spite of the fact that they are born to parents who were very likely married in the CofS and/or baptised there. Despite this secular-normativity, Sweden has a long history of powerful religious institutions. As mentioned earlier, 60% of the population of Sweden are members in the CofS. Many of the official holidays in the Swedish calendar have their roots in religion, including Christmas, Easter, and Epiphany. Added to these facts, even the harshest curse words in the Swedish language have religious origins. I will explore this further in my literature review, but it is fair to say that calling Sweden a secular nation does not give a full picture of the level of ambivalence towards religiosity within the country.

2.3 Religious conversion

While there is little agreement as to all that is entailed in conversion, and what motivates people to convert (Snow and Machalek 1984; Akcapar 2006; Kraft 2017), there is general agreement on the fact that conversion is personal, and thus has no single form, and that it is a significant factor in identity formation. Leaning heavily on Snow and Machalek's (1984) sociological approach to conversion, Jindra (2011), in a literature review that covers a variety of definitions, summarises the phenomenon this way:

> Conversion encompasses "radical personal changes" in a person's religious beliefs that can happen either suddenly or gradually. This comes with a different view of reality, of the world, and of self. Converts also reconstruct their biography as a consequence of their conversion in light of their current belief system (ibid., 276)

This definition is focussed on the personal/psychological factors involved in conversion, rather than the institutional act of conversion, which varies from group to group. The focus of this study are the processes of personal conversion, rather than the outward, institutionally codified ways in which these processes receive the 'rubber stamp' of the church hierarchy since I am looking at the ways in which individual converts construct identity and a sense of belonging within the church.

3. Literature Review

This literature review focusses on three main fields of discussion with which my study intersects, and outlines existing research along with the different voices within these discussions. The first sub-section looks at state mandated care and its shortcomings as expressed by UMs. It looks at how, and if, these shortcomings are being addressed. The second sub-section discusses the ways in which UMs are subjected to the violence of categorisation by those who are on the periphery of their experience, and the argument that we need to hear more from UMs themselves. The final sub-section of the chapter explores a number of the perspectives on the role that religion plays in the context of migration, with particular focus on the phenomenon of conversion.

3.1 Meeting the needs of UMs

UMs enter Swedish society as children in receipt of state mandated care. In order to contextualise their belonging, it is necessary to look at how they experience this care: do they experience belonging in the strong institutions that Sweden has given responsibility for their care? Existing literature on the detached nature of state provisioned caregiving in Europe suggests that state mandated care is falling short of the needs felt by UMs, which seems to be connected to the state's institutional approach to caregiving failing to provide the personal forms of care that UMs desire (Stretmo 2014; De Graeve and Bex 2017; Oppedal, Guribye, and Kroger 2016). In the Swedish context, strong state institutions are designed to provide an equal standard of care for recipients. However, the strong institutionalisation of care has resulted in a case that has been characterised as impersonal (De Graeve and Bex 2017). In recent studies carried on UMs in Belgium and Norway, UM's admit to desiring relationships with adults who are emotionally invested in them as people, as their parents would be (De Graeve and Bex 2017; Pastoor 2015). For example, in their study looking at UMs in Belgium, De Graeve and Bex (2017), found that the "bureaucratic apparatus of care", which they go on to describe as the various state institutions in charge of providing the various elements of care, failed to provide the "emotional commitment" that the UM's most desired. This being said, the high degree of professionalisation in the Swedish context was seen as a virtue by guardians:

Keeping a professional distance was generally described by the guardians as part of good guardianship practice and close relationships between guardians and pupils were often framed as unprofessional (ibid.)

This emotional detachment was interpreted as negligence by the UM's and led them to express disappointment at the level of "genuine interest" shown by guardians and other care givers (De Graeve and Bex 2017). Similarly to De Graeve and Bex's work, Herz and Lalander (2018) found that UM's view social workers in Sweden as distant and removed, yet powerful in their influence, and likely to appear unexpectedly to make life changing decisions. The authors describe the social worker of one of their participants, "who has played no active role in his everyday life, except for when she made a decision that threatened the core structure of his everyday life" (Herz and Lalander 2018). Herz and Lalander assert that this combination of power and remoteness is detrimental to the stability and coherence in the lives of these young people (ibid.). However, it is important to note that the authors also find examples of social workers and guardians who buck this trend and who go above and beyond the requirements of their job descriptions (ibid.).

In connection to the UMs perceptions that state-provided caregivers are emotionally detached, other research has shown that UMs look to meet their need for supportive adult role models through relationships with other adult figures in their lives (Oppedal, Guribye, and Kroger 2016; Pastoor 2015). Pastoor (2015) looks at the role of teachers who work with UMs, and asks whether the concept of the teacher should be redefined to more holistically meet the needs of UMs. She describes an interview carried out with one UM:

When asked what kind of help he needs, Jamal answered he needs somebody 'To show the right way, not the crooked one. I want to become a good boy. Manage school and get the education I need, the job I want. When you cannot get that, how do you get by then?' (Pastoor 2015)

She found that teachers were responding to such needs: "[they] emphasised that a great deal of time was spent on issues other than the curriculum as the newly resettled refugees needed

support in many other ways" (ibid.). Oppedal et al. (2016) also found that teachers' roles were informally expanding to include giving career advice to those who sought them out. While a small amount of research exists on the psychosocial support offered by adult support figures in the school context, little attention has been paid to adult support figures in other domains in which UM's participate, such as religious institutions. While this study does not directly address the role of adult support figures active in the Swedish church and their relationship with UM's, by looking at how UMs experience belonging, and thus seeking to understand the meaning they attribute to their connections with pastors, it indirectly contributes to knowledge in this area.

3.2 Children in an adult world: categorising UMs from the outside

As the lives of UMs intersect with the institutions of the state, a process of labelling and categorisation takes place. This happens on a formal level, as they make contact with healthcare professionals, who seek to offer diagnoses to their physical and mental illnesses (for e.g. Reavell and Fazil 2016), or migration office officials who use categorisations to determine credibility and ultimately their right to remain (for e.g. Crawley 2011; Hedlund 2017). It also takes place within media discourses which categorise them based on the opinions of people who are not UMs themselves (for e.g. Hedlund 2015). Psychiatry is by far the most represented field in research on UMs, as scholars seek to understand the psychological wellbeing of this group (Alemi, James, and Montgomery 2016; Carlson, Cacciatore, and Klimek 2012; Eisenbruch 1988, 1990; Pieloch, McCullough, and Marks 2016; Ramel et al. 2015; Reavell and Fazil 2016; Rousseau 1995; Sleijpen et al. 2015; Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014). UMs are overrepresented in Sweden's inpatient psychiatric care system and exhibit an array of mental healthcare needs, from anxiety to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and suicidal tendencies (Ramel et al. 2015).

In their research overview on the subject of the mental health of refugee children, Reavell and Fazil (2016) found that, while existing literature is inconclusive about the percentage of refugee children who suffer with PTSD or depression (with studies suggesting that anywhere between 5% and 60% of refugee children suffer from PTSD), these conditions are common among children who have experienced war and that among those with such conditions there is little

improvement in their mental health over a long period of time (ibid.). That said, factors such as having a "sense of belonging," to a school or elsewhere, were shown to reduce levels of PTSD among adolescents (ibid.). Young people who did not feel as though they belonged, and who experienced themselves as outsiders to the group, did not perform well in academic assessments, and were more likely to pursue destructive patterns of behaviour including drug abuse (ibid.). Association was drawn between identifying as either Muslim or Christian and experiencing "fewer internalising problems" (ibid.) but it is not known if this is directly related to the religious aspect of their experience or simply the sense of belonging they derive from being part of these religious groups.

Research on resilience and coping has revealed that UMs who demonstrate robust mental health utilise coping strategies that they have developed from previous experience (Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014; Alemi, James, and Montgomery 2016). In one such study, Völkl-Kernstock et al. discovered prayer to be a commonly used coping strategy for young refugees from North Africa (Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014). Reavell and Fazil note a gap in the research on the role that religion plays in the mental wellbeing of refugees and the impact that secularism has on children's religious views (Reavell and Fazil 2016). For many UMs, it seems that their experiences in relation to psychological vulnerability and resilience is not one of an either-or binary, of being either vulnerable or resilient, but is a complex mix of both. Eisenbruch (1990) argues in response to the readiness of psychiatrists to apply Western diagnoses on non-Western patients, that there is a need to take a step back and take into account the experiences and background of the individual before issuing such diagnoses. In his view, one of the primary lenses for understanding refugee psychiatry is the process of "cultural bereavement," a grieving for one's homeland, and that key to helping people in this process is taking the time to understand their worldviews.

Herz and Lalander (2017) contribute to the discussion on labelling by outside forces by looking at how UMs experience being categorised as 'lonely,' or 'unaccompanied.' Their participants reported feeling stigmatised by this labelling and that it exaggerated their own feelings of loneliness. They argue that 'the lonely child' is actually a product of societal discourse which denies agency and ends up shaping how UMs see themselves (ibid.). In contrast, the participants

in Herz's study demonstrated agency in addressing this issue in their own lives through building new friendships and keeping contact with family members (ibid.). UMs are also routinely characterised as a threat by media institutions who see their presence as undermining 'European values' (Delanty, Wodak, and Jones 2008; Gustafsson Lundberg 2018; Hedlund 2015; Herz 2018). Hedlund (Hedlund 2015) examines the use of the term "beard boys" (*skäggpojkar*) in media discourse on UMs in Sweden, a term used to undermine their status as children by pointing to features which are believed to be characteristic of adult males, and symbolic of the threat posed by their 'otherness' (ibid.). He argues that such terms are indicative of the current political climate in Sweden, one in which there is "the wish for an intense and palpable transformation […] towards safety, belonging and unity, in a fragmented and individualised societal climate" (Hedlund 2017, 91).

Herz looks at the ways in which UMs in Sweden construct gendered identities, with a focus on masculinity (Herz 2018). He notes that while the Swedish media discourse often portrays them in essentialist, monolithic terms, his subjects tended to approach discussions as opportunities to learn and adapt their conceptions of gender (ibid.). Following Hall, he contends that for these young men, gender formation takes place on an axis between the "continuity" of inherited perspectives and the "discontinuity" of taking on localized approaches (ibid.). This study seeks to explore this continuity/discontinuity axis through understanding the ways in which UMs perform identity and how they deal with norms from either home or host cultures.

Not only are UMs subjected to categorisation in terms of their psychological status, the threat they pose, and their essential otherness, but their status as children is routinely contested by the authorities (Crawley 2007; De Sanctis et al. 2016; Eide and Hjern 2013; Hedlund 2017; Sutalo 2017). In his research into the decision making of Migration Office officials, Hedlund (2017) found that it was common for them to categorise applicants based on western perceptions of childhood. Such perceptions include the idea that children are apolitical, and so UMs whose grounds for seeking asylum are built on a history of political activity risk being categorised as adults. Conversely, children with political pasts may be deemed by officials to be lying or lacking credibility (Hedlund 2017). He states, "conventional Northern/Western ideas of childhood, where children are construed as innocent and incompetent […] are not well matched

to acknowledge a child that claims to be politically aware and therefore persecuted." These asymmetrical power structures consistently privilege the host country, and leave child applicants with little hope of their initial decision being overturned (ibid.). In the United Kingdom, Crawley found similar practices at play, in which children whose experiences included political or sexual activity stood to forfeit their status as 'children,' because of outdated and western-centric constructions of childhood (Crawley 2011). She argues that not only does our conception of the experience of childhood differ from those in other places, but that it needs reimagining to be relevant to modern western-background children, who "are becoming more 'adult-like', as represented through their earlier sexualisation and heightened role as consumers" (Crawley 2011).

The age of UMs is also contested through the operation of the discressionary powers of migration officers and the implementation of medical age assessments by the Swedish Office of Migration (*Migrationsverket*) (Migrationsverket 2017a). In spite of being presented as credible by *Migrationsverket*, the effectiveness of medical age assessments is, in-fact, greatly contested within the scientific community (De Sanctis et al. 2016; Sutalo 2017). As well as arguing that they are inaccurate, these tests have been criticized for not taking into account regional physiological variation and for using old data (De Sanctis et al. 2016).

While the psychological wellbeing of UMs is thought to be dependent on experiencing a "sense of belonging" (Reavell and Fazil 2016), the experience of UMs is of being routinely labelled and contested by the adults around them based on their mental health, *otherness*, perceived threat, and age. This study seeks to step back from the external labelling of UMs in order to hear directly from them about the ways that they attribute meaning to their identity processes. By doing so, this study contributes perspective on how UM converts identify themselves, and whether the discourses about them bare any semblance to their own realities.

3.3 Religious Conversion and Migration

There has been some debate over the motives for conversion among refugees from a Muslim background, and the role that religion plays in their lives post-migration (Akcapar 2006; Kraft 2017; Roy 2004; Leman 1999; Kéri and Sleiman 2017). While the term is indicative of a single rupture in the experience of the individual, Kraft argues that conversion is best understood in terms of processes, which may or may not lead to a change in a person's religious classification (Kraft 2017). Her study looks at the conversion processes of Syrians who come into contact with Evangelical churches in Lebanon, and looks at why they decide to explore a different religious system. She argues, "It is […] helpful to view conversion among refugees not as a moment or a singular decision, but rather as part of a wider process of change with some fluidity and continuity" (ibid.). Thus, conversion becomes "a process of change in a person's life that involves religious exploration" (ibid.). For her, change is a feature of the identities of refugees, and change in religious attitudes or beliefs should be seen in this context (ibid.). She found that, among other reasons, refugees she interviewed were motivated by curiosity, the offer of material and moral support, meeting of emotional needs through prayer, helping them to put their suffering in context, and the community offered by the churches (ibid.).

Skodo (2017) suggests that conversion among Afghans in Sweden can be characterised as an attempt to acquire "migration capital" that will increase their chances of being granted residency. He argues that such capital is, in-fact, "counterfeit capital," since it is not accepted as credible grounds for remaining by migration officials (ibid.). Akcapar (2006) also argues that the acquisition of capital is a significant factor for refugees. In his study looking at Iranians who convert to Christianity in Turkey he argues that, for this group, conversion acts as both a "migration strategy and as a sociocultural adaptation tool" (ibid.). In his view, becoming Christian gives Iranians access to transnational networks of support which can be leveraged through accessing local churches in Turkey (ibid.). However, it is important to note that while he analysed the impact of conversion on migration, he did not view migration opportunities as the sole motivation of the majority of his participants (ibid.).

In contrast to this view, Kéri and Sleiman (2017) sought to understand conversion narratives among Muslim background converts in Europe, assuming conversion was largely motivated by

opportunities to improve migration chances: "A strong public criticism of Christian religious transformation in Muslim people is based on the assumption that these are not genuine conversions, but reflect personal needs and interests" (ibid.) Countering this assumption, they conclude that "the assumption of need- and interest-driven conversion is not supported by our results" (ibid.). Instead, the two narratives they found to be most common among their 124 participants were the intellectual and the mystical, with the intellectual accounting for 42.7% of conversions and the mystical accounting for 16.1%. They define the two narratives as follows:

> In the intellectual conversion motif, transformation is dominated by insight and illumination driven by religious teachings, sacred texts, doctrines, and traditions. Social pressure is low or absent, and the conversion process is gradual, characterized by a medium arousal level. Cognitive concerns and beliefs precede religious participation. In contrast, the mystical motif is brief, emotionally intensive (awe or love) with a high arousal level. There is no social pressure, and internal changes (beliefs, religious attributions, feelings, and attitudes) precede regular external religious practices (ibid.)

In other words, according to their findings, most refugees who become Christians in Europe do so as the result of a slow, intellectual process which involves engagement with the Bible and with the values and practices of the church. The second largest group become Christians relatively quickly after some kind of spiritual experience inspires them to do so. In both instances, there is little external pressure to change. The drawbacks to such a study is that of reducing a large group of respondents to six basic phenomenological types, which are generalised as the six pathways into conversion. Such categories are by nature very broad and findings fail to represent the nuances of individual journeys.

Based on his work in inner-city pluralist societies, Leman (1999) proposes five functions of religion for immigrants. Among these are religion as an "engine of (non-) adaptation," and religion as a "medium for affirming the original culture." He illustrates the first of these by looking at the role of Pentecostal Christianity in the lives of Romani converts. According to Leman, the belonging to the Pentecostal church "simultaneously encourages assimilation while nevertheless sustaining a fundamentalist, anti-integrationist discourse" (Leman 1999). Within

this category of "engine of (non-) adaptation," Leman sees a continuity in the "grammar of religion," in which the individuals maintain connection to previous symbolism while perceiving their new practices as a deepening of their existing faith (ibid.). There is an exclusivity in terms of belonging to an in-group, but at the same time aspects of the religious practice connect the individuals more closely to their host culture and social space. This is in contrast with the role of religion as a "medium for affirming the original culture," which has to do with the preservation of home-culture practices and can be seen in the European context among some Muslim groups (ibid.).

Scholars do not agree on any single role that religion plays in the lives of refugees. Some view it as one aspect of identity (re)construction (Kraft 2017), while others argue that it is a strategic means of acquiring "migration capital" (Akcapar 2006; Skodo 2018). Other scholars see it as the end result of a spiritual journey of varying lengths (Kéri and Sleiman 2017), or religion as a means of integrating a sense of belonging with assimilation (Leman 1999). These perspectives highlight that there is more to be learned about the role of religion in migration. At the time of writing there are no known studies which focus on conversion or the role of religion among UMs in Europe, and the impact it has on identity and belonging.

Conclusion

In this section I have looked at debates surrounding the adequacy of provisions of care for UMs in Sweden, the outward categorisation to which they are subjected to, and the role of conversion in the context of migration, while identifying gaps in current research on these subjects. At present, although it is understood that UMs seek out relationships with adults who can provide them with holistic care akin to that of a parent, little is known about if, and where, these needs are being met. By looking at belonging in the CofS I hope to contribute to literature in this area. While recent ethnographic approaches to research among UMs have begun to address the overrepresentation of outside voices who seek to define and comment on the lives of UMs, there remains work to be done in giving voice to the perspectives of UMs themselves and the ways that they construct meaning in the world. Finally, there is a gap in our understanding of the role that religion plays in the identity formation of refugee children, and UMs in particular, who find themselves in the secular west.

In light of these gaps, this study looks at the following questions:

1. *How do unaccompanied refugee minor converts to Christianity construct identity and belonging within the Church of Sweden?*
2. *Why do they choose to do this as Christians?*
3. *In what ways do conversion processes shed light on post-migration identity formation among unaccompanied refugee minors?*

4. Theory

In this chapter, I discuss the theories which guide the analysis of the data I have collected. Since I am looking at how individuals construct identity, and how they form ideas of belonging, my theoretical framework makes use of concepts which bring both the processes and practices of individual identity projects into the forefront. I draw first on Judith Butler's concept of *performativity*, that identity is something which is done, rather than owned, and that individuals are constantly constructing their identities (Salih 2007; Butler 2011; Giddens and Sutton 2009). I then use the concept of *fictive kinship* to discuss the ways in which belonging is enacted and practiced by the group.

4.1 Performativity and the doing of identity

Through the concept of *performativity*, Butler (2011) argues that identity is best viewed as something which is 'done,' rather than something that is 'owned,' and is a continuous active process (Giddens and Sutton 2009, 95; Lawler 2014, 112). For her, the Subject is created at the same moment in which he or she is named, or labelled. The act of labelling is the enactment of processes of performance which themselves create the subject (Salih 2007, 56). For Butler, identity is something constructed socially; it always exists in a context where norms can be found which most people continually reference, or 'cite,' through the activities of their daily lives. Indeed, individuals cannot avoid 'citing' existing norms (Butler 2011, xxii). She explains, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (ibid.). Identities are the product of continuous activity both on the part of the individual and the society at large. They are fluid in the sense that their existence is dependent on ongoing citation, but they are fixed because of the power of normative discourses which drive them (ibid.).

While Butler's focus is gender, particularly those who subvert gender norms, *performativity* is a point of departure which can be used to understand the identity processes of male UM converts in Sweden and how they do identity construction in the CofS. As converts, they live at the intersection of categories and as such are involved in both the questioning of pre-existing norms as well as (re)constructing of norms. As individuals torn from one social setting and doing

identity construction in a new, vastly different, environment, they are, perhaps, in the position to build something new, citing norms which exist both in Sweden and Afghanistan/Iran, but also allowed room to subvert such norms. For Butler, one is not simply free to subvert norms without first citing those norms and reproducing them in order that ones' subversion is credible (Butler 2011). She comments that:

> the reading of "performativity" as willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms (the "chains" of iteration invoked and dissimulated in the imperative utterance) constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names. (Butler 2011, 139)

Norms are not simply chosen but are themselves the product of discourses which, because of their repetition through history, hold genuine enacted power. UMs who leave Iran and move to Sweden enter a context where the discourses are different, and, where the social structures no longer have the same power. This echoes Roy's discussion of Islam's loss of social authority when it becomes deterritorialised (Roy 2004). The dominant discourses of Iran, or Afghanistan, are not the dominant discourses of Sweden, and those who enter Swedish society, to the extent that they can avoid group pressure, are granted a reprieve from the norms of their past. However, they are subjected to new norms which are dictated by the iterative histories of Sweden.

Normative identities are enacted simultaneously with an individual's social existence. Butler distinguishes between language that describes activity, and language which itself creates reality, and uses the example of a doctor carrying out an ultrasound examination telling the parents-to-be "it's a girl" as an example of the latter (Butler 2011, 176). In Butler's view, the doctor is not simply describing what the baby is, but is introducing an entire system of identity processes into the life of the child; or, as Lawler puts it, he is 'girling' the baby (Lawler 2014, 130). Even before she has any say in the matter, the moment when the child begins her social existence, when she begins to be recognised by those around her as a 'her,' her identity is already under construction.

Butler contests the concept of internalisation, the idea that our identities emanate from some deeper part of us. Instead she argues that identity is something that we learn, a "situational performance whose dramatic effect is the illusion of an inner generated self" (Seidman 2013,

219). We are, she argues, what we do, and, for the most part, we do what we have been taught to do. In this sense she seeks to demystify identity, through dismissing the idea that there is some kind of invisible, hidden actor controlling the structures of society (ibid.). Salih summarises this idea well: "Gender does not happen once and for all when we are born, but is a sequence of repeated acts that harden into the appearance of something that's been there all along." (Salih 2007, 58)

For Butler, the margins of society are the best place to understand the fragility of what we take to be natural. In the example of 'drag', or cross-dressing, she shows how problematic it can be to approach gender as something one is born possessing and she uses it as a case study to suggest that it is action, rather than nature, which creates gender (Butler 2011, 176). The act of impersonation undermines the powerful discourse of 'nature' which, through language, enacts the norm of gender. Butler points out something sinister about norms: that while we all imitate, to one degree or another their ideal forms, we always fail to live up to these forms (Butler 2011, 176). While I may perform the norms of masculinity to the best of my abilities, I will never live up to the six-packed Olympian version which I see referenced around me. The same could be said for religious identity ideals. Because of their repetition, they give the impression of "something that's been there all along" (Salih 2007, 58), something that is natural and therefore how things 'should' be. However, given alternative religious performances, these norms become contested.

Butler also problematizes the binary approach to identity which is so prominent in societal discourses (Butler 2011, 10). In the example of the masculine-feminine binary, there is an imbalance, one is viewed as stronger while the other weaker, but for one to exist they must both exist. These categories are problematic for those who do not fit into this either-or model of categorisation. Again, drag is her case study for this. Men who exhibit characteristics that are typical of the ideal female live at the margins of society because they are neither normatively male or normatively female. The maintenance of binary norms is dependent on the "exclusion of a field of disruptive possibilities" (ibid.), those who do not fit into the system that has been deemed 'natural.' this is not limited only to gender, the young people in this study are themselves caught between categories, of child and adult, Muslim other and Christian European, and, within the CofS, of cultural Christian and atheist. Butler reminds us that those on the margins, those

who do not fit neatly within our binaries, are those who can subvert our constructed notions of what is natural.

4.2 Fictive Kinship and belonging as performance

To understand belonging among UMs who are present in Sweden without their biological family members, we must look beyond traditional norms of family, tribe, and nation. While the participants in this study are Afghan by birth, in official terms they are stateless. According to my participants, they have grown up in Iran without official documentation and some have spent periods of time in Sweden as undocumented migrants. So how does one find belonging when one is without family, tribe, or nation?

The concept of fictive kinship offers an effective point of departure for those who do not have blood or birth to fall back on when constructing notions of belonging (Akcapar 2006; Lawler 2014). It is used to describe the formulation of relationships which go above and beyond mere friendships and which resemble what might be expected of functioning family units. Akcapar defines fictive kinship as "family-type relationships based not on blood or marriage but rather on religious rituals and close friendship ties" (Akcapar 2006, 819), while Lawler adds that one's fictive kin are "those kin with no 'biological' connection" (Lawler 2014, 62). These close relationships can be distinguished from biological kinship by the fact that they are optional, and as a result may be valued more deeply. Lawler argues that such kinship is "not necessarily […] 'false' but can simply mean 'made'" (ibid.). In the sense that it is actively constructed, fictive kinship is a practice which sits comfortably with *performativity*. It is family *performed* rather than *owned*. Where one might have a son whose life one has no active involvement in, lack of involvement would render fictive kinship obsolete. Of course, making this distinction between fictive kinship and 'real' kinship on the grounds of one being made and the other not is problematic since all social structures are constructs, including biological family and the ties we feel towards our own 'flesh and blood.' Fictive kinship is therefore best conceptualized as informal familial ties, where formal ties are those which follow traditional social codes.

For those who migrate and leave family behind, are without paperwork, and are limited in mobility, local, improvised forms of kinship are the essential building blocks of survival. As we

saw in chapter 3, state provision of care does not meet the needs felt by UMs, but that does not mean that they have no sense of belonging. UMs have highly adapted coping strategies which have been enacted during their long migratory journeys to Sweden (Alemi, James, and Montgomery 2016; Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014), and this includes the ability to network and build new ties.

5. Methods

This study takes a qualitative approach to understanding how meaning is given in the construction of identity and belonging of UM converts to Christianity. It does this through a short-term ethnographic design, or what Bryman calls a "micro-ethnography" (Bryman 2012, 433), meaning it is carried out over a shorter period than is commonplace for an ethnography. In seeking to understand the processes of identity and belonging of UMs who become Christians in the CofS, I have gathered new data on this group. This section begins with a description of my research strategy, before looking at data collection and the framework I use for parsing and analysing my data. From there I look at my role as the researcher with an insider-outsider status. Finally, I conclude by looking at the limitations and potential problems for this study.

5.1 Research Strategy

My research strategy is rooted in a constructivist approach which assumes that reality, or 'realities' are social constructions which are the product of the interactions which occur between individuals and groups (Giddens and Sutton 2009, 273). These realities can be contested and understood differently depending on ones' position within these social structures. Throughout this study I have sought to unearth the subjective experiences of UMs who come to Sweden and convert to Christianity, and to allow the meanings that they give to their experiences to gain prominence. Levers (2013) argues that, "The goal of subjective research is to develop understanding [and] increase sensitization to ethical and moral issues" (Levers 2013, 3). Such research is not intended to uncover some timeless truth that exists 'out there,' but is meant to shed light on the meaning that people give to the experiences they have, and through this, to increase the degree to which subjects on the margins can be understood and included by our social structures. By following an ethnographic approach, I have sought to cultivate a perspective that is as close as possible to the phenomenon studied, rather than the "gaze from afar," which Wacquant argues leads researchers to "fill [the] gap with stereotypes drawn from common sense, journalistic or academic" (Wacquant 2011, 84). Since, at the time of writing, no research exists on this phenomenon among UMs, I follow this view that to understand the phenomenon one must find opportunities to gain first-hand knowledge of it and not simply rely on opinions of informed second or third parties. Following O'Reilly (2005), this study is iterative and inductive,

incorporates multiple qualitative data collection methods, is based on direct contact over an extended period of time, and I have sought to operate with a high degree of reflexivity regarding my role as the researcher (O'Reilly 2005, 3). Throughout the literature on unaccompanied refugee minors and refugee children, researchers consistently assert the need to hear from the children themselves, rather than just from those who work with them (Hanberger et al. 2016; Herz and Lalander 2017). This study gives voice to a small group of UMs who are constructing post-migration identities in the Church of Sweden.

5.2 Data

The data for this thesis is drawn from a combination of qualitative methods. These include the transcripts of seven semi-structured interviews carried out with six UMB participants who are members of Saint Christopher's and Saint Teresa's churches,[1] as well as field notes and observations taken from my field work at both churches. These notes take a variety of forms, from diary entries to transcripts of conversations with priests, to memos written in the aftermath of interviews.

5.2.1 Sampling

The participants in my interviews were recruited by referral, following a snowball sampling approach (Giddens and Sutton 2009, 132). I decided to sample in this way because I wanted to get as deep an understanding as possible of what was happening in this a specific time and space, and with a very specific group of UMs; those who have converted and become members in the CofS in the specific town where my study is based. I began by contacting the CofS head office, who put me in touch with a priest whose work with this group of people at Saint Christopher's church is well known. This priest became my gatekeeper, introducing me not only to UMs within his church, but also to a deacon at Saint Teresa's who also works with UMs. She, in turn, put me in touch with UMs at Saint Teresa's. After my first set of interviews, I asked interviewees to refer me to anyone else in their community with whom they thought I should speak.

While it was not always possible to ensure prior to the commencement of interviews, I tried to

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[1] Names of churches changed to protect the identity of my participants

limit my group of participants to those who had arrived to Sweden in the last four years as unaccompanied minors, but who are now aged eighteen or over. In this thesis, I refer to this group as UMBs (UM Background young adults). The Interviews varied in length from thirty to ninety minutes.

5.2.2 Participants

The table below introduces the participants in this study, along with key details about their birthplace, time spent living in Iran prior to coming to Sweden, amount of time living in Sweden, and which church they are members of.

Name*	Age	Birthplace	Time in Iran	Time in Sweden	Resident	Church
Khaled	18	Afghanistan	12 years	26 months	No	St. Teresa's
Amir	31	Afghanistan	20 years	3 years (1st time) 27 months (now)	No	St. Teresa's
Hassan	17	Afghanistan	6 weeks	20 months	No	St. Teresa's
Sohrab	22**	Afghanistan	13 years	4 years	No	St. Christopher's
Rahim	20**	Iran	16 years	2 years	No	St. Christopher's
Almas	17	Afghanistan	N/A	30 months	No	St. Christopher's

*Pseudonyms: changed in the interest of confidentiality

** Age according to Swedish official documentation, which participants contested during our interviews

5.2.3 Participant observation

Entering the world of my participants by means of participating in the activities of the church was an opportunity to observe the UM's interactions with pastors, and with each other, and observe group learning processes first hand. However, it was vital that I set my subjects at ease, and doing so meant not just watching, but getting involved with their activities (Giddens and Sutton 2009, 1127; O'Reilly 2005, 87). Having grown up in a church-attending family meant that I had a degree of understanding of the codes and modes of behaviour common to such communities, which meant that I was able to quickly relate to some of the religious practices I observed. Perhaps because of this competence, the pastors granted me a remarkable level of trust, which gave me entry into my research group in a relatively short time. I was able to show myself to be a 'trusted other,' someone who, while coming from outside, was not entirely foreign to the practices of the church, and was not perceived as a threat. At times, being the 'trusted other' meant that I was called upon to contribute to the Bible study discussions in a way that I felt blurred the lines between researcher and participant. This happened one evening at Saint Christopher's Church, during a Bible study in which the head priest was answering questions about the difference between the Catholic and Protestant churches. After finishing his explanation of the matter, he turned to me and asked, "Jonathan, do you have anything you would like to add?" I did not take him up on this offer, but it made me realise that I was becoming something of an insider in the eyes of this priest. The pastors, fully aware of the vulnerable status of this group of parishioners, trusted me to offer my opinion on how to make sense of the church.

Data from this part of my study takes the form of field notes and observations which were recorded in my notebook and later transcribed.

5.2.4 Semi-structured interviews

I carried out interviews with six UMBs over a five-month period, between October 2017 and February 2018.[2] The majority of my interviews came about through contact with Saint Christopher's Church and Saint Teresa's Church and took place on church premises. Other

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[2] The interview guide used in these interviews can be found in the Appendix

interviews took place in cafes chosen by the UMs. The UMBs I interviewed at Saint Christopher's Church were recruited through attendance at a weekly Bible study that is hosted by the church. One priest, with whom I already had contact, introduced me to the group and asked them to introduce themselves with some accompanying facts (where they came from, how long they had been part of the church, and whether they had been baptised or not). After the Bible study, I went around to speak with the young men. I introduced myself in a more informal way, explained the nature of my interest in the Bible group and my research project, and asked if they would like to participate in my study. Interviews at Saint Teresa's Church were organised by a deacon at that church, who informed her Bible study group about me and my study. She explained that anyone who would be willing to speak with me and potentially be interviewed, should visit the church café at a specific time to meet me. This arrangement resulted in me meeting with a number of UM's in a more intimate capacity at which time I was able to more fully explain my project, and their potential role in it as participants. I made sure that the UM's who were willing to participate in my study knew that at any time they could choose to opt out of my study, which would mean that I would not use their information. Additionally, I explained in detail my stance towards confidentiality and anonymity. I later attended the Bible study at this church, where I was able to observe the group.

Although I used an interview guide, I sought to create an environment in which my subjects could speak freely and use their own words to describe their lives, rather than be constrained by pre-prepared questions. I used questions to ensure that certain themes were discussed, but was not bound to my guide.

5.2.5 Transcription, coding, and analysis

I recorded all interviews using the voice recorder app on my mobile telephone and later transcribed them in full. Where interviews were carried out in Swedish, I translated them directly into English. This process was carried out over several weeks and each section was listened to in its entirety before being translated portion by portion in order to ensure that full meanings were captured.

Once transcriptions were finalised, I read through each interview several times in order to re-familiarise myself with the content, before beginning the coding process. I analysed the text

according to principles of Thematic Analysis (Creswell 2007, 244) which allowed me to create overarching themes from the codes found in my data which later became the structure for my findings. For my first cycle of coding, I used a combination of a-priori codes, which were derived from my literature and theoretical framework, and emergent codes which I drew directly from the data (both In Vivo and Process coding) (Saldana 2016). This combination allowed me the flexibility of quickly identifying and categorising my codes, before coming back to them and relating them to overarching themes. Once my first cycle of coding was complete, I narrowed my focus through selective coding which entailed identifying axial codes which encompassed several of my initial codes and allowed me to form a more coherent narrative (Creswell 2007, 67). From here I came up with overarching themes which represented the major findings of my data in relation to processes of identity and belonging among UM converts in the CofS. During this phase I wrote analytic memos in order to connect different intersections in my data (Saldana 2016, 53–54).

5.3 Reflexivity

One of the challenges of conducting an ethnography is mitigating observer bias (Bryman 2012, 39), whereby the presence of the researcher unduly influences the study. An embrace of subjectivity is at the heart of modern qualitative research, particularly in those instances where the researcher becomes the instrument of data collection. A reflexive approach to the biases and potential blind spots of a researcher can lead to a more honest result. This section positions me in relation to this study and discusses the role I played in the research project.

Having grown up in Wales, in a family with a nonconformist church background, and as someone who decided to take his faith seriously from the age of 16, there are aspects of my identity which positioned me as both outsider and insider to my fieldwork. I was an outsider to the extent that I am from outside of Sweden, from a church background that was never aligned with a state, and to the extent that I approached my work with a degree of distance. I was an insider in that I am culturally Christian, share a catholic view of the church (that there is one church, with many subgroupings, of which the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church is one), and by the fact that I am a person who is open to taking a positive view of the influence of religion on society and individuals. I am personally motivated by the desire to see a deepening of

the understanding of the role that individual spiritual journeys, and communities of faith, can play in processes of identity formation and belonging, and the contribution that they may make to processes of integration.

In conducting a micro-ethnography, I was not simply observing my research environment, but participating in it. This approach allowed me a proximity to the UMs which, in turn, facilitated a deeper understanding of their experiences of attributing meaning to identity processes and forming ties of belonging within the church environment. However, there were limitations to the extent to which my experience could represent the full experience, as well as factors which undoubtedly influenced the outcome of my study. In this section I discuss these factors, looking at power relations, gatekeepers, and my insider-outsider status.

With limited time to carry out my fieldwork, I chose the most direct route into this group: making contact with the pastors who worked with them. After contacting the head office of the CofS, I was put in touch with a priest at Saint Christopher's Church, who invited me to the church for a meeting. I took extensive notes as I questioned him about the work the church does with UMs and, at the end of our meeting, he invited me to attend the UM Bible study. He also put me in touch with pastors at Saint Teresa's Church, who proved equally willing to invite me to attend their activities and to interview their parishioners. While this gave me swift access to my field, and established my insider status, there were certain drawbacks to entering into church life through official channels. Being introduced to my participants through their pastors, with little clarification as to what our relationship was prior to this introduction, left room for the UM's to view me as somehow part of the official church structure. Interviews at Saint Teresa's Church were also set up via the pastors at that church. In that case, one of the deacons offered to announce to the members of the Bible study group that I would be carrying out interviews on Thursday afternoons. She invited anyone who would like to participate to come at 15:00 on Thursdays. I began carrying out interviews prior to attending the Bible study, which meant that the participants from this church asked more questions about my study and what I would do with my findings than those at Saint Christopher's. This gave me more freedom to frame my role and my outcomes in a way that distanced me from the institution of the CofS.

As a 35-year-old, European male, I entered into the church environment as an outsider, an

outsider with power. Having already developed a relationship with the priest, I was introduced to the group by him, and he encouraged those in the group to introduce themselves to me. I was a special guest, someone who the priest made special efforts to welcome and make feel at home. He mentioned my education, that I was a researcher working on my Master's degree, and that I was writing about those who convert to Christianity in Sweden. All of these factors stood to influence how I was, or may have been, perceived by those in the group, including whether I was perceived as someone with access to power or authority, or even resources. I had an existing relationship with the priest, did that make me seem like a representative of the church? I have a higher level of education than many who were present, did that incline them towards being deferential? I was older than they were, and they came from a place where age infers respect. During my time at the church, I sought to build trust with the members of this group through making direct connections. Instead of allowing the priest to mediate my connections, I struck up one-on-one conversations at every opportunity, between mass and Bible study, during coffee times, during pauses. I exchanged phone numbers with them and made contact via the WhatsApp messenger application outside of group times. All of this was focussed on building trust and, as much as possible, making myself accessible to these UMBs.

One activity which I felt constantly conflicted over was the celebration of communion during the mass, the time in which my participants received bread and wine, representing the body and blood of Jesus. It was in this moment that I felt I had to make a decision that would impact how I would be perceived by the group. On the one hand, I was an outside observer, seeking to gain an objective understanding of the lives of UM converts. On the other, receiving the bread and wine is part of my own spiritual practice. To have abstained could have suggested that I disagreed or was cynical of the activities they were participating in. To participate could have suggested that I was so close to the practices of the church that I in some way represented it as an institution. In the interest of honesty and actively engaging in the group I wished to study, I chose to take full part. As someone from outside of the Lutheran church tradition, this also gave me the opportunity to experience participating as an outsider. Would the priests question whether I had, indeed, been confirmed in the CofS? Although it is certainly open to debate, I feel that participating in communion increased my ability to become 'part of the furniture' in the church environment, to enter what O'Reilly refers to as a "semi-overt role, where participants know what we are doing but do not always have it at the forefront of their minds" (O'Reilly 2005, 87).

This careful balancing act of perceptions which anyone undertaking ethnographic fieldwork must address is summed up well by O'Reilly (2005, 90): "Knowing too much can foreclose in-depth conversations; knowing too little can appear rude or uninterested." I wanted to demonstrate to my participants that they did not need to explain every aspect of the Christian life and language to me, that I was a safe, fellow believer, but that I was not so close to their experiences that they would assume I understood things that I did not.

My initial contact with the participants came through attending masses and Bible studies organized by the pastors. Since I knew that I would eventually interview them, I needed to think through how I positioned myself early on so as not to unduly affect the results of the interviews. While trust and familiarity help establish the rapport needed during interviews, it was important to me that my subjects felt free to answer my questions in ways that reflected their real attitudes and experiences and not the attitudes and experiences they felt the church would want them to convey. Because of this, I refrained from expressing my own views, positive or negative, about their life decisions. For me, this meant not making personal comments during group times and disclosing as little as possible about my own beliefs prior to the interviews. However, being perceived as too close to the church was not my only concern. I was also aware that showing myself to be cynical to their life choices could result in them feeling stigmatised and defensive.

5.4 Limitations and potential problems

There were several factors which constrained my data collection. The first of these was language. Since most of my UMB subjects had Dari or Farsi as their mother tongues, it would have increased the depth of my interviewing, as well as the pool of interviewees, had I spoken one of these languages. Instead, I was forced to conduct these interviews in Swedish and English. At times, perhaps because of second-language communication, or unfamiliarity and discomfort with the interview setting, it was difficult to get substantive answers from my subjects. When this proved to be a problem, I returned to questions repeatedly, hoping that they would elaborate on their answers.

Another limiting factor was time; a longer-term ethnography would have yielded more insightful and varied data than I was able to collect in four months of interviews. Because of this time constraint, I arranged interviews directly through priests. This perhaps framed our relationship in

a way that was more hierarchical than if I had formed a friendship with them in a more casual setting and transitioned to the role of researcher more slowly. The limitation of time and introductions via priests certainly impacted the degree of rapport that I was able to develop with my subjects.

While it would have been of great interest to include some female UMB converts in this study, I only encountered males during my time at these churches. This was perhaps reflective of the overrepresentation of males among the UM population in Sweden, with girls representing only 10% of the total.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Due to the vulnerable status of unaccompanied refugee minors, there were already several ethical challenges that I sought to address before embarking on my study. UMs are youth in the eyes of the Swedish legal system and this comes with a host of ethical considerations when interacting with this demographic of people. In order to address the issue of the vulnerable status of UMs, I initially sought to interview those who, while they came to Sweden as minors, have since turned 18 years of age. For this group, age can be a controversial subject in itself, due to its associations with age tests and the way in which the Swedish authorities decide upon an individual's age (two of my informants were told that they were two years older than they themselves had claimed). A person's vulnerability does not evaporate the moment they turn eighteen, so I took a "verbal iterative" (Herz and Lalander 2018) approach to consent, asking regularly if they wished to continue, and being quick to suggest we changed subject when there were signs that they did not wish to continue along a particular line of questioning.

Additionally, UMs are considered vulnerable because they are alone, without any social or emotional support and in a new, if not unknown, land without their families. Added to this, my informants have to face the stigma associated with converting away from Islam, of having committed apostasy. While it is not the norm in Sweden, there have been some reports of violence, or threats of violence against those who choose to convert to Christianity from Islam in Europe (Mellergårdh 2018; Sherwood and Oltermann 2016; Doward 2007). Even if the risk to

my informants was minimal, I chose to protect their identities as much as possible in order to protect them and the very personal identity processes they have embarked upon.   In order to protect the identities of my participants, I obfuscated person and place names. I changed the names of participants, both pastors and UMs, and chose to represent the churches to which they belong as Saint Christopher's Church and Saint Teresa's Church. I also chose not to name the town in which my study takes place, or any surrounding places mentioned during my interviews.

6. Findings

6.1 Participant Profiles

Khaled is eighteen years old and a passionate learner. He was born in Afghanistan but moved to Iran when he was four. He left Iran because of "problems" that he did not want to talk about during our interview. He has been in Sweden for two years and two months. At the time of our interview, Khaled had been part of Saint Teresa's Church for one year and one month. Moving to Sweden was difficult for him; he had lost his family and was also confronted by existential concerns as he wrestled with the nature of truth. In Sweden everything was different to how he had expected, even the history books told a different story to those in Iran. Eventually he threw himself into life here and embraced the fact he was allowed to ask the questions about religion that he had always wanted to ask, but had been unable to because of his parents' fears of the Imams in Iran. This started a process of reading about different religions, and eventually to having conversations with a friend who had converted to Christianity. In time he began attending Saint Teresa's Church and was surprised by the loving attitudes of those he spoke to, and the message that "we are all humans" that was taught there. After several months attending but with some cynicism, Khaled decided that he wanted to become a Christian. In our interview it becomes obvious that he is passionate about truth. He tells me how he knows that he wants to study but that he has not yet decided which subject he is sufficiently passionate about; "I want to study […] with my heart," he tells me, "not just with my brain." Khaled describes his relationship with his family with some ambivalence. "[They] are the most important to me," he says, while at the same time telling me that they are not a good family.

Amir is the oldest of the participants. He is confident and eager to answer my questions. He was in his early twenties when he arrived in Sweden for the first time. The migration office placed him in a "tiny village" in Northern Sweden where "there was nothing to do." He made contact with the church there and began attending their events, reading the Bible, and asking lots of questions. This went on for a year before he decided to convert. Of his conversion he said, "you are born anew and you feel better. You can forgive people, be nice to other people." Now 31, this is his second time seeking asylum in Sweden. His first asylum application was denied and he was deported to Afghanistan, a country he left when he was three years old when his family

moved to Iran. While there, he hid his conversion from those around him. His housemates eventually found out and he was chased out of town. Amir is a member of Saint Teresa's Church. At the time of our interview, he had been back in Sweden for two years and three months. I chose to include Amir in this study in spite of his age because he is an active member of the UM Bible study group in Saint Teresa's Church and is thus a member of the UM peer group.

Hassan was born in Afghanistan and moved with his family to Iran shortly before he moved to Sweden. The family fled Iran because of insecurity in their home village, and assumed that the common language and culture would make the process of relocation smooth. However, they were met with a level of xenophobia they were not expecting, "maybe seventy percent don't like Afghans," he told me. After just six weeks in Iran, Hassan decided to leave his family and travel to Europe, a journey which he found difficult to talk about. His main motivation for leaving Iran was the continued threat of deportation back to Afghanistan and the persecution he and his family experienced there. He first began attending Saint Teresa's Church after being invited by a member of staff at the home where he was living. At the church he was struck by how much they spoke about love and was deeply impacted by the church's outreach work to homeless people. Hassan described Christianity as "a light in the darkness" which gave him hope at a time when he had given up. At the start of our interview, Hassan is reserved and cautious, he seems to weigh his words carefully. As we progress, he relaxes and his answers become more fluid.

Sohrab, who calls himself "the voice of one thousand refugees," is an outgoing young man. During our interview he was animated and excited, keen to act as an advocate for his peers whose voices are not heard. He is an active member of Saint Christopher's Church, taking part in their musical and drama activities. On one occasion I found him, dressed as a jester, surrounded by the church's drama team who were rehearsing for a play about Martin Luther. Sohrab became a Christian in Iran after being invited to an underground church by a neighbour. He was baptised there. He travelled to Sweden because of the dangers associated with converting to Christianity in Iran. Since arriving, he has made it his goal to encourage other UMB Christians; he wears a cross and has a tattoo on his arm of a fish and a cross intersecting, which he uses as a conversation starter with those who want to talk about Christianity. He is an actor, and uses street theatre to raise awareness of the plight of UMs in Sweden.

Rahim's quiet disposition belies an inner strength that becomes obvious as our interview progresses. He was born in Iran to Afghan parents and was 16 when he left Iran for Sweden. His journey took six months, including six weeks he spent in a Turkish prison. He encountered Christians throughout his journey. First, on the boat to Greece, where he met a man who was fleeing because of his faith and who the other passengers shunned. While in Greece, he was taken in by a priest who found him and his friend lost and tired. When he was resettled in the town where this study was carried out, he began attending Saint Christopher's Church. Rahim began smoking hashish in Iran and became addicted to other drugs when he arrived in Sweden. During our interview he described how he feels that Jesus has helped him to give up drugs, "I think that Jesus is helping me and he's like magic in my life [...] he saved my life and if he didn't come into my life I think I would get addicted and continue my life like that." In the future, Rahim hopes to become a nurse. At the time of our interview, he was living in hiding from the authorities.

Almas grew up in Afghanistan and began his journey to Europe from there. He is 17 years old and the youngest of my participants. Although he seems confident, he is the most difficult to get talking, preferring to give concise answers, rather than going into detail. As a result, I find myself rephrasing my questions and breaking them down into sub questions. Almas has been in Sweden for two and a half years. He sought out Saint Christopher's Church after becoming curious about Christianity and researching about it online. He told me that his decision to convert came about because of the message of love he heard taught in the church. In the future, he hopes to become a police officer and is working diligently to achieve a level of Swedish that would allow him to study. Almas told me about his wide social network, which includes a group of Swedish young people he plays hockey with. During our interview he was upbeat and seemed to have a positive outlook on life.

Of my six respondents, five grew up in Iran, either having been born there, or having moved there at such an early age that, before coming to Sweden, they had no memory of life in Afghanistan. Hassan grew up in Afghanistan and lived briefly in Iran before setting out on his journey to Europe. All participants self-identified as coming from the Hazara tribe.

6.2 Codes

Themes	Axial codes	Codes
Life in Iran: the experience of religious coercion	• Group pressure • Coercion • Empty performance • Fear	• Born into Islam • No information • Brainwashed • Forced to pray • Discouraged from seeking answers • A God who waits with a rod • Forced to choose it • Didn't have connection with God
Becoming Christian in Sweden: choosing for themselves	• Religious freedom • Choice • Exploration • Process	• Nobody pressured me to go to church • Exciting to talk about religion • If everyone did this • Not like other Iranians
Finding a surrogate family	• Rejection by family • Church as surrogate family • Priests offer advice	• They were so angry/refused to talk with me • A huge family here in Sweden • Real friends • Do not care about religious ID • Help one another
Practices of the Christian life	• Prayer as coping strategy • Strength in helping others	• I pray when I'm sad • Speak with others about God • It felt really good for me to help other people

6.3 Life in Iran and Afghanistan: the experience of religious coercion

My participants spoke at length about their lives in Iran and Afghanistan, contrasting life there with life in Sweden. In this section I look at my participants experiences in these places. One of the threads common to each interviewee's account was an experience as Muslims in Iran and Afghanistan in which they felt powerless and essentially living under religious duress, forced to perform rituals regardless of whether they believed in them or not. Afghans are a minority in Iran, a group who may share the same language, culture and religion, but who are treated as outsiders.

"I was born into a family of proud Muslims," recounted Khaled, "so I think they did nothing wrong, they were born in a country where the government and others who have power force them into following their ways." Being Muslim was not their choice, but rather something they were born into. With this identity came a set of responsibilities that were closely monitored by the wider community.

"When I was in Iran, they tried to brainwash us," said Rahim, "they said that a person who converts to Christianity has to die." His experience of Iran was of a country in which information about religious matters was closely guarded. In spite of the fact that Jesus, or Isa Al-Maseeh, appears in the Quran, Rahim reported that information about him was difficult to come by: "Muslim society and the mosque, they don't allow us to get some information about Jesus or to know about him." Everything about religion is carefully regulated by the imams and the wider community.

One of the rituals they were expected to perform was prayer, with some participants describing how friends or family members woke them up to pray the early morning *fajr* prayers, regardless of whether this was what they wanted. They were expected to participate in these rituals between three and five times each day. According to my participants, this happened in both Iran and Afghanistan. Amir, who grew up in Iran but was deported to Afghanistan after a failed asylum process in Sweden, was a Christian at the time he was deported. He described how, when travelling from one city to another, busses would pull over to the side of the road at prayer times in order that all the passengers could pray. For him this was particularly problematic since he

was conflicted over the fact that by outwardly portraying himself as Muslim, he was hiding his real religious beliefs. He told me, "I felt scared all the time wondering when they would understand that I didn't do their prayers." Eventually they did find out and he was forced to flee.

Khaled described the fear his parents had of the local imams in Iran; his mother and father actively discouraged him from seeking out answers to the many questions he had because they were afraid of the social consequences:

> So my Dad is really old and he can't speak with them [the imams]. They have all the power in Iran. So we couldn't speak openly because we were afraid. I had many questions that I wanted to ask, but my Dad said "no! you can't do that. It's against their beliefs. You can't do that or something bad will happen." So I couldn't speak so much about that.

When Khaled arrived in Sweden he decided to learn more about Shia Islam and was surprised by what he discovered:

> I googled 'Shia Muslim' on the internet and it was so horrible. I knew about Imam Hussein and what they do at Ashura, etc. But when I was in Iran I was just a little boy. So when I read all about Shia Muslims, about how they cut themselves with knives, it's totally wrong. That day that I started looking, I said "no," I felt uncertain about whether I had things right or wrong. So I started reading again.

For the first time he began to explore the religion of his birth as an outsider, and he learned things that he had not previously been aware of, which he could not relate to and felt distressed by. Similarly, Hassan was not satisfied with the legalism that he encountered in Iran: "I've met many Imams from Islam and they only speak about religion and they say, 'if you don't do this, if you don't fast, you're going to hell. God will punish you.' And I received a picture of God, a God who waits with a rod and will punish people." Rather than inspiring him in his faith, the religious leaders' obsession with rules and regulations left him wanting something more.

Of all the participants, Almas was the most involved in the life of the mosque in his homeland. He describes a relationship with religion that is born of obligation rather than desire: "I was

forced to choose it. It wasn't something I chose. I thought there was just one religion, Islam." He participated in recital classes at his local mosque, which he described as follows: "I went there and I read the Quran. It was a course. I went to the mosque and I learned the Quran. It was three years [...] I can read, but I can't understand, because I didn't speak it. I just read the text." In spite of devoting a great deal of time to the memorising the Quran, he was never taught or encouraged to understand it for himself. For most of my interviewees, there was a disconnect between outward performance and inner belief, which Sohrab summarises: "sometimes when I read the Quran, or I was in [the mosque] praying, I didn't understand and I didn't have connection with God – the feeling I mean – and I feel like I'm just acting." He went through the socially ascribed patterns of behaviour of a Muslim in his context but felt like he was just going along with the expectations of others.

6.4 Becoming Christian in Sweden: choosing for themselves

In contrast to the pressure experienced in their homelands, when talking about becoming Christians, my informants describe a process over which they have complete control. They sought out contact with the church by their own initiative. They stress the 'hands off' approach that the church and other Christians have taken with them. For example, Hassan comments, "Nobody pressured me to go to church, it was a free decision, if you want to come, come, if you don't want to, no problem. I really liked that." In their eyes, they are free agents making decisions over their own lives, which they were not able to do before.

First exposure to life in the CofS is described by my participants as something filled with great excitement. This excitement comes predominantly from the fact that they are free to discuss anything; no question is taboo. This environment of open-mindedness and acceptance, even being encouraged to ask questions, is unlike any other they have encountered. For those whose journeys towards Christianity were sparked by curiosity, which they had been unable to explore in their homelands, a space that is open to discussion is deeply appreciated. Almas comments about his first contact with Saint Teresa's Church:

> It was a year ago. I was curious about it and started looking on the internet and spoke with people, and then I found Saint Teresa's. I went there and met people who go there. It

was very exciting to talk about religion […] After that, I thought that I would like to choose that and learn much more about it.

Stepping into an environment where there is freedom to negotiate one's own spiritual journey was a tantalising prospect that drew him in. In this setting, unlike the imams my participants spoke of, the priests are not guarding or dictating a set of truths that the participants are obliged to follow. On the contrary, priests I spoke to were adamant that their parishioners pursue their own interpretations of truth. Hassan confirmed this when he contrasted imams he had met with the priests at Saint Teresa's. Whereas the imams painted a picture of a god of punishment, "the priests never spoke about punishment." They did not use religion as a means to control him, and while they welcomed him, they did not make him feel like he was obliged to attend. Creating space like this, for exploration without pressure, meant that some of the participants who had once been against Christianity gave it a second look. Khaled was one of these:

> I had read about Christianity previously, but it wasn't serious. I learned that they have three different gods, and I thought "that's totally wrong! I can't be Christian if they have three gods." I read about Christianity again what is the trinity, what is the cross, how do they think? I had a friend who became a Christian [...] from Afghanistan. He showed me things. I asked him, "what is this trinity, with the Father, Son, Holy Spirit?" And he said, "there's only one God but he shows himself to us in three different ways." Before that, my belief was that if someone hit me then I should hit him back. But in Christianity, if someone hits me, I should say "you're welcome to hit me again." [...] I began to think about what life would be like if everyone did this.

His conversion to Christianity was a slow process that developed gradually over time through reading, meeting Christians, and asking lots of questions. In contrast to this, others arrived in Sweden with a good impression of Christianity. The church provided these participants with a space to pursue their curiosity more deeply. The first Christian Amir met was his boss in Iran:

> I had a good picture of Christianity from Iran. My boss who I used to work for was a Christian, he was Armenian, but had an Iranian passport […] He was really nice with us,

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not like the other Iranians were with us. I thought that maybe this has to do with his religion. It was a good picture of Christianity.

While his boss never spoke to him about his faith, his actions and attitude towards his Afghan workers made an impression on Amir. Knowing little else about Christianity, Amir attributed this man's behaviour to his religion. Another participant who encountered Christians before coming to Sweden was Rahim. During his journey from Iran he met Christians who spoke openly about their faith and who offered him help. The first of these was on the boat from Turkey to Greece, where he met a man who was fleeing for his life after converting:

> when I was in Greece and we were passing from Turkey to Greece in the sea, there was one person with us in the boat who was from Iran and who had converted to Christianity. And a lot of people in the boat didn't like him because he was a Christian. But I found myself so close to him and he told me a lot of stories and I listened to him and his stories.

While in Greece, he also met a priest who took him in:

> one night we were so tired and when we were headed to the camp I was so tired that I fell asleep and suddenly a priest came and brought us to his house. Then I moved to his house and he talked with us and I had some rest there. So then I was with him for a couple of days and I decided to come to Sweden.

These encounters made such a strong impression on Rahim that he decided to explore Christianity once he arrived in Sweden. Despite an attempt by his guardian to subvert him, telling him "because you are underage you cannot convert to Christianity," he found a Bible and began to read it, and then a friend who had converted took him to church.

For the UMBs I interviewed, arriving in Sweden did not only mark the end of their journey from state oppression, but the beginning of life in a context where religious identity is no longer presupposed, and in which state approval of the norms they have grown up with does not exist. As my participants pointed out, the authorities here do not care whether they are Christian, Muslim or atheist. While they start out thinking of themselves as Muslim, we find them adapting

to this more religiously liberal environment by exploring the possibilities that are open to them. Khaled described his journey, which was echoed by others I spoke to:

> I read many stories on the internet, different books, like Charles Darwin who said that people were first apes. I read so much about that, atheism, Buddhism, different religions

It is not only Christianity which they explore, but a whole range of different options available. They begin by shopping around, but eventually come back to a religion which offers them community as well as some continuity with their religious background. For example, Sohrab explains:

> the relationship that I had with God when I was Muslim was like the king and the thief, like if you're not following the rules, you get punished by the king. But right now the relationship that I have with Jesus is like a father and son. If I do any kind of mistake he say, "don't worry, my son, I'm here with you."

Rather than replacing one god with another, Sohrab's experience of Christianity is of reframing the way he looks at his relationship to the same deity.

6.5 Finding a surrogate family

All of my participants have left behind family members in Iran and have travelled alone, with the help of smugglers, to Sweden. This section looks at the ties which emerge to meet the needs of my participants here in Sweden.

Because of their decisions to become Christians, the participants face an added layer of complexity in their relationships with their transnational kin that other UMs do not face: of making a life decision that many in their homelands would view as apostasy. Those I spoke to had mixed experiences of talking about becoming Christians with their families. As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Amir's family rejected him and he no longer has contact with his parents. Khaled's family responded in much the same way: "when I told them, that I became

Christian they were so angry with me […] My Dad never speaks to me." In their view he has aligned himself with bad people and no longer belongs in their family. While they have not yet told their parents about their conversions, Almas and Rahim fear that they would react badly to this news. Almas told me, "No, I can't. It's hard and will take a long time." Instead of risking the anger of their families, they choose to keep this part of their lives hidden. However, not all of my participants experienced rejection when they admitted their conversion to their parents. Sohrab's family were supportive, telling him, "you can decide for yourself." Similarly, Hassan's parents told him, "do what you want." These family members were able to put their relationships with their sons ahead of any theological disagreement.

My data shows that in spite of the rejection faced by some, and the separation that all experience from their family members, these young men are making local connections which they describe as taking the place of family. On this point, Sohrab comments, "They are like my family because they help me in lots of kinds of situations. Like even we are far away from our families, but we have a huge family here in Sweden." He has not stopped caring for his family in Iran, but has found a new family from whom he derives practical and emotional support. This support goes two ways: "the important thing is that I always give hope to my friends, even like even I am down with my feelings, I try to give a positive energy to my friends." He not only receives help and encouragement from his network, but he finds belonging through giving support to others. Hassan's experience is similar: "I've left them, all my friends, but I've got more now. I've got more love. I've met many. I've got new friends here who are real friends, and they don't mind if I'm Christian or Muslim, or Jewish. They think, 'okay, he's a person, we are the same.'" These new connections do not exist simply on the basis of him belonging to a particular religious group, or being family members, but are more open. Almas mentions his relationship with the priests at Saint Teresa's: "they are kind and help each other […] and the priests are really good and nice and they help us." In my time spent at both churches, I observed many interactions between pastors and UMBs. It was clear that there was a great deal of trust and respect on both sides towards the other. For example, at the beginning and end of Bible studies, the young men could be seen talking one-on-one with the priests, asking them for advice or guidance on a variety of matters.

6.6 Practices of the Christian life

During our interviews, participants spoke of their faith not simply as a theoretical decision, but as a collection of practices which they have integrated into their lives. Prayer was one of the activities that was referenced the most, as those I interviewed told of finding peace and strength from the act of prayer. One of these was Amir, who converted prior to being deported and spent some time living as a secret Christian in Afghanistan. He told me:

> When someone has faith in a relationship with God, then you are very weak, but when you read more Bible or spend more time with God and speak with other people about God then you are strengthened in your faith […] now I have a relationship with God. And that is so important to me. A relationship directly with God. I pray when I'm sad or I feel alone. He's my best friend. I feel good and happy that I'm not alone. There's someone who loves me, someone who is with me all the time.

For Amir, prayer is part of an active relationship that is central to his conversion. He also describes finding strength in reading scripture and speaking to other Christians. His faith is something that is shared with others in his church community, who provide mutual support.

Almas believes that the practice of prayer is directly related to his having fewer problems in his life. "When I pray to God," he says, "I feel very comfortable and safe and secure. Before, I had a lot of problems, it didn't go well with life. Now everything has changed." Not only does the practice improve his personal comfort, but he sees a correlation between improvements in his life and the practice of prayer. In fact, when asked about where they derive emotional support from, my respondents were more likely to reference prayer than conversations with friends. Rahim told me: "sometimes I tell a little of my problems to my friends, but if I want to talk from deep parts of my heart I just talk with my God" Instead of seeking out contact with other people, he uses prayer as a vehicle for processing life's challenges.

Prayer is also something that Sohrab and his girlfriend participate in when they come to Saint Christopher's. He tells me, "we together come to church and we praying and it really works and

makes us calm and makes us closer to God." But for Sohrab, his faith is something that drives him to help others:

> my friends are shy to say that "I converted to Christianity," so I have tattoo on my hands and like any time that I go and I see different new peoples, I just put my hands and show the cross and they feel more comfortable that they're not the only one who converted. And they don't have to be shy […] when they see my tattoo, they come and they start talking with me and we talk about God's word and like what we have to do in our life in the future.

He finds ways to give courage to other UMs who have converted but have not 'gone public' with their decision. By taking the first step, he hopes to inspire them with confidence and to let them know that they are not alone.

As well as prayer, Hassan had another experience of the performing of Christianity, which made a great impression on him. He was invited to take part in an initiative to help the homeless:

> At the church they told me, "we want to help people, those who are homeless, we want to give them clothes and food. Would you like to come with us? […] And we went there and we helped those who didn't have clothes and we made food for [them] and they thanked us. It felt really good for me to help other people."

This story was offered when he was telling me about how he decided to become a Christian, and the kind of love that he saw expressed in the church community. For him, this was a practical demonstration of that love expressed towards those on the margins of society, a practice that the whole community was invited to participate in together.

7 Analysis

In this section I discuss my findings with reference to existing literature and theory in order to shed light on the constructions of identity and belonging of UMs in the CofS. I develop this in sub-sections related to the effect of the UMs' increased religious freedom, their newly formed kinship ties, and how they perform religion.

7.1 The journey towards agency

In chapter 6, we saw how the participants in this study have been on a journey from a context with a great deal of social control over religious matters into a pluralistic environment in which they are able to make decisions for themselves as to their religious identification. In Iran and Afghanistan, religious practices were carefully regulated and controlled by a religious hierarchy and through mechanisms of social pressure. Sweden, by contrast, is a place of considerable religious freedom.

According to Butler, the citational process at the heart of performativity "produces the effects that it names" (Butler 2011, xxii). Through this lens, in Iran the participants were both constructing their identities around the norms expected of a Muslim man in their culture and (re)creating the structure through this performance. By consistent citation of Shia-normative behaviour, the very structure which constrained them was being reproduced (ibid.) and increasingly gaining the appearance of something concrete (Salih 2007, 58). The young men I interviewed had been 'Muslimed,' saturated in Shia Islamic norms since before they were born. To use Butler's terms, the pronouncement of a child as Muslim is not simply to use the language of description, it is in fact an act which creates reality (Butler 2011, xvii). Calling a child 'Muslim' introduces a system of identity to the life of that child which determines their position in society, their relationships with others, or as Butler describes it, "that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect" (ibid.). This naming that takes place early in the child's life evokes a chain of acts which reinforce the idea that this is the individual's natural state. Through outward conformity to practices such as prayer rituals, Quranic memorisation, and mosque attendance, the participants performed according to the behaviour regarded as 'natural' by those around

them. But while the community perceives these activities as 'natural,' according to my participants, their involvement in these practices were motivated by social pressure which included being woken up to pray and being asked by family members not to ask questions to the religious leaders. Because of the careful control of information, my participants were not exposed to alternative ways of viewing the world. Roy argues that, in Europe, Islam experiences a "crisis of the social authority of religion, the delinking of religious and cultural patterns" (Roy 2004, 27). Back in Iran and Afghanistan, religion is part of the social fabric, woven into how one relates to family, neighbour, and society at large. Because of this "[…]linking of religious and cultural patterns," a young person questioning the norms of religion poses a threat not just to the religious establishment, but to the whole structure of society. While some of my participants expressed the desire to ask questions even when they were in Iran, they lacked the agency to pursue such desires.

Travelling to Sweden was not simply a geographical journey towards a new destination, but a journey into greater agency. My participants left the environment of religious control and have found themselves in a space in which the outward pressure to cite their home country identity norms is greatly reduced. They are, to a greater degree, free to follow their curiosity. In their reconstruction of their identities, they are free to subvert the norms of their home country. Just because they were born Muslim, and most of the UMs around them are Muslim, does not mean that they reconstruct their identities as Muslims. However, it is interesting that while several of my informants explored atheism, perhaps a more culturally appropriate identity in secular-normative Sweden, in the end they chose a religion that is monotheistic and Abrahamic. Of course, on this point my sampling plays a significant role in my results, since there may well be a large number of UMs who have gone on similar religious quests and decided to become atheists.

Herz (2018) describes the careful balance of continuity and discontinuity that is at play in the identity processes of UMs in Sweden. He finds that while his participants are extremely open to new perspectives, they also reference aspects of their home culture in their forming of new ideas about themselves. This can be seen in the behaviour of the participants in this study. For example, involvement in the church community, their conversion processes, and their new way of looking at individual value, freedom, and choice reflect a discontinuity with their past. In the past, they were taught that only Shia Islam is right, and that any other perspective is

unacceptable. They cited these norms consistently while in Iran and Afghanistan. On the other hand, their high level of devotion to their religious practices, and the importance of the group to these practices, seems to represent some continuity with the past. They are passionate and devoted members of the CofS who seek to make religion the most important part of their lives. According to pastors I spoke to, this is not the norm among CofS members today. As described in chapter 4, Butler is sceptical of the idea that our identities are the product of some internal force, instead tending to argue that we are what we do, and we do what we have been taught to do (Seidman 2013, 219). The participants in this study combine aspects of religion in their home and host societies in a way that produces a practice of Christianity which is not commonly seen within the CofS. In Iran, they have learned about the centrality of ritual, and group participation, to the practice of faith. In Sweden, they adapt to new styles of prayer and a new understanding of God, while contextualising them within their individual and group processes in a way that links them with cultural patterns of their homeland (Roy 2004, 27). While Roy argues that Muslims who come to Europe embrace a more individualised form of religion that is less about group identification (ibid., 9), by embedding the teachings of the CofS into a highly committed group identity these young people appear to be doing the reverse. In a sense, they are subverting the religious norms of both their homeland and their host society.

Although the religious norms they adopt may not fully reflect the usual expression of CofS Christianity, becoming Christian and gaining exposure to a long established Swedish institution helps them to adapt to the society around them. While, in becoming Christians, they are choosing one identity over others, and are renouncing the faith of their youth, in doing so they also take on attitudes and dispositions which align them more closely with their host society. This process echoes that of Leman's (1999) function of religion as an "engine of adaptation," since their religious practices as converts to Christianity enable them to learn more about the surrounding culture through contact with church members from a Swedish background, and through exposure to one of Sweden's oldest institutions. We have seen, for example, the participants taking on attitudes about equality and individual freedom which, according to them, are uncommon in Iran or Afghanistan.

7.2 Belonging and fictive kinship

As discussed in chapter 4, the concept of fictive kinship relates to family-type connections based on ties other than blood (Akcapar 2006; Lawler 2014). The participants in this study exhibit kinship ties that are based on friendship, shared experiences, and religious performance. They meet with regularity, sometimes daily, to discuss matters of religion and the Christian life, to pray, and to socialise. They help each other in the same way that family members might be expected to in Iran or Afghanistan. Their kinship is built on both helping each other and the common purpose of constructing identities as UMB Christians. Fictive kinship is done rather than owned, it is the product of choice, rather than of blood, and the ways in which my participants describe their kinship within the church is one of activity. They do not simply call each other friends, they do friendship through acts of help and activity.

Herz and Lalander (2018) found that the relationships between UMs and their social workers were distant and impersonal, while De Graeve and Bex (2017) found their UM participants to be disappointed that legal guardians and other caregivers did not care more for their holistic wellbeing. Because of this, UMs seek out caring supportive adult relationships elsewhere which can fill the void left by their parents and state appointed caregivers (Oppedal, Guribye, and Kroger 2016; Pastoor 2015). The participants in this study have found supportive relationships with adults through contact with the church community. Whereas social workers or legal guardians focus on fulfilling the responsibilities set out in their job descriptions, dictated by their line-managers (Herz and Lalander 2018), pastors exercise a greater degree of freedom in caring for the holistic wellbeing of those in their congregation. This includes their spiritual wellbeing but can also include other aspects such as their asylum applications or listening to their concerns about family members. In this way, my participants become integrated into the life of the church not merely as attendees, but as fictive kin.

While the open attitude of the church has certainly contributed to the process, as mentioned in the previous sub-section, it is remarkable how UMs themselves are shaping the religious practices of their group and the wider church. In seeking out the support of pastors in the church, UMs are accessing a service which is available to everyone in Sweden, but endowing it with meaning which others might not. While, for others, the advice of a pastor may be something they

seek out in very specific circumstances, such as when a family member dies, or when they wish to get married, the UMs I spoke to seek the advice of priests on a range of subjects in their lives. In doing this they make them fictive kin, even surrogate parents, who are part of their locally improvised family. Reavell and Fazil (2016) observed that identifying as Christian and having a sense of belonging was indicative of better mental health. While it is outside of the scope of this study to offer a medical assessment of their mental wellbeing, my participants reported drawing great moral support from their belonging to this group.

7.3 Performing religion

The participants perform their religion through participation in events and activities hosted by the wider church community, through times spent with other UMB converts, and through personal acts of devotion. They attend masses and services which are part of the church calendar, and join in with outreach activities, like the homeless project that Hassan participated in. As a group, they meet weekly to read scripture, discuss their circumstances, and to learn from the pastors about practicing the Christian life. As well as privately reading the Bible, my participants also described finding strength in prayer.

Vökl-Kernstock et al. (2014) found that prayer was one of the most highly utilised coping strategies of UMs from North Africa. In difficult moments in their lives, my participants also used prayer as a coping strategy. Rather than speaking to friends, even those in their Christian community, some chose to turn first to prayer when facing stressful circumstances. While participants stressed that their journey into Christianity was a continuation, rather than a rupture in their spiritual paths, the kind of prayer that they describe utilising after conversion differs markedly from the formally structured prayers that they participated in in their homeland. This is illustrated by Sohrab, who described that when practicing Islamic prayers, he "didn't have connection with God," whereas today he claims that his practice of prayer brings him "closer to God." It is interesting when looking at prayer that Christian prayer is experienced as having an internal affect which is described as connecting a person with God. It is outside of the scope of this thesis to offer explanations for why the two forms of prayer are experienced so differently, but it is clear that, for my participants, one is experienced as the fulfilment of obligations, while

the other is seen as personal and situational, adapting to meet a person's needs.

8 Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, I set out to understand how UM converts to Christianity construct their understandings of identity and belonging within the Church of Sweden, to look at why they choose to do this as Christians, and to look at what their conversion processes can teach us about post-migration identity formation among UMs. I will use this chapter to summarise my findings in relation to each of these questions and will conclude by offering recommendations for further research.

As discussed in the previous chapter, my participants take a holistic approach to their lives within the CofS, not as 'members,' but as *fictive kin*. Rather than providing them with a social event which they could attend once per week, the churches seemed to represent a safe space, a home of sorts, in which a new expression of surrogate family is performed. In this context, UMs relate to one another as siblings, while pastors take on a parental roles. Their devotion to the practice of their faith takes centrality in their lives, as they draw from norms from their homeland as well as the church. Just as their notions of kinship are active, marked by helping each other and doing friendship, religious identity is something not owned but done. While they may have been born Muslims, they do Christianity, through involvement with church and group activities, through prayer and Bible reading, and through offering support to one another.

For most of my participants, becoming Christian represents the best among a number of options offered to them in their new lives as agents of their own destinies. They leave Iran with the understanding that Shia Islam is the only true religion, and that those in the west are apostates, but these preconceptions are undermined by their experiences en route to Europe. Receiving acts of kindness from Christians during their journey to Sweden, and entering a pluralist society, where there is space to question and explore, releases curiosity in these young men and they begin enacting previously forbidden practices, firstly as seekers, and then as Christians.

While there is no single, simple answer to the question of why they reconstruct their identities as

Christians, there are several themes that my participants raised. These include a sense of belonging, an environment that engages their curiosity rather than shuts it down, rapport with pastors and other UMs, and the holistic care they receive as members of the CofS.

The conversion narratives of my participants demonstrate the fluidity of identity in the context of migration. While those who end up identifying as Christians are in the minority, for many, the refugee experiences is marked by a fluidity and openness which is rarely represented in media discourses.

8.1 Further research

While, as we have seen, there is some literature on conversion among refugees which investigates motivations and conversion narratives, little is known of the implications for conversion on integration pathways. This study has explored the allocation of meaning to the identity processes of a small group of UMB young adults. However, it is just the tip of the iceberg in enhancing our understanding of the role of religion, and of changing religion, in today's pluralistic, secular-normative Sweden. In concluding this chapter, I suggest several directions such research could take.

Firstly, this study has presented a short-term snapshot of the lives of UMs who have lived in Sweden for around two years and who have converted to Christianity. Little is known of their future pathways: do they continue to deepen in their commitment to the life of the church? Does their long-term membership of the CofS improve their chances of asylum? Do they become successful, well integrated, members of Swedish society?

Secondly, it would be interesting to understand the impact the influx of refugee converts is having on the identity and direction of the CofS and those who work within it. This study suggests that the role of pastors within the church is changing, and rather than becoming an increasingly pluralistic, less dogmatic type of organisation, these new converts are influencing the church toward a return to an emphasis on biblical teaching.

Finally, from a psychological perspective, it was beyond the scope of this study to compare the

psychological wellbeing of UMB Christian converts with that of those who do not convert. Such a study could complement our existing data and provide us with a more objective understanding of the impact of conversion on the psychology of the individual, for example by looking at how religious conversion impacts the mental resilience of UMs.

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Appendix

Interview Guide - Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (English/Swedish)

Tell me a bit about yourself and where you come from.
Kan du berätta vem du är och var du kommer ifrån?

How did you decide to come to Sweden?
Varför bestämde du dig för att komma till Sverige?

How long have you been in Sweden? How did you get here?
Hur länge har du varit i Sverige? På vilket sätt kom du hit?

What are your hopes for the future?
Vad hoppas du ska hända med ditt liv i framtiden?

Which people in your life are most important to you?
Vilka människor (i ditt liv) är viktigast för dig?

Tell me about how you keep in touch with them.
Berätta hur du håller kontakten med dem.

Who do you talk to when you have had a difficult day?
Vem pratar du med när du haft en jobbig dag?

Now that you are in Sweden, what things do you do to build your life here?
Nu när du är i Sverige, vad gör du för att bygga upp ditt liv här?

Tell me about how you came to be involved in the church.
Vill du berätta hur/varför du blev involverad i kyrkan?

And how did you decide that you wanted to become a Christian?
Hur bestämde du dig för att du ville bli en kristen?

Were other people involved in this process?
Fanns det andra personer som var involverade i denna processen?/ Vem hjälpte dig?

How has your life changed since you became a Christian?
Hur har ditt liv förändrats sedan du blev kristen?

How have your relationships been affected?
Hur har dina relationer påverkats?

How have the people in your life reacted to this decision? (at home, here)
Vad tycker människorna i ditt liv (hemma och här/familj och vänner) om detta?