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Young Migrant Converts in the Church of Sweden

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Living in the Borderland

Young Migrant Converts in the Church of Sweden

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Living in the Borderland

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Young Migrant Converts in the Church of Sweden

Jonathan J. Morgan

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract
From 2014 to 2016, 44,617 unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) arrived in Sweden and sought asylum. The Church of Sweden has received hundreds of these young people seeking to join the church and be baptised as Christians. Conversion to Christianity among asylum seekers in Europe is a well-documented phenomenon that is often dismissed as merely a strategy to boost asylum chances. This dissertation challenges such views, revealing the intricate reality behind these conversions.

Grounded in three years of ethnographic fieldwork, and drawing on participant observation and first-hand narrative accounts, this study follows a Bible study group in the Church of Sweden made up predominantly of URM-background Hazaras from Afghanistan. The study draws on Wenger's situated learning theory and Honneth's recognition framework to provide a conception of religious conversion that is highly contextual and emerges from social practice. Mapping the participants' trajectories in terms of belonging, behaving, and believing, it proposes that belief should be understood as practical knowledge constituted through social participation, rather than according to a form of dogmatic cognitivism. This finding is at odds with the Swedish migration agency's working definition of religion.

The dissertation furthermore addresses the nested precarities that characterise the lives of asylum seeking youth, and the invisibility that accompanies the bureaucratic processes in which they are caught up. This is juxtaposed with the visibility and recognition that the participants encounter in the community of the church.

Key words Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, ethics, migration studies, religious conversion, recognition, precarity, communities of practice, practice, ritual, narrative, Church of Sweden, Scania, migrationsverket, political theology, ethics, productive waiting, lived religion

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Living in the Borderland

Young Migrant Converts in the Church of Sweden

Jonathan J. Morgan

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MADE IN SWEDEN

To the young men and women who left behind their mothers and fathers only to be met as strangers on Europe's shores.

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Abbreviations

URM	Unaccompanied refugee minor
MBB	Muslim background believer
CMB	Christian with a Muslim background
BMB	Believer with a Muslim background
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

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[1] All names pseudonymised, but you know who you are.

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[2] Lund University's higher seminar in faith and worldviews (*Tros- och livsåskådningsvetenskap*)

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[3] Whose names I have had to change.

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1. Introduction

Vignette 1: The Field

It is 6:20pm on a Thursday evening in late 2019 and I enter the sanctuary of the church. It is dark outside, and the lights in the sanctuary are dimly lit. It is warm inside and, as I unzip my jacket and remove my beanie, I greet the church warden (*vaktmästaren*) who sits behind a small sound desk which he is setting up for the mass. I pass a table from which I take a songbook and I notice the strips of paper that are lined up in front of the stack of songbooks; each has the scripture for the evening printed on it in a different language, French, Farsi, Arabic, German, Spanish, English, and Swedish. The warden asks me, 'Do you speak German?' And I tell him I do not, but that English is my mother tongue. He encourages me to take the scripture printed in English. It is quiet—few have arrived this early—and the priest and church musician stand in the chancel, conferring on some matter related to the coming mass. At 6:25pm, the priest disappears behind the retable, returning a minute or two later wearing a white robe over her dress, her white sneakers poking out incongruously from beneath it.

At 6:31pm, the already quiet sanctuary seems to take an inward breath as the bell starts to ring, announcing that the mass is about to begin. And I hear the footsteps of new arrivals behind me. The priest welcomes the congregation and invites them to sing the first song. She says the song number twice, making an effort to pronounce the number clearly, 'Let us start by singing song number twenty-one; song number two-one.' The piano begins, and the first song is sung. Then the Bible reading begins. This 'Mass in the Spirit of Taizé' (*Mässa i Taizéanda*) takes its form from the ecumenical community in Taizé, France, and involves the singing of simple repeating verses, prayer, silence, Bible readings, and the Eucharist. It is not until the priest invites us to greet one another with God's peace (*Guds frid*) that I see who arrived after me. We shake hands and quietly pronounce 'Guds frid' to one another, with a smile. Most of the others who are gathered are young men from Afghanistan. Their clothing is on trend. Some have large tattoos and piercings. All have recently cut, contemporary hairstyles. We return to our

seats and await the Eucharist, for which we line up and receive a small, round wafer, which is then dipped into a goblet of non-alcoholic wine before it is eaten. After this, I notice those who have gone before me stepping up onto the chancel and approaching a large holder containing many candles. Each person takes a candle from the box that sits alongside the candle holder, lights it from the central candle, and spends a moment in contemplation or quiet prayer. They then place the candle into the holder, stand a few moments in subdued silence, and walk back to their seats.

At 7:05pm, the mass is over and we walk in twos from the quiet church sanctuary to the church hall where the Bible study will take place. We are greeted by Astrid,[4] the priest, no longer dressed in her clerical robes, with her dog—an inquisitive black pug—and invited to help ourselves to sandwiches and drinks in the church hall. It is laid out café-style with small clusters of tables and a lounge area in the corner. One of the young men plays with the dog—trying to get it to sit, stand, lie down—as the others queue up to choose bread, cheese, vegetables. After asking Harold, the deacon, 'What type of meat is this?', the young men pass over the plate of ham, and begin preparing themselves tea—black, no milk. There is conversation in Dari and Swedish. We hear updates about the past week. The topics include health, school, friends, asylum processes.

When we are all seated, the priest takes out a picture she has drawn of a character from the Bible and asks the group if they know who it is. There is quiet discussion among group members, but they confirm that they do not, in fact, know who this is. After a few words of introduction, Astrid asks if someone would like to collect the Bibles from the cupboard, and two of the participants leave, returning with six or seven Bibles in Farsi. We open to the passage for the evening, which is read in Farsi, then Swedish and, for about 30 minutes, Astrid explains what is important in the text. The group is then given the opportunity to ask questions.

The young men in this group are Hazaras, an Afghan ethnic minority. They arrived in Sweden between 2014 and 2016 during a wave of immigration—popularly known as the 'European refugee crisis' (Schmiedel and Smith 2018)—which saw some 44,617 unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) arrive and seek asylum there (Migrationsverket 2023a). They are converts to Christianity and have been baptised into the Church of Sweden.

[4] All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

The Problem

These young men are often portrayed as opportunists intent on remaining in Sweden by any means necessary, giving up the religion of their birth in the hope of earning the opportunity to do so. Their interest is presumed to be merely instrumental.[5] I call this the *asylum capital* hypothesis, since it is based on the assumption that they are seeking to accrue a form of social capital which, it supposes, may positively affect their asylum status. Such a view does not confine itself to media discourses on the matter, but has found its way into popularly held assumptions about this group. This standpoint is consistent with other negative discourses that have emerged, discourses which blend a variety of xenophobic tropes and characterise the threat which migrants in general, and male unaccompanied refugee minors in particular, are perceived to pose to society (Hedlund 2015).

In her landmark work, *Politics of Piety*, anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) addresses widely held assumptions about another group that is subject to similarly reductionistic discourses—women in Islamist movements who are commonly assumed to be victims with no agency of their own. She asks, '[I]s such an assumption valid? What is the history by which we have come to assume its truth? What kind of a political imagination would lead one to think in this manner?' (Mahmood 2005, 2)—basic retroductive questions about the values that underpin such assumptions. However, Mahmoud does not stop there. She raises what she considers to be a more interesting set of questions: 'More importantly, if we discard such an assumption, what other analytical tools might be available to ask a different set of questions about women's participation in the Islamist movement?' (Mahmood 2005, 2).

This dissertation is inspired by this prospect of taking a case which is surrounded by strong normative discourses and looking at it through an alternative analytic lens. I have examined the case of conversion among young Afghan men to Christianity in the Church of Sweden. I want to look beyond reductionistic

[5] Shortly before this dissertation was published, Liberal Party MP Fredrik Malm (2024) re-ignited this debate by suggesting that churches should agree to wait until asylum seekers have received residency before they are baptised, his implication being that there are significant numbers of asylum seekers who use 'false' conversion as one means to improve their chances. Representatives of the Christian Council of Sweden, Sofia Camnerin and Jan Eckerdal (2024) were quick to respond that freedom of religion should not be postponed until often long asylum processes come to an end, and that evidence shows that 90 per cent of converts in Sweden are active church members four years after they receive residency.

discourses in which this group are painted as mere opportunists and to explore the actual lives and practices of this group.

The theme of 'fake' conversions has emerged in interviews I conducted with priests and with young Afghan converts. Neither group has denied that there are indeed some who seek to use conversion opportunistically. However, I want to suggest that the question of motivation is flawed. Or, to be more precise, the kind of answers that this question tends to illicit are flawed. This is perhaps because the question can be understood to imply that there is a single causal explanation. When asked, *Why do they convert?*, it is tempting, especially outside of the academic environment, to give a simple answer, mirroring what is modelled by the media. This dynamic also implies that conversion is a one-time event—something which happens once, for one reason—rather than understanding it to be a process, an ongoing act of identity formation. With Mahmoud, I want to ask: if we discard this assumption that they are converting so they can stay in Sweden, what other analytical tools might be available to ask a different set of questions (Mahmood 2005, 2)? Indeed, to begin with, I would suggest that the question of *why* they convert is less interesting standing in isolation than when it is combined with the question of *how* they convert. What might we learn if we also look at what this group does, and how they describe what they do and how they live their religion?

I make the case that conversion processes and religious practice represent one way in which a group which has otherwise been made invisible finds visibility and recognition. It is a sphere in which the individual agency comes to the fore as the participants in this study define for themselves what 'productive waiting' (Engblom 2023, 93) means.

Aim and Purpose

In this dissertation, I pay attention to both the how and the why of conversion. I wish to situate these questions in the actual practices and situated learning processes of these young men. This is a study of the lived religion of this group. The primary goal of this study is, therefore, to develop an understanding of the processes of formation and learning that shape these URM-background participants as they engage with the formal and informal practices of the Church of Sweden. I also want to use this case study in conversion among Afghan migrants to increase our understanding of the shape of religious practice and identity

formation in the context of migration. Put simply, the question which guides this study is:

> *How should we understand the conversion and identity formation processes of unaccompanied refugee minors in the Church of Sweden?*

In the course of answering this main question, I address the following: What meaning do unaccompanied refugee minor–background converts attribute to their experience of belonging and engagement in practices of the Church of Sweden and the Bible study group in which they participate? What is the relationship between doctrine and practice in the conversion processes in this study? How do we observe the participants negotiating their place in society despite the various challenges they face? I investigate these questions by looking at two sets of themes which I found in the data: 1) belonging and (embodied) social practice, and 2) precarity and recognition.

Background

Although this is a study of lived religion (Ammerman 2021; Knibbe and Kupari 2020) which privileges on-the-ground religious practices over institutional hierarchies, having some grasp of the context in which such practices take place is none the less important. '[B]ecause "religion" is a socially defined category', says sociologist Nancy Ammerman, 'context matters' (Ammerman 2021, 27). Psychologist Lewis Rambo describes context as 'the dynamic forcefield in which conversion takes place' (Rambo 1993, 166); to understand a process of religious transformation, it is vital to understand its context because agents are shaped by their context and contexts are shaped by agents (Rambo 1993, 166).

In this section, I introduce the context of this study. It is split into two parts which delineate both the politics and the religious landscapes of Sweden. In the first part, I describe the political context into which the participants arrive, one in which there is an increased politicisation of migration; indeed, unaccompanied refugee minors have become a focal point in migration-critical debate. The second part is concerned with the religious landscape of Sweden. In this part I seek to understand why, in a country where more than 50 per cent of the population are members of the Church of Sweden, conversion would seem like a strange option which *must have another explanation* besides authentic belief. Overall, I demonstrate that Sweden has, in recent years, become more hostile towards immigration and that this has affected the bureaucratic mechanisms of the state.

One outcome of this is the securitisation of the state, including increased notation—categorising individuals on the basis of terms such as 'unaccompanied refugee minor'—which may on the surface appear to provide the opportunity to cater to specific groups, but in practice is a means to enhance bureaucratic management. I also make the case for the plausibility of the scepticism of the asylum capital hypothesis due to its being rooted in a self-conception of Swedishness as post-religious.

Sweden and its Political Milieu

Here, I introduce the societal context in which this study takes place. Looking at popular discussion of Sweden, it is easy to get the impression that it is either a bastion of humanistic secularism (Zuckerman 2008) or a failed multicultural project (Borevi 2014; Åberg 2019). The reality is of course more complex than this binary. The high influx of asylum seekers between 2014 and 2016 put the state's reception system under pressure and made a strong impact on Sweden's approach to migration (Gustafsson Lundberg 2018). While the state struggled to accommodate the large number of asylum seekers arriving during this period, civil society experienced something of a renewal of engagement, with at times interesting collaborations formed between organisations that had not previously worked together (Herz and Lalander 2021, 3–4; Fridh 2017).[6] The Church of Sweden was one such actor and, among other things, became involved with providing assistance to newly arrived asylum seekers, opening up church facilities as emergency housing (Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017; Viktorsson 2015).

Sweden's relationship with pluralism is relatively recent. It was not until the 1980s that the country began receiving non-European asylum seekers in any significant numbers (Widfeldt 2015). However, it rapidly became the Nordic country with the largest immigrant population. In 2020, 25.9 per cent of the Swedish population had a foreign background (SCB 2021).[7] Prior to 1989, all of Sweden's political parties had policies which could be characterised as pro-immigration,

[6] For example, a collaboration between the Church of Sweden and Kontrapunkt, a leftist social organisation that would tend to espouse a skeptical stance towards organised religion (Fridh 2017; Frykman and Mäkelä 2019, 311).

[7] According to the measure employed by Statistics Sweden, a person is counted as having a foreign background if they were born outside of Sweden or if both parents were born outside of Sweden (SCB 2021). In spite of this strong presence of those whose origins lie elsewhere, it is worth noting that employment practices reveal a preference for candidates who embody *Swedishness* (see for example Risberg and Romani 2022)

albeit coming from different ideological starting points (Widfeldt 2015). This began to change in 1989, when the Social Democrat government became more restrictive towards who could qualify for asylum—a decision which contributed to a politicisation of the immigration question (Widfeldt 2015, 401). This was followed shortly after by the rise of the anti-immigration *Ny Demokrati* (New Democracy) Party, which won almost 7 per cent of the vote in the 1991 general election (Spehar, Bucken-Knapp, and Hinnfors 2013). Although their time in parliament was short lived,[8] immigration continued to be a contentious and political issue in the country. Prior to the rise of the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats party,[9] the Liberal Party had already begun making political gains via a more defined immigration and integration platform which they introduced in 2002 (Widfeldt 2015, 403). This shift within the Liberal Party manifesto is thought to have been key in their tripling their share of seats in parliament and also securing the importance of immigration as a campaign issue.

In spite of this, in contrast to the rest of Europe, Sweden was understood by many to have a fairly welcoming approach to asylum seekers until the so-called 'crisis' of 2014–2016 and its accompanying shift towards a more populist and nationalistic politics (Gustafsson Lundberg 2018, 125).[10] Acceptance rates of asylum applications dropped significantly between 2014 and 2017, including among URMs (Garvik and Valenta 2021, 11–13). Along with this, the majority of those who were granted asylum in Sweden no longer received permanent residence, but were instead granted temporary protection.[11] This put URM-background asylum seekers in a 'condition of social and civic limbo' (Garvik and Valenta 2021, 14), not knowing whether they would be permitted to remain in Sweden or face deportation, along with the sense of precarity that this entailed.

In September 2015, what the press described as Sweden's 'refugee crisis' came to a head. Sensing the need to rally civil society to attend to the needs of a wave of

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[8] *Ny Demokrati* lost their seats in the 1994 general election (Spehar, Bucken-Knapp, and Hinnfors 2013)

[9] The Sweden Democrats' share of the vote increased from 1.4 per cent of the vote in 2002 to a peak of 20.5 per cent in 2022 (SCB 2022)

[10] At the time of writing, questions of migration continue to dominate the public debate, and the loss of dominance of the left-of-centre Social Democrats to the right-of-centre Moderates and Christian Democrats and the anti-immigration *Sverigedemokraterna* (the Sweden Democrats) has been largely attributed to those parties' commitments to reducing immigration (Östman 2019, 33).

[11] The granting of residence is the means by which the Swedish State grants asylum.

migrants the then Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, addressed a large crowd gathered in Sweden's capital. He told them, 'In my Europe, we take in people who flee from war. We do it in solidarity, we do it together. My Europe doesn't build walls, we help each other when the need is great.'[12] Eriksson notes the retrospective irony of this statement given that, just weeks later, Löfven and his government began introducing measures that would curb migration to Sweden and which would, by the following summer, make it harder for asylum seekers to receive residency (Eriksson 2019, 10). On 24th November 2015, Löfven announced that Sweden would reduce the number of asylum applications accepted to the minimum possible under EU regulations (Engblom 2023, 17). Ethnologist Rikard Engblom (2023, 17) notes three significant aspects of the government's new policy: (1) the legal grounds for asylum were reduced from four to two,[13] (2) Sweden stopped giving permanent residency to those applying for the first time, and (3) family reunification regulations were tightened. By December 2015, the government was preparing emergency measures to close the Oresund Bridge, one of the main over-land entry points into the country, compromising Europe's free movement of people (Chadwick 2015). This was not just any European country, but one with a long-held self-perception as 'a *moral superpower*' and 'the *conscience of the world*' (Herz and Lalander 2021, 5; emphasis in original).

Trägårdh uses the term 'Statist Individualism' to describe the combination of strong state and individual liberty which is emphasised in Swedish state policy (Trägårdh 2014, 22). According to this approach, the social system is organised so as to minimise the individual's dependence on traditional support structures. While many states may make this claim, the Swedish example is particularly extreme because it extends to the idea that the less responsibility an individual has for a spouse, children, ageing parents, and other significant others, the greater

[12] *Mitt Europa, det tar emot människor som flyr från krig. Och vi gör solidariskt, vi gör det gemensamt, mitt Europa bygger inte murar, vi hjälps åt när nöden är stor* (as quoted in Eriksson (2019), 9; my translation).

[13] The two grounds for asylum which were removed were: *övriga skyddsbehövande* ('other grounds for protection')—by which people fleeing natural disasters or with a 'well-founded fear […] of assault' could seek protection—and *synnerligen ömmande omständigheter* ('particularly distressing circumstances')—which could include those in need of healthcare in Sweden or those who had adapted well to life in Sweden (Engblom 2023, 52).

their potential to be who they wish to be.[14] Underpinning this statist individualism is a very particular anthropology which sees human happiness as dependent on freedom from others. It is what Taylor (1992, 28–29) calls the *ethics of authenticity*, which he sums up like this: 'There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's.' This ideal can be seen at play in the social provision of the Swedish welfare state and the conception of the good life which necessitates the freeing of individuals from that which encumbers them so that they might pursue that which most resonates with their inner selves. In *Culture and Authenticity*, Charles Lindholm describes this sense of authenticity and the cultural artefacts which underpin them through the lens of social construction (Lindholm 2008). It is, he argues, the destabilisation caused by modern society which creates the need for individual authenticity projects: 'As taken-for-granted meaning systems have been challenged from within and without, human beings everywhere have sought to recapture a degree of significance and stability, often enough by inventing or affirming a form of authenticity they can claim for themselves and share with others' (Lindholm 2008, 144–45).

In other words, the very processes of centralisation, industrialisation, and workforce mobility that have shaped the modern nation state had a destabilising effect on individual identity. The self situated in a rich history is gone and has instead been replaced by self-curated authenticity. An emphasis on one's inner sense of authenticity, the ethic of authenticity, has been the result. Those who migrate and seek asylum find themselves bereft of the institutions of their country of origin which previously provided a sense of stability and clarity of identity (Öztürk 2022). In much the same way as Lindholm claims was experienced by those migrating from countryside to city in the Industrial Revolution, this experience is linked with a sense of liminality which I discuss later in this section.

The Religious Landscape of Sweden

In this sub-section, I describe Sweden's complex relationship with religion, the strong historical influence of the Lutheran (former) state church, and the Church of Sweden as it stands today. In doing so, I hope to set the scene for the particularity of the context in which the participants convert to Christianity as

[14] Trägårdh (2014, 22) comments, 'an overarching ambition in the Nordic countries [is] not to socialize the economy, but to liberate the individual citizen from all forms of subordination and dependency within the family and in civil society'.

well as providing some context to explain why conversion to Christianity in this particular milieu may be viewed with suspicion, as either strange behaviour or as motivated by factors other than religious conviction.

An important question related to the context of this dissertation is, what makes conversion to Christianity seem like a strange choice in Swedish society when more than half of the population are registered Christians? Historian of religion David Thurfjell (2019) explores a similar question in *Det Gudlösa Folket*, in which he asks, '*Why is it that Swedes have such difficulty seeing themselves as religious, even though to outside observers they appear to be?'* And '*What has caused the negative connotations between the words 'Christian' and 'Religious'?'* One of the things he observes is that Swedes find it easier to imagine the cultural 'other' as religious, whether it be Muslims or Pentecostal Christians, than they do themselves (Thurfjell 2019, 8–9; my translation)

It is widely held that in order to understand the Swedish peoples' relationship with religion, one must consider the country's relationship with its former state church (Thurfjell 2019). Emerging in the same period and structurally entwined for centuries, the Church of Sweden and the Swedish nation have had a long and close relationship (Thurfjell 2019, 40). Indeed, according to Thurfjell, until the 19th century the words 'Christian' and 'Swedish' were synonymous with one another (Thurfjell 2019, 38–39). Pietistic movements emphasising the personal faith of the believer influenced Sweden in different waves, beginning in the 1700s (Thurfjell 2019, 41–42). These groups were often also critical of the church authorities. Such ideas are thought to have paved the way to an emphasis on the inner experience or the authenticity of faith. Thurfjell argues that these ideas were influential in the Enlightenment, and also in the shape of today's post-Christian culture (Thurfjell 2019, 42). However, there are also elements of Lutheranism in its state-church formulation which made it particularly conducive to being integrated, perhaps to the point of invisibility, with the mechanisms of the state.[15]

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden (*Svenska kyrkan*) is today the largest religious denomination in Sweden (Berntson 2022, 94). It currently has an official membership of some 5.6 million, or 53.9 per cent of the population (Svenska Kyrkan 2023b). In spite of its disestablishment in 2000, which brought the formal separation of church and state, the church still has a close and privileged position in relation to the state (Thurfjell 2019, 19). For example, the Church of Sweden

[15] Bernd Oberdorfer, for example, comments that 'Lutherans have always emphasized loyalty to the state's authority' (Oberdorfer 2021, 64).

is the only church in Sweden whose leadership, finances, and functions are defined by statute (SFS 1998:1591).

Westerlund (2021, 145) describes the situation for young Christians in Sweden :

> As a result of widespread secularization and the declining participation in church activities, knowledge about religion and spirituality is now generally low in Sweden. People are becoming less religious, and remain unconnected with faith or world-view communities. […] [Y]oung people grow up in a society characterized by religious decline; they encounter less religious tradition, and thus often live their lives without any profound contact or knowledge about what it means to practise religion.

This means that, in spite of widespread Church of Sweden membership, identifying as Christian is considered strange. In recent years the predominance of the church has begun to change. Since it became disestablished, it has seen a steady attrition in membership, which in the last ten years has accelerated to a loss, on average, of 61,000 members per year (Svenska Kyrkan 2022). Sociologist of religion Grace Davie famously characterised the Swedish approach to religion as 'believing without belonging' because, in spite of large membership numbers, active participation remains low (Davie 2007, 6). However, it has since been suggested that 'belonging without believing' better describes the cultural religion of Sweden (Kasselstrand 2015). It has been estimated that only around 80,000 (less than 1.3 per cent of the population) regularly attend Sunday services in the Church of Sweden (Ekenberg 2016, 31; Thurfjell and Willander 2021, 312).[16] The Church of Sweden is not known for emphasising evangelistic outreach, which makes conversion within its walls a particularly striking phenomenon. The lack of conventional 'evangelistic' practice in the church can be explained by its state-church history. In the past, the Church of Sweden had contact with people in society by virtue of their privileged status. People brought their children to be baptised, children ended the school year and were confirmed in the church. The

[16] This is to be contrasted with Sweden's so-called 'free churches', 'those Protestant Churches that are not a branch of the state', which historically have a more engaged, albeit smaller, membership (Halldorf and Wenell 2014b, 6; Ekenberg 2016, 31). However, this should not necessarily be interpreted as a recent decline (Thurfjell and Willander 2021, 312). Thurfjell and Willander (2021, 312) suggest that this is due to a particular interpretation of Luther's *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*, in which religious rituals are 'transferred to the domain of worldly matters'.

church was an established part of society and most people were members, therefore recruiting new members was not considered necessary.[17]

Just as Swedish society is changing, so is the Church of Sweden. Since disestablishment, and with the continued diversification of Swedish society, the church has found itself with an increasingly culturally diverse membership. Anthropologist Kristina Helgesson Kjellin (2016) has documented the church's attempts to adapt to these newcomers, particularly in those urban areas which have been most impacted by migration. She has studied churches belonging to the *Framtiden bor hos oss* (we are the future) network which comprises congregations in multicultural and multi-religious areas (Svenska Kyrkan 2024). The network exists to explore how the church should adapt to Swedish society becoming more pluralised and is an excellent example of the lived experience of folk church theology. In one example, Helgesson Kjellin (2016, 13–14) describes Skärholmen's Church, which permitted a 'Mary altar' in its sanctuary for Catholics from outside of Sweden who expressed the desire for a space in which to pray according to their traditions. This altar represents a willingness on the part of the church to negotiate with the cultural other over the use of material space. However, Helgesson Kjellin avoids too rosy a portrayal of the intercultural work of the church, pointing out that sometimes there are tensions which follow their parishioners from their countries of origin.[18]

In 2017, Kristina Hellqvist and Andreas Sandberg (2017) published *A Time of Encounters*, a survey-based study on the local work of Church of Sweden congregations with asylum seekers. The study focussed on the years 2015 and 2016, when the participants in this study arrived and were in their early days in Sweden. They found that many new activities had been started in response to the 'refugee crisis', including language cafes, emergency accommodation, information signposting, and material provision.[19] According to the report, such initiatives were taking place across Sweden, in cities, suburbs, and rural contexts (Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017, 23). The picture that the report paints is of an organisation with an active and broad network which can be leveraged during times of

[17] Until 1996, those who were born in Sweden, to parents who were members, automatically became members of the church—they therefore did not join the church, they were born into it (Bengtsson 2023, 1; Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017, 20).

[18] In particular, she describes tensions between Muslims and Christians at the churches in her study (Helgesson Kjellin 2016, 112–13),

[19] Half of all respondents had started a new initiative in response to the need (Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017, 23).

increased demand. Among the authors' conclusions was this reflection: 'The Church of Sweden is a big organisation with the advantage of having personnel and premises throughout the country, both in cities and rural areas. As a consequence, it has had the infrastructure to build on. Employed personnel are able to maintain networks and have broad skills as well as expertise' (Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017, 121). They also found that there was a broad cooperation between the Church of Sweden and other NGOs, including other church denominations (Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017, 123).

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) Seeking Asylum

In this sub-section I introduce the term *unaccompanied refugee minor* and look at how members of this group experience life in Sweden.

URM is a category used by European societies to describe persons under eighteen years of age who have crossed into the describing country in order to seek asylum, unchaperoned by a responsible adult (Herz and Lalander 2017; Vervliet et al. 2014). Although it first entered use in Sweden as a bureaucratic category in the early 2000s, this was not the beginning of the Swedish state's relationship with what are referred to as *alone-coming children* (Herz and Lalander 2021, 14). Social work scholars Herz and Lalander (2021) have remarked on the difference between Sweden's reception of children fleeing Finland during World War II and children who flee to Sweden today, often from further afield.

> The Finnish children were received with open arms, and there were more homes available than children […] The children and young people who have come to Sweden in recent years are seen as strangers, often in the negative sense, meaning that they really come from "outside" (Ahmed 2004), that they are truly different from "Swedish" children and young people, and that they thus pose a threat to Sweden. (Herz and Lalander 2021, 15)

While today the term URM is commonly used and may seem innocent enough to those of us who are not familiar with the lives of these young people, it masks a problematic reality. As a category, being an unaccompanied refugee minor means something to your status in society. Being regarded as a minor often means that you lack agency, that your status in the country is predicated on vulnerability, the inability to take care of yourself. Unaccompanied implies that you are socially incomplete—a *proper* refugee minor has a parent or guardian accompanying them on this journey. In a society in which citizenship (or at least residency) is a precursor to claiming rights, refugee status is precarious (more on this in Chapter

5). Refugees are, in effect, a lower class, a class of persons that we entrust to the migration agency to decide whether they are deserving of a more permanent status.

Between 2014 and 2016, the most dominant countries of origin represented among URMs seeking asylum in Sweden were Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria—all of which are Muslim-majority countries. This meant that, unlike the Finnish children of yesteryear, these young people had to deal with an othering that was flavoured with Islamophobia. Weber comments on the way in which, for URMs, religion becomes a problematic aspect of their identities:

> When it comes to unaccompanied minors, a now widely discussed topic in Sweden, religion has been considered as both a tool or coping mechanism for integration and an impediment to integration. An important aspect, in line with Farris's argument, is that 'young people in Sweden with a background in countries where Islam is the dominant religion must deal with the fact that they are interpreted through an anti-other discourse that constructs Islam as threatening and strange'. When arriving in a secular country such as Sweden, they constantly needs [*sic*] to explain and even defend their faith, which means that ideas of religion and secularism directly shape integration processes and practices. (Weber 2021, 18–19)

In the three years I spent with this group of so-called unaccompanied refugee minors, I only once heard one of them refer to themselves with the term. On that particular occasion, it was in reference to a conversation with a migration official who had called him this. This is striking considering I had gone around describing my research project as focussed on unaccompanied refugee minors while, at the same time, the very status by which they are known is not actively used by members of the group themselves. While this was going on, these young men were going through processes of conversion which, on the surface, involved being baptised and beginning to call themselves Christian instead of Muslim. In doing this, they were breaking with family tradition, describing themselves as no longer belonging to a category they had been defined by since birth.

While child asylum seekers are entitled to special consideration from the migration agency, which is meant to consider their claims, this does not mean that such claims will be processed while they are still children (Engblom 2023, 104). Indeed Engblom (2023, 105), in his discussion of productive waiting, suggests that the migration agency uses waiting as a means of managing such duties:

> One way in which waiting certainly becomes a productive element in immigration control is when the long waiting in the asylum process reduces the opportunities for some groups to receive residence permit [*sic*]. This was the case of people who arrived as unaccompanied minors […] but who turned eighteen before their case was decided on, which in turn meant that authorities did not have to take into account the special considerations that children ought to receive. (Engblom 2023, 22)

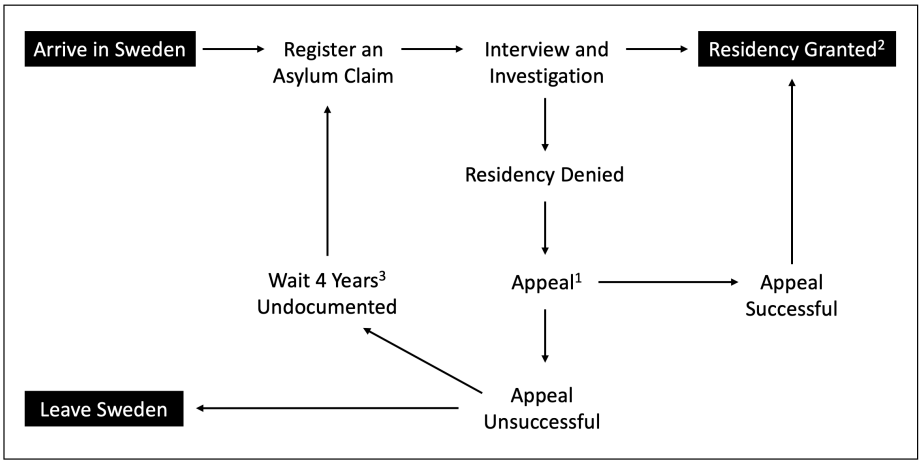
Life for unaccompanied child asylum seekers in Sweden is fraught with challenges. In their excellent work, *Social Work, Young Migrants and the Act of Listening*, Herz and Lalander (2021) use first-hand accounts to describe the experience of 20 URMs in Scania. Among the challenges they identify are increasing racism, the use of 'unaccompanied refugee minor' as a focal point for migration politics (thereby highlighting the stigmatization of the term), discussion of and exposure to medical age testing, a tightening of asylum requirements and restrictions on family reunification, and the overrepresentation of URMs in suicide statistics. Regarding one survey on suicide, they comment:

> Experiences of poverty, marginalisation, and traumatic events both before and during the flight are common [causal] factors identified in the survey. However, it is also interesting that there seems to have been an increase after 2015, possibly related to longer handling times at the Swedish Migration Board and to restrictions of the right to asylum introduced after 2015. (Herz and Lalander 2021, 7)

In sum, the category of unaccompanied refugee minor is an externally applied bureaucratic category which, on the surface, seems to offer certain protection, but in practice is the cause of increased stigma. Although, I would argue, there are experiences shared by those belonging to this category which makes it relevant to my study, it is important to note its limited use as a category since it is one which is not owned by those who have received this form of recognition. Indeed, political scientist Pouran Djampour (2018) warns of the damage done by this somewhat arbitrary clustering of migrants.

> Often in public discourse, particularly in media rhetoric, they are portrayed in single-story terms. Within this single story, 'unaccompanied' children are seldom portrayed as any other children with hopes and dreams, or as the present and future generation. A single story ultimately reduces the subject to stereotypes. I argue that there are simply too few portrayals in public discourse where migrants are defined beyond migrantness, that is, as parents, children, coworkers, friends, lovers, dreamers, artists, neighbours, activists, teachers, students, etc. (Djampour 2018, 27)

The critique of the single story is important to bear in mind, since it is within my power to portray the participants in this study with a degree of uniformity which does not hold up to reality. However, there are also experiences particular to this group which make the category at least a worthwhile starting point in the delimitation of participants (as was true of Djampour's study (2018, 28)). The problem, as I see it, is not about having categories as a starting point in a research project, but about reducing the participants to possessing only the attributes of this category. It is my hope that in this work I have succeeded in letting the participants narrate their unique perspectives as persons whose experiences and points of view predate and supersede their categorisation as unaccompanied refugee minors. As such, I intend for this study to highlight agency in the participants both within the category of unaccompanied refugee minor and beyond it.



[1] There are three stages to an appeal: first, directly to the Board of Migration; second, to the Migration Court; third, and more rarely, to the Migration Court of Appeal.
[2] At time of writing, residency is usually granted temporarily, for three years.
[3] The first asylum decision is usually valid four years from the time it comes into legal force. This means that they must live as undocumented migrants for years while they wait to make a new application.

Figure 1.1: Flow diagram showing the steps of the Swedish asylum process.

In order to understand the discussion at hand, it is worth taking a moment to orient ourselves within the asylum process itself, and how it appears to a person seeking asylum in Sweden. In Figure 1.1 you see a flow diagram which shows the basic stages of the asylum process. To apply for asylum, an individual must either

apply within the country or at the border (Migrationsverket 2022)[20] by announcing their intention to seek asylum to the border police who will then refer them to *Migrationsverket*, the Swedish migration agency (Migrationsverket 2023c). The asylum seeker will then visit a migration centre, fill in an application, and have their fingerprints and photos taken. Shortly after that, they should receive a letter from their migration agency caseworker with an appointment for an information-gathering meeting. This meeting is to ensure that all the relevant documents are prepared for the Asylum Interview, which is the formal investigative interview at which a translator, a lawyer and, in instances where the applicant is under the age of 18, a legal guardian are present. At some point in time after this interview, the applicant is invited to a meeting with their case worker who will present them with a formal decision. If their application for asylum has been successful, they will begin the process of receiving a temporary residency permit, usually for no more than three years.

If the application is unsuccessful, they may appeal—first directly to the migration agency, then to the Migration Court, and later—in special circumstances—to the Migration Court of Appeal. Once the appeal process is complete, the decision becomes legally binding. In the event that a negative decision is upheld on appeal, the applicant will usually receive a 1–5 year re-entry ban which applies to the entire Schengen area (Migrationsverket 2023b). They usually have to wait four years, until the decision expires, before they can apply for asylum again.

Although the language of re-entry bans and four-year waiting times makes remaining in Sweden following an asylum rejection sound nearly impossible, all of the participants in this study, with the exception of Sohrab, spent extended periods of time living "in hiding" while they waited for the opportunity to re-apply.

Previous Research

This section covers previous research on three main areas: conversion studies, migration and identity, and precarity. Since this study spans a number of research areas, I hope to clarify the contribution that it makes to each.

[20] Quota refugees, who apply via the UNHCR in their country of origin, are an exception to this rule.

Conversion from Islam to Christianity

In this sub-section I introduce some core discussions in conversion theory and studies on Muslim-to-Christian conversion. I also draw on recent work in the context of migration. In doing so, I seek to highlight the contribution that this study makes to emphasising lived practice and religion as a social learning process.

Within the sociology of religion, a great deal of attention has been given to developing explanatory models for the phenomenon of religious conversion (Jindra 2014; Rambo 1993; Stark and Finke 2000). Since a detailed overview can be found elsewhere (see Gooren 2007), in this section I briefly describe what were the two dominant approaches to religious conversion in the past—*deprivation* and *network influence*—which represent the psychological/individualist and the structural/collectivist paradigms; I then introduce some more recent attempts which are designed to address the shortcomings of these two.

The *deprivation* approach emphasises the internal, psychological aspect of conversion. It argues that an individual becomes a religious seeker when they experience deprivation in the form of broken relationships or *"spoiled identity"* (Gooren 2007, 339; 2010, 47). In the absence of coherence in personal life-meaning structures, people seek out explanations or solutions to their problems, and this motivates them towards changing their faith. One instance of the deprivation theme in conversion theory comes from anthropologist Peter Stromberg, who views religious conversion as a linguistic process devised to resolve inner conflict. In Stromberg's account, the telling of an individual's testimony serves the function of a ritual designed to deal with the conflict in socially acceptable terms. However, the conflict is not resolved once and for all; rather, the resolution is reenacted every time the narrative is told (Stromberg 2008, 31).

The *network influence* explanation argues for a more structural understanding of conversion: that one's social network pulls one towards religious conversion (Jindra 2014, 110; Smilde 2005, 761; Stark and Finke 2000). Lofland and Stark studied conversion to the Unification Church in California during the 1960s (Stark and Finke 2000). They argued that people converted once their 'interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to nonmembers' (Stark and Finke 2000, 117). Following a similar logic, in *The Rise of Christianity*, Stark (1996) argues against the prevailing notion that Christianity in the early centuries spread due to doctrinal appeal:

> [T]he claim that mass conversions to Christianity took place as crowds spontaneously responded to evangelists assumes that doctrinal appeal lies at the heart of the conversion process—that people hear the message, find it attractive, and embrace the faith. But modern social science relegates doctrinal appeal to a very secondary role, claiming that most people do not really become very attached to the doctrines of their new faith until after their conversion. (Stark 1996, 14–15)

The argument that people converted primarily because what they heard was convincing de-emphasises the role that the community of believers played in making what was taught convincing and it overstates the causal power of words heard in isolation. Stark's point is that without the context of a compelling community experience, the words by themselves would not have had the effect which they are credited with having. I think here there is an important distinction to make between Lofland and Stark's network structuralism and the claim that religious conversion is a social process and thus not primarily doctrinal. I would argue that it is possible to resist the tendency of reducing conversion to merely the influence of those closest to you, without rejecting the social process thesis. Who a person knows is indeed a factor in the emergence of religious commitment and conversion, but that does not mean it is the single causal factor. However, denying that conversion is a social process would necessitate being blind to the empirical evidence on conversion.

Here, I introduce the critiques of network influence theory, but in doing so want to be sure that this is not understood as my rejection of the social process conception of religious conversion. Smilde (2005, 758), who is critical of network influence theory, characterises it as follows: '[I]ndividuals adopt new cultural meanings and practices, such as those provided by new religious movements, not because of any inherent characteristics of the latter, but rather to the degree that they reduce dissonance in important relationships'. In other words, converts are actively seeking the path of least resistance and, therefore, convert so as to make important relationships easier. Smilde's (2005, 758) problem with network influence theory is not that it is entirely false, but that, for such a well established theory, it offers so little in terms of explaining causality and that it entirely overlooks individual agency. Since network structuralism has failed to account for how and why networks are responsible for conversion, it simply acts to de-emphasise the convert's control over their own actions; thus, it 'fails to show exactly how it is that intentional, creative human action serves in part to constitute those very social networks that so powerfully constrain actors in turn' (Emirbayer

and Goodwin 1994, 1413; quoted in Smilde 2005, 759). In this sense, it merely serves to minimise the agency of the convert.

Both the deprivation and network influence themes have been criticised for obfuscating the agency of the subject by overemphasising the role of stressful experiences and social connections (Gooren 2007, 347). Whether it is claimed that one is driven towards religious seeking by circumstances, or wooed by a network of the faithful, both explanations are deterministic and portray the convert as a passive agent in the process. For anthropologist Henri Gooren, network structuralism and deprivation represent patterns to be found among those who convert, but these patterns should not be mistaken for causes. Other critics of network theory agree that the case for network theory has not been developed sufficiently: '[I]t is unclear how or even why networks function' (Smilde 2005, 758). It also tends to ignore the idea that agency might work through networks: '[N]etwork research typically rests on a default conceptualization of human beings acted upon by networks rather than acting on them and through them' (Smilde 2005, 758). While it is rare to find a convert who has not been part of a religious network prior to conversion, when a control group of non-converts has been included in studies like that of Heirich (1977), little evidence has emerged that network influence is deterministic of conversion. This is because those who encounter religious networks are equally likely not to convert. Likewise, the deprivation theme has been given too much causal emphasis, since control group sampling shows that people who do not convert also experience crises and stress (Heirich 1977, 664).[21] In other words, if network influence and personal crises are present and could be seen as part of the motivational patchwork of conversion, their influence should not be overstated, as it has been in the past. Indeed, they may represent patterns, or 'demi-regularities' (Edwards and Burton 2021, 495) which can direct further research into causation, but, as Gooren argues, they should not be mistaken for causal explanations in themselves.

Other more recent work has synthesised contributions from different disciplines and has moved away from the goal of finding a universal, step-by-step model for religious conversion. These include Rambo's (1993, 165–70) seven-stage process-oriented model of conversion, Gooren's (2007, 2010) *conversion career* approach, and Jindra's (2014) *New Model of Religious Conversion*. Rambo's influential model

[21] It should be noted that it is not common to use a control group in research on conversion. This is why Heinrich's study is mentioned even though, at time of writing, it is more than 45 years old.

includes the following seven stages: *context*, which is 'the most comprehensive of all stages'; *crisis*, which maps onto the deprivation theme we discussed above, *quest*, in which the potential convert actively searches; *encounter*, in which the potential convert meets a potential guide; *interaction*, which involves an intensification of learning; *commitment*, a 'psycho-spiritual experience of surrender'; and *consequences*, which describe the outcomes of the process (Rambo 1993, 166–69). While analytically distinct in Rambo's model, he describes them as elements in a dynamic social process with a backward and forward flow, rather than discrete linear stages.

Basing her work on narrative interviews, social work scholar Ines Jindra (2014) takes a comparative approach as she seeks to move beyond what she sees as the shortcomings of the predominant theories on religious conversion: the limited attention given to the personalities of converts, and the particular characteristics of the religious groups to which they convert. She found that:

> [A]lthough most conversion biographies share some similarities, there are two broad pathways that conversions can take: those that move from relatively closed conditions to more open, theologically liberal groups, and those who, having experienced insecurities and disorienting conditions, convert to closed, theologically and socially stricter groups. (Jindra 2014, 5)

Additionally, network theory was a more compatible fit with describing conversion to more 'closed' groups than it was for those who converted to more liberal or theologically open traditions (Jindra 2014, 187).

Rambo tells us,

> Debates about whether a conversion is sudden or gradual, partial or total, internal or external, and the like, can be resolved by acknowledging a spectrum of possibilities. Conversion is malleable. It is a complex process that transpires over time, shaped by the expectations of those advocating a certain type of conversion and the experience of the person who experiences the process. (1993, 170)

As conversion studies have become less focussed on Christian churches and New Religious Movements, and as research on the majority world has increased, it has become clear that while there may be observable patterns, conversion processes do not fit neatly into a prescriptive model. Gooren (2010, 44) describes the challenge that broader empirical data has posed to models which proffer a particular conversion process with fixed stages:

> [T]he old models are difficult to use in the contemporary situation of growing religious pluralism in Latin America and other parts of the developing world. In process models of religious conversion, like the original one by Lofland and Stark (1965), converts of various world religions at different moments in time are supposed to go through similar stages, until finally reaching a full or spiritual conversion. It is clear from, for example, the literature on conversion to Protestantism in Latin America that such process models of conversion are no longer valid, because there seem to be no fixed stages and because the patterns of conversion are much more complex and heterogeneous.

While research on motivation is informative for my enquiries into why my research group renounce Islam and become Christians, I am also interested in what happens after conversion as the participants continue to develop in their understanding of what this new identity means for them. Along with this, I want to look at conversion from the perspective of the socially situated individual agent in the process—turning away from the agency-denying trends in both early conversion theory and public discourses on URMs.

Gooren offers the *conversion career approach* which is designed to look beyond the conversion act and towards a more long-term view of faith change trajectories, including disassociation (Gooren 2007). This concept may be useful in framing my work more broadly than simply the adoption of a Christian identity. Anthropologist Simon Coleman describes what he calls 'continuous conversion', writing, 'There is a disjunction between the frequent charismatic depiction of an instant, radical, and total conversion and an ethnographic perspective that indicates a much more gradual and ambiguous socialisation into shared linguistic and ritual practices' (Coleman 2003, 16). For Coleman, conversion is a continuous process, perhaps having more in common with the Lutheran idea of living in your baptism that it does with a sudden, radical rupture.

While a great deal of earlier literature focusses on conversion to Christianity, in recent times relatively little attention has been given to conversion from Islam to Christianity (Kraft 2013b, 11). This is curious given repeated claims that conversion by Muslims to Christianity is a rapidly increasing phenomenon, particularly since the 1960s (Darwish 2018; Garrison 2014; Miller and Johnstone 2015; Miller 2018).[22] I now turn to the literature which does exist on Muslim to Christian faith change.

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[22] This lack of attention is perhaps due to several factors: first, the well-documented stigma in Muslim countries regarding conversion away from Islam. Indeed in many such countries renouncing Islam is met at least with social resistance, if not legal consequences (see Darwish

Missiologist Duane Miller discusses the terms used to describe Christians from a Muslim background (Miller 2018, 133). He gives preference to the term *Believers with a Muslim Background* (BMB), or *Christians with a Muslim Background* (CMB), over the more commonly used *Muslim Background Believer* (MBB) because of their emphasis on the subject's current religious affiliation (Miller 2018, 133). However, primarily due to the 'insider movement' phenomenon,[23] not all MBBs would call themselves Christian. As Miller comments, '[T]here are reportedly some people who continue to identify as Muslims and not Christians in some cultural sense' (Miller 2018, 133). This could, of course, extend to other religious or non-religious identities (such as atheism) due to the understanding of Islam as both religion and culture in a way that the West seems to have lost. Many Muslim majority countries are what Ammerman calls 'entangled religious spheres', in which there are 'religious practices that are so highly interwoven with everyday practical affairs that it is impossible to think of them as distinct forms of social life' (Ammerman 2021, 32). As Conn (1979, quoted in Syrjänen 1984, 14) puts it, 'Islam's cultural continuum may extend far enough for an adherent to be an atheist but still call himself a Muslim'. Kraft comments on how difficult it is to gather quantitative data on conversions among Muslims because the phenomenon is 'almost entirely an underground movement' in the Arab world (Kraft 2013b, 13).

According to some scholars, the phenomenon of Muslim-to-Christian conversion has significantly increased in recent times (Miller and Johnstone 2015; Kéri and Sleiman 2017). Miller and Johnstone conducted a global census of BMBs, using data from between 1960 and 2010 (Miller and Johnstone 2015, 18). Their conclusion was that, even with adjustment for over-reporting, conversion from Islam to Christianity has been on the rise during this period, although more work is needed, for example to understand the impact that the Syrian civil war has had on the BMB population (Miller and Johnstone 2015, 18). These findings are

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2018, 47; Kraft 2013a; Miller 2018, 138). A second reason for the paucity of research on Muslim to Christian conversion may be the strong influence of movements within academia to decolonise social enquiry, resulting in greater attention being paid to non-'Western' religion. Christianity, although far from being only a Western religion, still carries with it a historical association with European colonisation. Thirdly, this gap in research may simply come down to difficulties in acquiring access to underground churches and so-called *insider movements* by established scholars of conversion, while those who do have access to such groups are siloed in Evangelical institutions.

[23] This is the term used to describe instances in which Muslims begin to study and 'follow' the teachings of Jesus but do not change their formal religious affiliation.

helpful in providing context to what is being observed in Sweden. While there are no recent figures of the number of MBBs in Sweden, it is clear that this global phenomenon has made its mark there, and that conversions among URMs in the Church of Sweden should be regarded in relation to it. Notably, the largest recorded group of converts are Iranians, a group who began their migration journeys much like my research group: departing from Iran.

While part of the focus of this dissertation is conversion to Christianity and its implications, it is important to take into account the background of these young converts because it makes it possible to understand the phenomenon more fully and avoids treating refugees as *blank slates* with no prior history (Zaman 2016, 44–45). In some ways, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, unaccompanied children are even more at risk of this blank slate discourse due to the way in which their prior experience is scrutinised during the application process.

Due to be released shortly after this thesis is published, *Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Europe* is an anthology edited by Lena Rose and Ebru Öztürk (2024) which represents the state-of-the-art on conversion among Muslim-background asylum seekers in Europe. The anthology is multi-disciplinary and offers a range of perspectives on the experiences of those who convert and the legal systems under which they do so. For example, Markus Elias Ramsauer and Ayşe Çağlar (2024) introduce the complexity of asylum adjudication on religious grounds in Austria. They tell us 'the evaluation of faith poses problems to the secular logic of the state, since the *unprovable needs to be made provable* outside of the religious logic' (Ramsauer and Çağlar 2024, 62; emphasis in original).[24] They note the striking similarities between how these 'regimes of truth' are used on converts to Christianity and in cases of individuals claiming asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation. Following on from this discussion, Ebru Öztürk (2024) looks at the gendering at work in Swedish asylum adjudication through the codification of terminology such as 'Male Network' (*Manligt Nätverk*). Stepping away from the legal system, Vähä-Savo and Koivuluhta (2024) offer a more grassroots perspective as they look at volunteers with various NGOs who work with asylum seeking converts. They explore the strategies by which these actors deal with moral dilemmas, such as the steps they take to avoid judging the authenticity of an individual's conversion. In the same anthology, Benedikt Römer argues that the conversion of Iranian migrants to

[24] Although beyond the scope of this thesis, this point could be fruitfully discussed with reference to the concept of secular translation, problematised by the likes of Charles Taylor (2011) and Talal Asad (2018).

Evangelical Christianity should be understood within the context not only of the receiving country, but also in relation to the contemporary politics of Iran. His argument is similar to that of Zaman (2016), in that it resists the tendency to treat refugees as blank slates. In the text he is eager to complicate the conception of Iran as a Muslim country, reporting that of the 99.6 per cent who make up the official Muslim population of Iran, 'only around 40 per cent of Iranians self-identify as Muslims of different streams' (Römer 2024, 148). Rather than an example of religious individualism, Römer points to the collectivism inherent in Iranian converts' desire to link Christianity with Iran's pre-Islamic history (Römer 2024, 158).

This study complements the discussions in the anthology by drawing on firsthand narrative accounts of the conversion processes of unaccompanied refugee minors in the Church of Sweden and through looking at the means by which this group find visibility and recognition in the church.[25]

On Fake Conversions

As I touched on earlier in this chapter, during my time studying this phenomenon, the question I have been asked with the most frequency has been some variation of, 'Aren't they just converting so they can stay in Sweden?' I have received this question from neighbours, friends, and colleagues, from those who left school with a basic education to those with advanced academic degrees. The phrasing might be somewhat more elegant from those who hold doctoral degrees, but the sentiment is the same: that these conversions can be explained in purely utilitarian terms. This is a view which seems to be grounded in a general popular understanding of what the experience of migration must entail. Whether the person asking the question is aware of it, it indicates a cognisance of the gravity of the situation for the one seeking asylum, that the asylum process is difficult and weighted against them. These questions also indicate something of the Swedish relationship with religion: that belonging to the national church does not necessarily imply that one should consider oneself Christian. With this in mind, it makes some sense to reason that, in the shoes of an asylum seeker, one might also consider changing religion for the sake of improving one's chances. It is also easy for the casual observer to overlook the gravity of what it might mean for

[25] I should mention that Chapter 4 of this dissertation is developed from a chapter that I contributed to the same anthology (see Jonathan Morgan 2024).

someone from the background of these participants to change religious affiliation, and what the social consequences might be for the one converting.

While there is an abundance of literature on URMs in Europe, little attention has been given to the phenomenon of religious conversion, or even the role of religion, in this group.[26] Where religion is mentioned in the literature on this group, it tends to be characterised as either a psychological coping strategy (Raghallaigh 2011; Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014), an attempt to accrue asylum capital (see Akcapar 2006; Morgan 2020; Skodo 2018), or a means by which to attain a sense of solidarity (Herz and Lalander 2021, 110). While such analyses offer important perspectives, they are at times reductive, failing to take into account the complexity of identity processes in the midst of migration. As anthropologist Johan Leman (2007, 3) contends, viewing conversion through the lens of the acquisition of asylum capital or mobility is problematic since conversion is 'too complex to reduce its totality to such functional logic'. Thankfully, recent ethnographic work on asylum and conversion has offered a more nuanced perspective on this topic, acknowledging that while asylum seekers may initially be drawn to churches because of their social work activities or the chance of attaining asylum capital, they often maintain contact for a variety of additional reasons (Ringgaard Lorensen and Buch-Hansen 2018; Öztürk 2022).

Asylum capital should be understood as a subset of social capital, which Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 119) define as 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. The role of social capital is much contested in the literature on conversion from Islam to Christianity. Akcapar analyses conversion among Iranian Shiites to Christianity in Turkey, using the concept of social capital to suggest that conversion is part of a migration strategy (Akcapar 2006). This view of conversion is commonly found in popular discourses on migration and matches the utilitarian view of conversion, echoed by Stark and Finke, whereby religion becomes a means of maximising social and religious capital (Stark and Finke 2000, 118–25).[27] Echoing the social capital theme, Stene describes 'conversion as

[26] One exception is Elin Ekström (2019), whose Licentiate dissertation described the innovative religious practices of URM girls.

[27] To make sense of the language they use, it should be noted that Stark and Finke's paradigm for understanding religion is based on rational choice theory, and in particular the idea of 'the religious economy'. This entails understanding religious trends according to market forces of supply and demand (Stark and Finke 2000, 35–36)

integration strategy' by which churches 'may become a way into (a section of) broader society' (Stene 2020, 215). Anthropologist Joel Robbins has been critical of such utilitarian approaches to religious conversion, pointing out their inherent reductionism, but also that they create a tendency in the observer to make unsubstantiated claims about how another person from a different culture would reason.

> The utilitarian approach is most prone to difficulty, often enough becoming something of a caricature of itself. The gravest danger that threatens those who use it is that they will allow some universal notion of what is valuable to supply the motive force driving people's interest in the new religion. Who would not want rice or steel axes if they had none, the analyst imagines. The problems of ethnocentrism and circularity (How do we know they wanted rice? They converted to get it) that haunt this approach are too obvious to require elaboration. (Robbins 2004, 85)

Darwish challenges the social capital explanation of conversion to Christianity among Iranians, arguing instead that sensory experience plays an important role in conversion, allowing individuals to move beyond a merely rationalistic process (Darwish 2018). Commenting on this discussion, Ringgaard Lorensen and Buch-Hansen reflect on a conversation with one of their respondents: '[W]e cannot separate faith from the feelings of loneliness, from existential anxiety, from a longing for being welcomed, recognised, and loved' (Ringgaard Lorensen and Buch-Hansen 2018, 36). The desire to accrue social capital may indeed compel someone to seek connection with a church; it may even give them capital which provides future opportunities, but conversion is too complex and stratified a phenomenon for this explanation to be sufficient.

Leman describes the 'new fields of memory' by which new Iranian Pentecostal Christians in Turkey seek to police their memories of life in Iran (Leman 2007, 5). He notes that among the important things to forget are positive memories associated with Islam. Leman describes the 'enclave of hope' which these Pentecostal communities represent for the Iranian converts, which is characterised by their ability to 'take care of' bad past experience, offering 'shared sets of values' and social capital which bonds as well as bridges. In this context, bad or neutral experiences become reframed as part of a teleology of hope (Leman 2007, 8–9).

While social capital is no doubt a factor that is present throughout the process of conversion, and beyond, reducing it to the primary reason for conversion—or, at least, reducing the concept of social capital to the utilitarian view of conversion—while a common trope in societal discourses on conversion, does not paint a full

or nuanced picture of faith change. It is my hope that this dissertation is able to both take social capital seriously as a factor, but also to not to reduce conversion to a mere quest for capital.

Migration and Identity

Moving from the society of one's birth to another creates a sense of loss, but also the conditions for change in a person's conception of themselves and the world around them. Sociologist of religion Eva Hamberg (1999, 24) tells us that 'individual worldview and values may change considerably in connection with international migration', while Ammerman (2021, 44) observes, 'When religious practices are transported across cultures and geographies, they inevitably change'. This is illustrated by sociologist Kathryn Kraft (2017), who looks at conversion processes among Syrian Muslim refugees who come into contact with Evangelical Christian churches in Lebanon. In her work, she notes that while her research group, for the most part, do not convert to Christianity, their exposure to the church and its beliefs prompts changes in their conceptions of God and themselves. Dislocation from their social networks provides the opportunity and desire to expand their knowledge of Christianity. Such a view normalises the idea of individual transformation in the context of migration and allows us to consider the possibility that even those who do not seek to change their religious affiliation go through processes of change.

Literature on religion and migration has discussed the liminal, borderland state in which migrants find themselves when they leave one social context for another (Akcapar 2006, 845; Darwish 2018, 48; Leman 2007). The liminal state 'is full of ambiguity and refers to a phase between separation […] and reincorporation […] The people in this liminal state […] are in transition and do not belong to any stage in life: although they exist as beings, they do not exist as social persons in society' (Akcapar 2006, 845).

Leman, who has studied Iranian Pentecostalism in Turkey, argues that rituals can play an important role in bringing a season of liminality to a close.

> The long period of social liminality is left behind in the ritual. The old philosophy of life is forsworn, and one publicly expresses acceptance of Jesus as 'Saviour and Lord', is submerged in the water, and emerges from it draped in a white sheet and surrounded by fellow members of the community. The enormous, de facto—and essentially: painful—social discontinuity between the social context of origin and

> that of destination, which is gradually bridged in the religious enclave, is now definitively sealed in one brief ritual. (Leman 2007, 10)

The ritual, in this case baptism, bridges the discontinuities between the before and after of conversion and signals full membership in the church. While more phenomenologically oriented, Leman's work finds an analogue in that of sociologist Ebru Öztürk (2022), who has also studied Iranian converts to Pentecostal Christianity in Stockholm. She suggests that affiliation with the 'secondary institution' of the church allows these converts to establish a firm grounding, a 'sense of home' in the face of change. This grounding helps them to address the sense of ontological insecurity they experience from having been estranged from their primary institutions by migration.

Pierre Bourdieu calls this experience *hysteresis*, an experience of one's habitus (a concept which I discuss further in Chapter 3) being at odds with one's field (Hardy 2008). Before they left Iran or Afghanistan, members of the research group were deeply embedded in their local family structures (their field) and had internalised the practices and understandings of this context (doxa), developing the habitus necessary for that particular field; it was the 'basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience' (Bourdieu 2018, 78). During their migration process, they enter a new field and are thrown into crisis by the discordance between their habitus and the new field. Those dispositions which indicated their belonging in Iran or Afghanistan are in Sweden viewed as *foreign*. Bourdieu's hysteresis, in my view, is capable of bearing more theoretical weight due to its integration with field theory than is the concept of liminality. While liminality problematises the stage between migration and incorporation, by drawing on the concepts of habitus, field, doxa and capital, one can develop a more comprehensive description of the processes at work.

While relatively few unaccompanied refugee minors convert to Christianity in Sweden, the concept of hysteresis normalises the idea of identity transformation among newcomers, the natural outcome of which is that some will take the step of changing faith. During such transitions, religion undergoes change but also reveals itself to be an important resource for successfully navigating the perilous waters of transition. As Zaman comments:

> The extraordinary circumstances in which forced migrants find themselves encourage a re-imagining or re-energizing of particular understandings of religious traditions to create inhabitable worlds. Rather than merely consuming religious resources, social agents challenge the passivity assigned to them in the religious field and in fact engage in the production of re-assembling of religious resources,

> competing against institutions that are often regarded as dominant producers of religious resources. (Zaman 2016, 21–22)

The Iraqi refugees in Syria that Zaman studies were not only consumers of religious products but were active agents in religious innovation. This view is shared by Ekström, Bülow, and Wilinska (2019, 15), who found that female unaccompanied refugee minors reimagine the role of religious practice following migration. While religion can be viewed as a barrier to integration, it is also a 'source of strength' which, in their view, deserves further attention. Both sets of writers agree that the role that religion plays in migration has been given insufficient academic attention: 'religion and faith has [*sic*] until very recently been considered by many researchers to be less important a concern than issues of class, race, ethnicity, or gender' (Zaman 2016, 5). On this point, religious communities and faith-based organisations are able to conceptualise the task of helping in ways that are more personal than those of secular organisations and institutions. Zaman, looking at refugees in Syria, points to the distinction between secular aid and a more religious understanding of humanitarianism (Zaman 2016). In the former, refugees perceive themselves to be undergoing a 'loss in value' as 'compassion becomes bureaucracy and suffering a technical problem waiting to be solved'. The result is that they are subjected to a 'standardising discourse' in which they are 'broken into bite-sized bureaucratic chunks' (Zaman 2016, 37). In contrast to this, and echoing Leman (2007) and Öztürk (2022), a religious[28] understanding of humanitarian aid means that individuals are 'brought into the fold of family' (Zaman 2016, 37). Highlighting this difference is important because it represents two very different conceptions of humanitarianism, but also two different conceptions of the human person, a theme on which I will elaborate later in this dissertation.

According to Swidler (2003, 89), culture is more visible in those who have 'unsettled lives'. This is 'because people actively use culture to learn new ways of being'. Culture is more overtly lived by those wishing to embody it because they are in a stage of acquisition, of practicing their target identity. She identifies teenagers as an example of this, since they are in an experimental phase with identity markers less fixed than their adult counterparts (Swidler 2003, 90). If this is the case, we should not be surprised to find URM converts, or prospective converts—as teenagers and migrants whose lives are by definition unsettled—

[28] In this case Islamic

embodying the culture of the church community more explicitly than those who have been members for longer or have grown up in this context.

The Contribution of this Study

In this section, I introduced some of the dominant themes in conversion theory, drawing attention to their shortcomings when treated as universal approaches, which overlook individual agency and the particularity of person and group. I further problematised the 'asylum capital hypothesis', which assumes conversions to be motivated by the desire for asylum in the host country, arguing that, while social capital of course features in the motivational patchwork of conversion, such processes are far too complex to be reducible to a single causal factor (Leman 2007, 3). In the rest of this work, I seek to contribute to filling these gaps by offering an account of conversion which takes seriously the particularity of the participants and their context, and which offers evidence of these young converts demonstrating agency as they seek to overcome processes which tend to make them invisible.

Theoretical Points of Departure

I orient this study by drawing on three main theoretical approaches, which I introduce here. I utilise Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning to provide a language and theoretical recontextualisation of the phenomenon of conversion and Bible study practices. I situate the study at the intersection of precarities as I think this helps us to understand both the particularity of the individual experience and its overarching backdrop. Finally, Axel Honneth's recognition theory and its Butlerian critiques, provide a lens through which to examine the relationship between the participants, the church, and society, and the unavoidable sociality of human experience.

Situated Learning

Well known in the world of educational theory, Jean Lave (1991) and Etienne Wenger's (2022) theory of situated learning takes the emphasis away from what is taught in formal educational structures to focus on how smaller, interest-based communities—*communities of practice*—learn together. For the purposes of this

study, I describe the context of the Bible study group as a community of practice. While it is not a commonly used theoretical framework in religious studies, there have been a variety of works in the last ten years which look at religious communities of practice (Asserhed 2024; Cejvan 2023; Daley Mosier 2018; Jenkins 2019; Langer and Weineck 2017; Piela 2015; Porkka 2019; Segarra Arnau, Traver Martí, and Lozano Estivalis 2023; Shanneik 2018; Westerlund 2021). In this section, I introduce literature from this corpus which is of particular relevance to this study.

Of those studies which address both situated learning theory and religion, only two relate directly to religious conversion in the narrow sense of changing religious affiliation. The first is the work of anthropologist Yafa Shanneik (2018) who has studied women converts to Shiʿa Islam in London. Adding a Foucauldian reading of Wenger and Lave, she looks at how increased participation changes power relations within the group. Shanneik also documents the struggle that converts undertake as they seek to participate as equals with old timers. The second is practical theologian Björn Asserhed (2024), who uses situated learning theory as a framework for understanding Christian formation in the context of three urban church plants in Sweden. He follows the trajectories of nine individuals who come into contact with each of the churches that he studied. However, although conversion narratives come up occasionally in his material, this is not the focus of his work and he does not discuss it with reference to literature on conversion.

There have been two other recent studies based in the Swedish context. Systematic theologian Katarina Westerlund (2021) has considered the training groups for confirmation camp leaders in the Church of Sweden as communities of practice. These leadership training groups are a close analog of the Bible study group I follow in this dissertation. She notes that, for the participants, Sunday services 'became more and more meaningful and connected to positive experiences of belonging, recognition, and peace' (Westerlund 2021, 151) as a result of their increased participation, understanding, and sense of recognition. This was, at least in part, due to the bridging of knowledge and embodied practice. Finally, anthropologist Olivia Cejvan (2023) utilises Lave and Wenger's work in her doctoral dissertation, *Arts and Crafts Divine*, an auto-ethnography in which she studies an esoteric community based in Stockholm, looking in particular at the role of secrecy, community lore, and the practices, which precede the ability to experience visions.

In this study, I draw on the work of Lave and Wenger to provide analytical focus to the study of a particular Bible study group in the Church of Sweden (I discuss this more in Chapter 3). In doing so, unlike Shanneik and also in distinction from

Bourdieu, I give questions of power somewhat less priority.[29] I view this as closer to Wenger's early conception of communities of practices.[30] This addresses a gap in the sparse literature that exists on the subject of communities of practice and religious conversion, specifically how the conversion processes themselves can be conceived of as social learning processes.

Precarity

The scholarly background to notions of precariousness and precarity deserves introduction before I discuss the specific *nested precarities* of the participants in this study in Chapter 5. Judith Butler (2009, 25–26) distinguishes between precariousness and precarity. Precariousness, according to Butler, is that basic vulnerability which is common to all human beings. It is evident in the way in which we enter the world and our ongoing ontological dependence. Precarity is 'differentiated' and resonates most closely with the experience of those who are marginalised. In recent years there has been talk of 'the precariat', a growing class of people who find themselves particularly vulnerable to the current political and economic status quo. According to Standing (2011), whose book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* brought the term into more widespread use, the precariat is composed of three groups: members of the working class from areas where their skills are no longer needed; migrants; and members of the middle class who lack opportunities to use their education for economic gain (Stålsett 2023, 26–27). However, prior to the widespread use of the term precarity, traces of this discussion can be found in sociologist Anthony Gidden's (2008, 38) earlier description of *ontological security*, when he theorised that the inherent reflexivity of the human person demands 'a "faith" in the coherence of everyday life', an *ontological security*. This need is at the core of sociologist Aaron Antonovsky's (1988) *salutogenesis*, which proposes that the likelihood of good health is strongly predicated on the individual's sense of the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of their life and the resulting *sense of coherence* (Antonovsky 1988, 16–18). Precarity is the counterpart to this ontological security, undermining life's coherence and causing anxiety and insecurity at a foundational level of life (Giddens 2008, 38). At the turn of this century, Zygmunt Bauman (2006, 148)

[29] In doing this, I follow Ammerman's view that while our study of religion should take power into account, it should also go beyond questions of power (Ammerman 2021, 17)

[30] Wenger does discuss the proximity of his theory to Bourdieu's practice theory but, in my view, tends to place more of an emphasis on collaboration than on competition (Wenger 2010).

commented on the trend towards precarity in the workplace, and the accompanying individualisation which, rather than drawing people together in solidarity, nudges them toward suffering alone. Stålsett (2023, 48) critiques a similarly pessimistic stance on precarity found in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1998), in which the person in a state of exception[31] 'seems totally isolated and solitary. There does not appear to be any potential for community[…]'. This bare life is also, apparently, devoid of agency (Stålsett 2023, 48).

I introduce this more general discussion of precarity because I consider it necessary to avoid essentialising the migrant experience—a common critique among those scholars working on post-migrancy—or the idea that migrants are somehow exceptional or distinct as a category of people. Ethnologist Richard Engblom takes a dialectic approach to this question in his 2023 dissertation, *Timewarps*, in which he shifts modes between considering the particularity of his participants and considering their experiences more generally as possibly shared with other categories of people. In this study, although I focus on a particular group of migrants who have been organised under the category of unaccompanied refugee minors, I wish to avoid suggesting that their experience is somehow incomparable with other experiences of precarity.

Recognition and Misrecognition

In Chapter 5, I draw on Axel Honneth's (2005) recognition framework and Jaana Hallamaa's (2023) typology of misrecognition in order to shed light on the role that the church plays in the formation of the participants. Honneth claims that there are three types of recognition essential to subject formation: love-, solidarity-, and legal-recognition. Love-recognition has to do with our most intimate relationships with friends and lovers. Solidarity-recognition takes into account the group level and involves being recognised for who one is and what one offers to the group. Legal-recognition is an institutional recognition, providing a person with legal status and the basis whereby which one claims one's rights. Recognition theory underlines that human beings are unavoidably social, and that our very personhood demands that we are seen for what we are by others on the individual, group, and social structural levels.

[31] Agamben's term to describe the experience of a 'bare life' (*homo sacer*), a person who is included in the law only to be excluded by it.

Structure of the Dissertation

In **Chapter 1** I have discussed the premisses of this study, the aims and purpose of the research and the questions which guide it. I have also described the background in which the study is situated by introducing the particular season in Swedish migration politics and the religious landscape of Sweden. Both of these aspects—the political and the religious—play into the invisibility of the narratives of young asylum seekers. The political through bureaucratic measures which create classes of individuals who are in limbo—waiting for an asylum decision. The contemporary religious landscape, in which Swedish identity is strongly associated with the theme of secularism, and the strong membership of a national church of alleged non-believers (Kasselstrand 2015), makes it reasonable that claims of belief made by asylum seekers are construed as motivated by the desire to stay, rather than 'authentic' faith. After this, I surveyed previous literature on the themes of Muslim-to-Christian conversion, migration and identity, as well as looking in more detail at the question of motivation in discussions on conversion. This literature discussion set the stage for the particular gaps that this research seeks to fill. I ended this chapter by introducing important theoretical points of departure which will be more thoroughly unpacked in Chapters 3-6, in synthesis with the data.

In **Chapter 2**, I introduce the research participants, as well as the qualitative methods that I draw on in the course of carrying out this study. This includes the methods of data collection and data analysis, researcher positionality, ethics, adaptations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the limitations of this study. In doing so, I position this work as an ethnography employed to go beyond a surface-level understanding of the phenomenon of religious conversion among young, Muslim-background migrants. Rather, I seek to introduce a deeper discussion on the causal mechanisms which inform processes of identity formation in the context of Christian conversion, and the role of the group in such processes.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of this study. To begin with I give a general picture of the practice and embodiment orientation before introducing Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's situated learning theory, which I use as a framework for understanding the relationships and group formation in the Bible study field. With reference to the field site, I argue for understanding conversion as a social process of situated learning which is intimately tied to context and content.

Chapter 4 is an analytical chapter concerned with the conversion processes which the participants in this study undergo. This chapter examines the *how* of the conversion process. In it I investigate the relationship between belonging, believing, and behaving. I suggest that the cognitive emphasis that is often placed on the idea of belief is narrow compared to the conception of belief described by the participants in this study. I present *belief-as-understanding* as an alternative to the cognitive view. During the course of the chapter, I describe how legitimate peripheral participation cultivates belief, and also revise my original view to frame behaving as a subset of belonging.

Chapter 5 examines the what of conversion among this group. Continuing the analysis, I look at the experience of *nested precarity* in the lives of the participants. After this, I draw on recognition theory in order to understand the role that belonging to this Bible study plays for them. I argue that, in the absence of legal-recognition, the Bible study community of practice becomes a solidarity-community in which love-recognition is nurtured alongside solidarity-recognition. Belonging to this group, I suggest, substitutes for recognition in the legal system.

In **Chapter 6** I set my findings in discussion with the data and seek a synthesis with the theory and data introduced in Chapters 3-5. I look at how the participants' engagement in the Bible study is a form of productive waiting, in which they exhibit agency in shaping their lives and values in Sweden. I point to the structural forces which impinge on this process, including the way in which the migration office influences practice in the church.

2. Methodology

This study's methodological approach is intended to draw out the participants' experiences of migration, asylum, and conversion, as expressed in their own particular accounts. In this chapter I introduce the ethnographic research design, the data gathered, the process of analysis, and research ethics. I also include a discussion about researcher positionality and what it means to be a parent-in-the-field. I begin by introducing the participants in this study. The names of all participants, non-participants, priests, and deacons have been pseudonymised to preserve their anonymity.

Introducing the participants

Between 2014 and 2016, 44,617 unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) arrived and sought asylum in Sweden (Migrationsverket 2023a). Since their arrival, the Church of Sweden has welcomed hundreds of these young people seeking to join the church and be baptised as Christians. Although there are no official figures, it has been estimated that some 1,000–2,000 of these young people have converted to Christianity in a variety of churches in Sweden,[32] including the Swedish Pentecostal movement (*Pingst rörelsen*) which reported baptising 2,340 people in 2016, their highest number in 30 years, many of whom came from outside of Sweden (Österberg 2017). Since only 10 per cent of the URMs who came during this period were girls, and most of these have ended up living with families rather than in care homes, they are less visible than their male counterparts (Ekström,

[32] Miller and Johnstone (2015) note that, due to under-reporting and over-reporting of conversion figures by various parties, it is notoriously difficult to establish accurate figures on Muslim-to-Christian conversion. However, from conversations within the Church of Sweden, free churches, and members of the group behind the 2019 report on asylum decision making in cases where conversion to Christianity was a factor (Bergström et al. 2019), I synthesised this figure as a best estimate. It should be noted that the figures suggested by some were far higher than this.

Bülow, and Wilinska 2019, 9). It seems that these foster families offer the girls a 'familial' social setting that the group homes do not, and this has perhaps reduced the level of free exploration of these young women relative to their male counterparts.

In this section, I briefly introduce the participants in this study. All but one of them were Hazaras from Afghanistan, although half grew up in Iran. They were all over the age of eighteen when I interviewed them for this project and had arrived in Sweden between 2014 and 2016, when the majority were under the age of eighteen and unaccompanied by a parent or other adult guardian.[33] They were, therefore, classified as unaccompanied refugee minors. By the time I began this study in 2019, all had reached the age of 18, and some were already in their early 20s. While this group is commonly referred to as URMs, or its Swedish equivalent, *ensamkommande flyktingbarn* ('alone-coming refugee child'), at the time of our meeting they were no longer children.

All the participants travelled to Sweden via land and sea routes with the help of smugglers. The arrow in Figure 2.1 shows the approximate route that these young men followed: travelling by land into Turkey, then by boat between Turkey and Greece. From Greece they travelled up through Europe using a variety of means: on foot, by public transport, and sometimes in other vehicles. The journey was a drawn out and gruelling process.

[33] Definition from Herz and Lalander (2017); Vervliet et al. (2014).

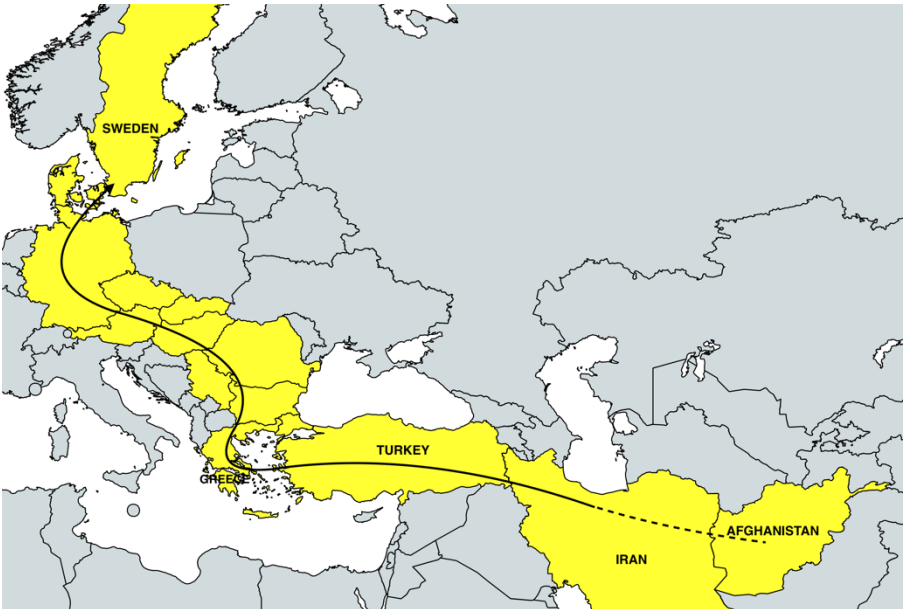

Figure 2.1: From Afghanistan to Sweden: an approximation of the route followed by the participants in this study

I was given the opportunity to present my project plan to the Bible study group on the first occasion that I attended in 2019.[34] When I did so, I was clear that I was going to be around for a while and would be very interested in interviewing any who were willing. A few approached me after this meeting, offered to be interviewed, and gave me their phone numbers. Others were more reluctant, telling me, 'I need to think about it', or 'I'm very busy at the moment.' To begin with, I did not know how to interpret their excuses—were they too busy or did they just feel uncomfortable about saying *no*? Rather than push it further, my strategy was to wait and see, to build a sense of connection with them and to see whether the next time I suggested interviewing them (after several months) they would say yes. In the long term, this strategy paid off and the more rapport that I built with the group, the greater the willingness of individual participants to be interviewed.

One participant, Haji, whom I originally met in 2018, was very outspoken during the study itself but seemed reluctant to arrange to be interviewed. When I asked him about it, he would tell me that he was very busy, or that he had too many commitments. After brushing me off twice, I assumed that he did not wish to be

[34] A full description of the field follows below.

interviewed. However, more than a year into my fieldwork, he suggested that we meet for a coffee. When we met at my home in mid-2022, I had low expectations and certainly was not expecting an interview. But a few minutes after he arrived, he asked me, 'Would you like to start the interview?'

Key interviewees:

1. **Haji** is a long-standing member of the group, and the closest the group has to an 'elder'. He has a philosophical mind and thinks deeply about how the scriptures apply to his daily life. People regularly comment that he should become a priest. Although he has lived in uncertainty for many years, Haji has built a strong social network and is active in finding opportunities to help others.

2. **Shaheed:** I conducted three interviews with Shaheed. He grew up in Iran and came to Sweden in 2015. At the time of our first interview, he was about to be baptised, and in my last interview he described receiving residency and taking a trip to Iran to visit his parents. Shaheed is easy going and very good at Swedish. He joined the church after being invited by his friend Amin (3), who is also a participant in this study. Shaheed was the first member of the group to receive residency in Sweden.

3. **Amin** is the only member of the group who came to Sweden with family. He cares for his brother, a vulnerable adult whose special needs are, according to Amin, only partially diagnosed, and his aged mother. He is a calm presence in the group and is the one who invited both Shaheed and Abas to join. Amin is tall and has large tattoos on his arms and clearly has a sartorial sensibility. He often wears outfits that are colour coordinated and has a fondness for white trousers. Before interviewing him, we met to discuss his application for asylum in Canada. He told me that he was worn down by the asylum process in Sweden and would not wish to continue living in Sweden even if he received residency.

4. **Jeremiah:** I also had three interviews with Jeremiah, who changed his name when he was baptised.[35] On Sundays, Jeremiah attends another Church of Sweden congregation in the same town. Jeremiah comes across as a cautious and thoughtful young man. After meeting him during my Master's project, we reconnected after bumping into each other at the town's main library. He told me about a film that he wanted to make

[35] My choice of pseudonym is intended to indicate this.

about Afghan converts to Christianity and asked me whether I would be able to help him.

5. **Abas:** Despite his heavy tattoos and regular mixed martial arts (MMA) training, Abas is a soft-hearted and somewhat shy member of the group. In my first encounters with Abas, I found him nervous and insecure. He hesitated when speaking Swedish and his friends told me that he was paranoid about being stopped by the police. As time went on, I came to know Abas as a kind and disciplined person. At the time of our first encounter, he had begun training six days a week at the local MMA gym and was about to enter his first competitive fight. The fight did not go to plan and it took a couple of weeks for the black eye and other wounds that Abas received to heal. Like Shaheed, Abas joined the group after being invited by Amin.

6. **Sohrab:** I met Sohrab in 2017 during fieldwork for my Master's thesis. By the time I interviewed him for this study, he had moved to another town in Sweden for work. Sohrab became a Christian in the underground church in Iran and is the only member of the group who converted before he came to Sweden. He is outspoken and eloquent, and is happy to imagine himself speaking on behalf of those who do not have a voice. However, he has struggled to find a Church community in his new town. Although he continues to meet with and discuss the Bible with people online, he admits that he would like to be part of a more active, in-person community.

7. **Aziz** is one of the most faithful members of the group. He regular attends all activities at the church. He is a friendly character who is always helping with practical tasks like serving coffee and washing dishes. Apparently due to the stresses of the asylum process, Aziz has found it increasingly difficult to communicate in either Swedish or his mother tongue and has had other stress-related health issues. At time of writing, Aziz is still waiting for a decision on his most recent application for asylum.

8. **Zohaib** came to the group later in my time there, joining after a similar Bible study group at the church he was attending was cancelled. He grew up in Afghanistan in an area with a strong Taliban presence and later lived in Iran. Zohaib works hard and enjoys exercising. Since arriving in Sweden, he has learned to swim.

9. **Karim** has been part of the group since the beginning of my fieldwork. He is one of the quieter members of the group, preferring to let others

talk. He likes to play football and has found a team that he trains with in a nearby town. He received residency and is considering moving to a smaller town where there are more work opportunities. When we organised an Afghan peace feast, it was Karim who read a poem about his homeland which silenced the room with its poignance.

10. **Abdullah** was part of the group during the first year of my fieldwork but later moved to France. He is Pashtun and used to work transporting equipment for the United States army. He is a warm-hearted young man who, like Haji, occupied himself with helping others. After he left Sweden, I met his 'Swedish mum', who told me that she had been to visit him and that he seems to be building a network and attending a church in France.

11. **Bilal:** originally born in Iraq, Bilal works as a warden at the church. He has lived in Iran and speaks Farsi, and is therefore able to relate to the other group members in their own language. He is a peripheral member of the Bible study group, but a convert to Christianity and relationally connected to all the members of the group.

Movement during the study

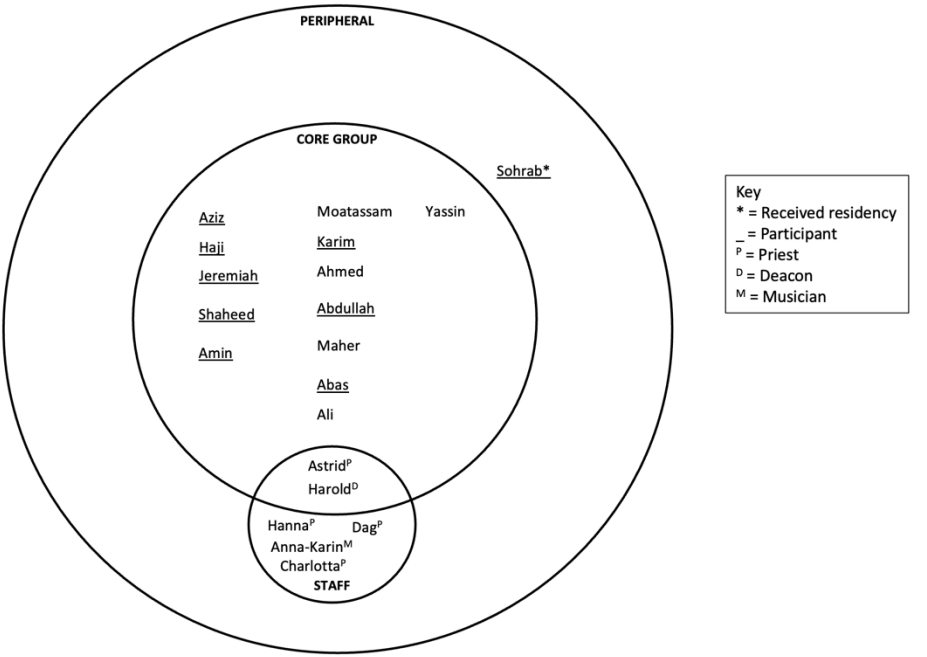

Figure 2.2: Map of the research group when this study began in June 2020.

As you can see in Figure 2.2, at the start of my fieldwork, the core group was fairly large. At this point, only Sohrab had moved away and was working in construction in another town. Of the core group of 13, I interviewed eight throughout my three years at the church. The only study participants who arrived later were Bilal, who became warden at the church in 2022, and Zohaib, who came to the group from another, similar group that had been cancelled.

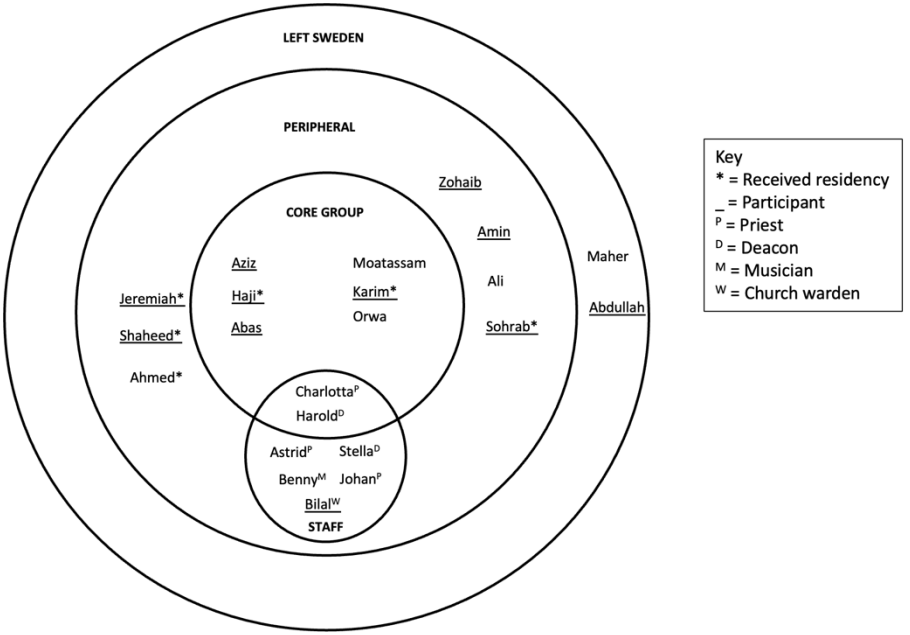

Figure 2.3: Map of the research group towards the end of this study in April 2023.

In Figure 2.3, you can see that there has been some change in the composition of the group over the three years. This was just one month before I concluded my fieldwork, and by this point two of the participants (in the outer ring) had left Sweden for France, and others had become peripheral to the group, continuing to attend Sunday services but attending Bible studies with less frequency. During this time, there was also some change in the staff team at the church. Astrid started working with children and families instead of young adults. Hanna moved from this church to a congregation in the countryside. Two deacons were appointed; Stella joined the working team as a deacon, and, after completing his training, Harold was promoted from Assistant Deacon to full Deacon. Dag, who has long been an influential presence at the church and is still involved on a part-time basis, took on a national role in the Church of Sweden, with some international responsibilities. Charlotta became the main priest working with young adults (primarily this group), but spent most of the spring on assignment in Palestine.

Research Design

The primary data in this study were collected during fieldwork, which I undertook between June 2020 and May 2023. They consist of field notes from participant observation and interview transcripts from audio recorded narrative interviews.

The Field

My fieldwork drew primarily from ethnographic approaches. The context of the study was a Church of Sweden congregation in a town in Scania, Sweden's southernmost county. I conducted participant observation at masses and Bible study meetings, and had many hours of conversations, phone calls, and instant messenger chats. Each Thursday evening I would attend a Taizé-inspired mass in the sanctuary of the church and then mingle with those gathered as we made our way to the church hall, where coffee and sandwiches were served. After this *fika* time,[36] we were invited to sit around a coffee table for Bible study. During this time, I occasionally attended Sunday services and family nights with my children. While not traditionally part of ethnographic practice, this gave me the opportunity to view the activities of the church through other sets of eyes, as they asked questions about different aspects of the mass that I might not have focussed on, and were more attuned to action than to speech. It also gave me inroads into understanding where the priests stood on certain ecclesiological questions. For example, one Sunday morning after a mass my daughter Vera asked me, 'Why is Astrid [the priest] wearing that colour?' I told her that they wear different colours in different seasons, but that we should ask her. When we approached Astrid to find out, she told Vera that her robes represented that we are in a time of feasting in the church calendar. I commented that the whole liturgy becomes richer when you understand all the symbolism but she observed, 'I think it's good that you don't always know everything, or that you learn it slowly.' The implication was that part of engaging in the liturgy is engaging in mystery. This was a comment that I found interesting, particularly since I come from a Christian tradition that places great emphasis on making practices easy to understand.

Access to the site was granted by priests and deacons responsible for working with this group. They reacted positively when I explained my research and invited me to participate in masses and to attend the Bible study class. Many Church of

[36] A Swedish word for a social encounter involving coffee and something light to eat (often cake).

Sweden priests and deacons have studied at Lund University and both institutions pride themselves on their cooperation. I came to understand that this relationship with academia is part of the Church of Sweden's broader self-identity as something of a *rational* church. As time went on, the staff of the church began to refer to me as a 'volunteer', since I willingly took on certain tasks which allowed me to continue my involvement with the group, such as standing in for one of the two leaders when they were sick, designing a printed handout for the group, and offering technical support during the COVID-19 pandemic. When I became aware of this, I went to greater lengths to emphasise that I was there to do research.

Participant Observation

I carried out 200 hours of participant observation over the course of 35 months of fieldwork. This was interrupted by seven months between October 2020 and April 2021 when the church was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During fieldwork, I participated in the church's weekly Bible study group and attended church services, including a regular Taizé-inspired mass and occasional Sunday services. As I discuss below, participating as a Christian among other Christians meant that I was accepted into the group in a way that would have been difficult for a researcher unacquainted with Christian tradition.

At its best, participant observation can enhance both the quality of the data obtained and the way in which the data is interpreted because, according to DeWalt and DeWalt, it takes place over a long enough time period to allow for enculturation—a taking on by the researcher of the 'tacit culture' of the group being studied—and therefore increases the quality of the data gathered (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 11). This deep approach was the reason I chose to spend three years with this particular group, rather than carrying out interviews across a broad range of contexts. In her book *Ethnographic Methods* (2012), sociologist Karen O'Reilly describes the ideal conditions for the participant observer:

> Once we realise that that the purpose of participant observation is to live amongst the group in their natural setting, we also realise we want to upset that setting as little as possible, and in order to do this, we hope that they will forget about us being there and act naturally. So, gaining access will usually involve explaining about our research overtly and then settling into a semi-overt role, where participants know what we are doing but do not always have it in the forefront of their minds. (O'Reilly 2012, 88)

It was this 'semi-overt' status that I sought to achieve, whereby I made it clear that I was a researcher doing research on the group, but also involved myself in the activities and relationships in the group to the degree that this status, albeit clear, was not singular.

Qualitative Interviews

I carried out 17 in-depth narrative interviews with 11 participants which each lasted 60–120 minutes. Each participant was interviewed at least once (n=7), some twice (n=2), and some were interviewed three times (n=2). I also had in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the priest (n=1) and deacon (n=1) responsible for working with this group at this church during the bulk of my fieldwork.[37] Finally, I conducted two focus groups, one with members of the Bible study group, and one with representatives of the Swedish Church at the diocese level. The interviews and focus groups took place in a variety of settings including at libraries (n=2), in a park (n=1), cafés (n=2), online (n=5), on church premises (n=2), and at my home (n=5). The location of these interviews was decided together with the participants.

For the main participant interviews, I took a biographical-narrative interview approach[38] in which I asked the interviewees to tell me about their lives, beginning with their families and where they grew up; I then followed up with questions which I hoped would refine the narrative without taking control of it. My goal was to ensure that the interview was informal and conversational (Ammerman 2021, 213) and to give the participants plenty of space to answer as they saw fit (Riessman 2008, 24). I took a flexible approach to the interview process as participants varied in how comfortable they were in being interviewed. This meant that with some I played more of a role in structuring the interview process than I did others. While the participants were aware that I was studying them because of their experience at the intersection of migration and religious transformation, focussing on their biographies more broadly gave them the opportunity to cover ground that they wanted to cover, rather than limiting them just to their conversion stories. It also meant that, when they came to their conversion accounts, they might be less bound by the conventions of this genre of storytelling.

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[37] This congregation has a fairly high turnover of staff.

[38] What Wengraf (2001, xxv) calls the 'semi-structured depth interview'.

Although told as a single narrative, there are three distinct narratives taking place during these interviews. Firstly, the broad life stories which encompass childhood and home histories and lead up to present day life in Sweden. Secondly, there are narratives of migration, how the decision was made to migrate, pull-push factors, the journey itself, and the asylum process that began on arriving in Sweden. Finally, there are the conversion narratives, which cover their religious upbringing, their reasons for leaving Islam, and their journey into belonging in the church and identifying as Christians.

With few exceptions the participants followed a linear progression when telling their stories: beginning with their early childhood, family relations, schooling, life prior to migration, reasons for deciding to leave Afghanistan/Iran, the journey to Sweden, arriving in Sweden, early days in Sweden, the asylum process, encountering the church, becoming Christian, baptism, life after baptism, current status. The exceptions to this were Sohrab and Aziz. With Sohrab, since we had already discussed his conversion narrative on a prior occasion,[39] we recapped his conversion story and then spent most of the conversation discussing his life after moving to another town. According to other participants, Aziz has regressed in his ability to communicate in both Swedish and Dari due to the effects of the asylum process on his mental health. With this communication obstacle, it took him a little while to understand that I wanted to hear about his full story and not just that which related to his time at the church.

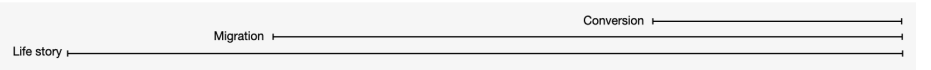

Figure 2.4: Narratives within the life story narrative

It is clear that all participants are accustomed to being asked to tell their stories, and that for some it brings back the emotions of their experiences at the migration office. On the odd occasion that it seemed that they were reciting a script that they had learned for the asylum process, I did my best to disrupt them by asking questions in the hope of getting to the point of encounter, rather than mere performance. Overall, the participants reported having a positive experience of their interviews with me, and this was reflected in the continued deepening of our relationships.

[39] I unfortunately cannot include this in my material for this study because it was collected as part of my Master's project and therefore before I had ethical clearance for this project.

All participants consented to their interviews being audio recorded, which meant that during interviews it was easier for me to focus on the content of the interview, and any questions that should follow, rather than on recording verbatim what was said. After the interviews, I took field notes related to details which were not picked up by the recorder—the disposition of the interviewee, the location, questions I would like to follow up with in later interviews, and any other miscellaneous descriptions that would be helpful in recounting the interview.

Sociologist Grace Yukich has commented that 'People shape identity not only through the use of words but also in concrete practices that embody their stories. These deeper-than-words rituals and practices can be more powerful in constructing identity than mere words by involving the whole person, "body, mind, and spirit"' (Yukich 2010, 174). It is my hope that by combining participant observation with interviewing, I can offer a picture of both narrative identity and lived religious practice in the lives of these participants.

Digital Ethnography During the Pandemic

The arrival of COVID-19 threatened to derail my fieldwork. During the pandemic, the church closed its doors multiple times for several months and I was forced to adopt certain digital methods for data collection during the long months when I was unable to meet the participants face-to-face. While this adjustment was underway, the pastors took the Bible study group online. They tried out a variety of video conferencing tools for this purpose but attendance was low, with just one or two participants joining myself and the pastors. After several weeks, they began using Facebook's Rooms feature, a tool with which all members were familiar, and this led to a more consistent turnout.

I was forced to embark on 'anthropology from home' (Góralska 2020). Anxious to gather data in spite of the pandemic, I started carrying out one-on-one interviews using Facebook Messenger's voice call feature. As teenagers and undocumented asylum seekers, the lives of these young men were often improvised and highly spontaneous in nature. During the pandemic, their language schools were closed and the everyday activities which had been structuring their lives evaporated, which only added to this spontaneity. Because of this, I realised that there was no use planning interviews a week or more in advance and instead began contacting the participants the day before I wanted to interview them. Sometimes I was even asked if I would like to interview them immediately and so I hurriedly set up my recording app in order to make the most of the opportunity.

The interview data I gathered during this time surprised me. I had expected that making a good connection with these young men would be harder to achieve online; there is some disagreement in the literature over whether rapport building is more difficult online than in person (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; O'Connor and Madge 2017, 427–28). In the case of my own study, the participants were at times more willing to disclose personal information than they would have been in an in-person interview. Some studies have attributed this to the effect of anonymity that is a factor in some digital ethnographies (O'Connor and Madge 2017, 427); however, the fact that I already had in-person contact with the participants prior to interviewing them online meant that they were not anonymous to me. This may have been related to the 'online disinhibition effect' and the minimisation of status and authority which takes place in an online space (Suler 2004). Although some have suggested that participants may feel uncomfortable being interviewed virtually in their home space (O'Connor and Madge 2017, 423), I seem to have encountered the opposite; the participants benefited from being more in control of their environment, rather than entering a physical setting where they had less agency. It is worth remembering that the transnational nature of their social identity means that they are well accustomed to cultivating and maintaining relationships via digital means. Of course, conducting interviews in this way also involved certain drawbacks. For example, I could not make direct eye contact or read their body language as I would have been able to in person.

The pandemic also left its mark on the practices of the church after it re-opened. The eucharist was served in single-serving cups and the communion wafers were provided in hermetically sealed packaging.[40] During the 'passing the peace' section of the mass, instead of greeting one another with a handshake, hands were placed over hearts as people nodded at each other from a distance. Interestingly, although the Eucharist is now served in its previous form, two COVID-19 adaptations persist. Now, before the priest begins the bread-breaking portion of the liturgy, she walks to the alter and dispenses a few squirts of hand sanitiser into her hand, rubbing her hands together as she returns to her position alongside the unwrapped bread and wine; moreover, the 'passing the peace' section continues without the physical touch of handshakes. However, further discussion of such liturgical changes are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[40] Usually, wafers are handed out by the priest ('The body of Christ broken for you') and then dipped into a communal cup of wine ('The blood of Christ shed for you').

Action Research?

During the three years that I worked at the church, I had conversations with priests and deacons which eventually shaped the practices of the Bible group in significant ways. I also helped to plan an event together with the participants, an Afghan Peace Feast, which was a point of collaboration, of building relationships, and of getting insight into their points of view on their ancestral homeland. Both of these meant that I went beyond being a mere participant observer and became involved in the co-creation of practice. As will be discussed later, elements of this led the group to adopt the kinds of pedagogies for which Paulo Freire (2014) is known: interactive, critical pedagogies. In terms of pedagogical approach, there were two stages of my time at the church. Below is an extract from my field notes that describes the evolution that took place in the pedagogical approach taken by the leaders of the group. It begins with a description of how the group's meetings were structured when I first began my fieldwork:

> Each Bible study is different, based on the amount of preparation the pastors have done, who has turned up, the time of year, and current events. However, the meetings follow the same basic structure: *fika* (coffee or tea, sandwiches, fruit, and cookies) and informal conversation, structured Bible study, an opportunity for questions, prayer, and a final blessing.
>
> The main strategy that the pastors use for teaching these Bible studies is the traditional lecture-style presentation. During these times, the priest will introduce a Bible passage, have one of the participants read that passage from a Farsi Bible, and then have someone (usually the deacon) read it in Swedish. She will then explain the importance of the passage, its meaning and what can be learned from it. This can take anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes, with occasional pauses for translation. Sometimes, both priest and deacon will have prepared something to present, and the Bible study section might take longer. During these times, it is common for the participants to sit listening quietly, occasionally giving signs of recognition. Sometimes one of them translates for the others. It is unclear during these times how much of what the priest is saying is understood by the participants, and whether or not they are engaging with the content.
>
> In the autumn of 2021 and early spring 2022, the pastors taught a series designed to demonstrate the master narrative of the Bible—that although there are many individual stories and discourses within scripture, it can also be understood as a coherent whole. They did this by introducing different Bible characters and their stories, beginning with the creation story in Genesis, and ending with the resurrection of Jesus in Acts (see image below)

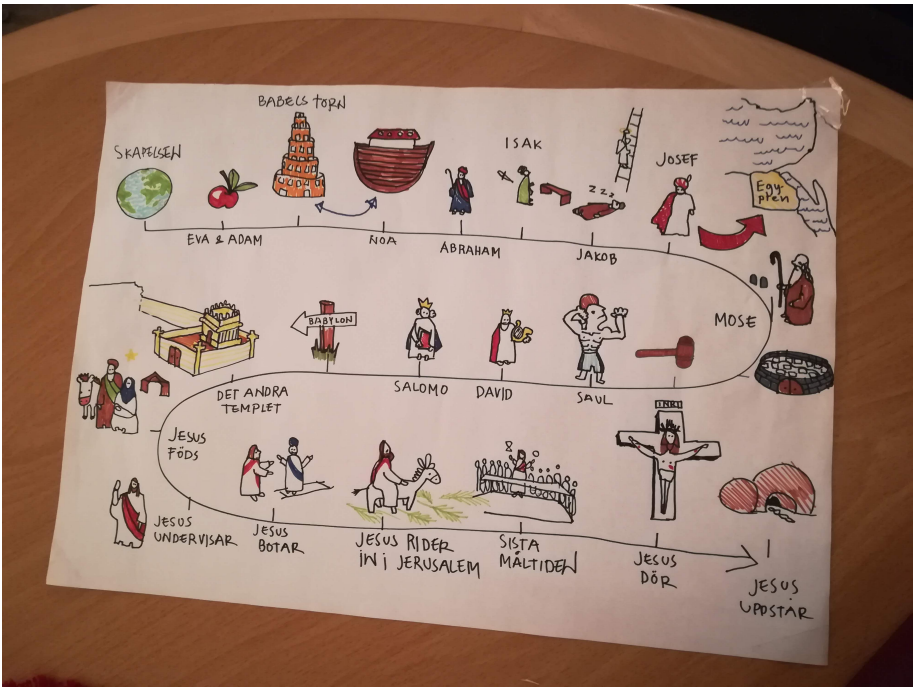

Figure 2.5: The story of the Bible as taught in the group

During this series, the priest returned repeatedly to the concept of *the big story of scripture* and asked the participants for feedback on what they had learned. Usually, these times were met with one of two reactions by the participants. The first, and most common, of these was silence: no indication that they had questions or wanted to contribute. The second of these was politely agreeing that they liked or followed the teaching, with little or no reference to what it was that they remembered. When asked specifically, for example 'Who did we talk about last week?' Or 'Who was Abraham?' The response was usually silence, which to me suggested that they did not remember or did not feel sufficiently confident to contribute.

No one really had questions related to the previous series, other than to say that they thought it was good (a sign of respect for the priest?)[41]

Sometimes there is variation in this pattern. Some weeks there is more interaction than others. This can depend on the makeup of the group, whether some of the

[41] Extract from my field notes, 17/03/2022

more accomplished and outgoing Swedish speakers are there. During the time I have participated in this group, the Bible study sessions which were most vibrant were those in which the priest adopted a facilitator role, rather than a teacher/expert role. For example, at the outset of Lent 2022, the priest asked the group several questions related to the fasting period. The first was, 'What might you consider giving up during the fast period in order to focus more on prayer and your relationship with God?' (see Figure 2.6).

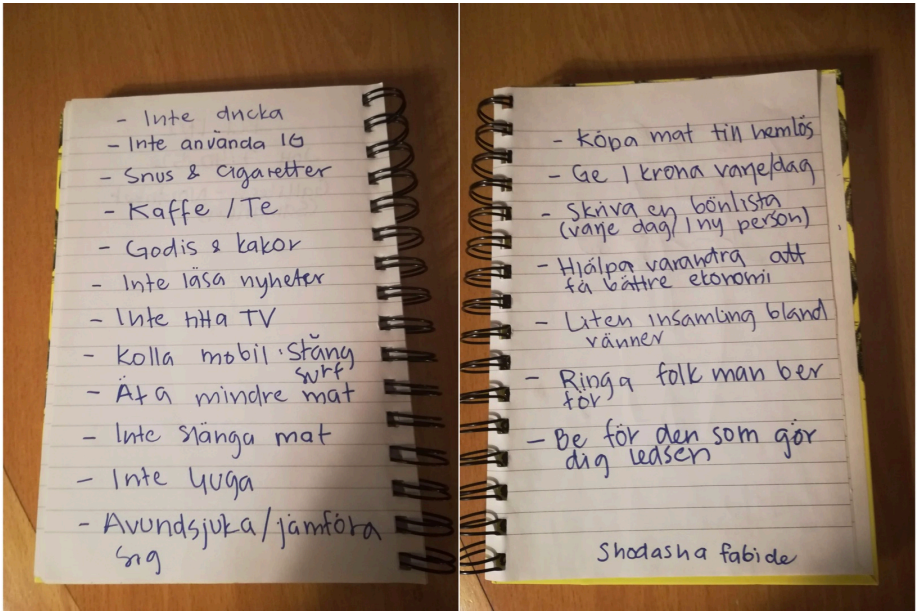

Figure 2.6: Lenten group work. Bible Study participants suggested things they could give up for Lent, and what they could do for others

Answers varied, with one young man quipping that he would give up snus,[42] even though he does not use it. After this, the priest asked, 'What could we do to help others during this period?' There was a discussion about the refugees arriving from Ukraine, the view being that they really needed help at the moment. One of the young men, Haji, said that he would be on call, ready to help when people arrive at the train station (as Syrians and Afghans did in 2015). Most of the suggestions

[42] Orally administered tobacco which often comes in small teabag-like pouches. Unlike chewing tobacco, snus is not chewed.

that were made by the group centred around giving something to people who do not have money, whether food to the homeless, or giving money away.

Once Lent had begun, the priest checked in regularly with the group to find out whether they were fasting, what they had given up, and how it was going. Such a practical exercise, while initiated by the priest, gave the participants the opportunity to shape their praxis of church tradition on the individual level. It addressed everyday distractions—in the end some decided to abstain from social media, or news websites—and the participants' desires to make space for God and others.

Interestingly, when it came to Lent, the priest did not avoid singling out individuals in the group to contribute to the conversation. She did not seem to feel that she was overstepping her role by asking 'Hey, Amin, what will you give up for Lent?', even though, in the normal course of activities, the pastors in the church are careful not to be directive in their work with this group.

It is notable that it is during times when the Bible is not being directly referred to that group participation is at its highest. This could perhaps be due to the priests and deacons, as hired religious 'experts', feeling an extra pressure to 'teach' the Bible. It could be related to the literacy of the group, and a lack of confidence in relating with written texts. It could also be connected to the backgrounds of the participants. In interviews, a number of the participants described the contexts in which they grew up as exhibiting a high level of social control over religious matters; they did not feel that they could deviate from those practices that were expected of them, one of which was that they should not ask questions. Finally, there is a strong desire, expressed by the pastors, that the participants should feel comfortable and safe. (I have observed that they do not give much time for the questions that they ask to be answered. This is probably because of not wishing to put the participants 'on the spot'). Whatever the reason for the limited direct engagement with scripture by participants, I would argue that it results in the pastors playing a more central role in the interpretation of scriptures than is necessary, and that *deep learning* is inhibited.

During this period, as is probably evident from the text, I was quite frustrated with the leaders' seeming disinterest with the low level of active participation in the group. I discussed with the priest the fact that I had been reading about pedagogy in education, and she suggested that I come and present my reflections to her. We had a meeting in which I described concepts such as 'deep and surface learning', and also the idea that learning can be more effective if the participants are given the opportunity to process and contextualise their learning more actively. I combined this with a couple of post-colonial critiques from contextual

theologians Lamin Sanneh, Chung Hyun Kyung, and Volker Küster, emphasising that these thinkers argue that it is possible to facilitate emergent theologies from within communities of the marginalised, if we (as Westerners) are willing to step back from our habitual positions of dominance.

The priest expressed positivity about the concepts I was introducing, but also admitted to being tired, and that she wished she could have been introduced to these ideas earlier. It seems that she was in a position of empathy fatigue, which meant that although she was stimulated by the idea of fresh perspectives on working with this group, she did not have the inner resources to implement change. Shortly after this conversation, she changed her role in the team and began working with families instead of asylum seekers. She was replaced by another priest, and the deacon who had previously been working with this group continued. The new priest took more of a back seat in the leadership of the group and encouraged the deacon to take the lead. The previous priest had encouraged me to present the same ideas to him, and he was eager to make the group more interactive than it had been before.

From this point onwards, we implemented a new pedagogical process, known as the Discovery Bible Study. This process involves reading a short passage of scripture together multiple times (in the case of this group, once in Farsi, once in Swedish) before asking a series of questions:

1) What does the text say about God?
2) What does the text say about people?
3) What do you hear in the text that you would like to follow and change in your life?
4) Is there someone you would like to share this with?

Figure 2.7: Printed cards with the questions for the Discovery Bible Study in Farsi on one side and Swedish on the other.

The deacon printed out cards with these questions written on in both Farsi and Swedish and began encouraging group participants to take it in turns to facilitate

the group—asking questions and giving everyone the opportunity to respond. What was interesting about this change was that the participants in the group began to contribute in much more detail about what they thought about the scripture and how it applied to their lives. On one occasion, for example, they discussed Psalm 23, which describes God as a shepherd, and began talking about the fact that Zohaib had been a shepherd during his childhood. He described what it is like to work with sheep, their characters and what it is like to lose a sheep.[43] After telling this story, he spoke about what the text meant to him personally. Such personal experience-based reflection on a passage was much less likely to happen in a setting where participants were not given much opportunity to contribute, or were asked questions which were too open.

Material

The data for this study include fieldnotes from participant observation carried out between June 2020 and May 2023, as well as the written transcripts of interviews conducted during the same period. Interview recordings were transcribed in their entirety directly into English from their original Swedish. During this process, I made an effort to reflect the flow and language of the interview without hindering the readability of the text.[44]

Fieldwork was recorded as field notes, initially as audio notes and short scribbles in the thin notebook that I stored discreetly within the cover of my pocket Bible. They were then written up longhand within one day of the event taking place. I also kept short memos of thoughts and ideas that I had during the events: a link to a concept, a response to feelings that bubbled up, and so on.

Ethical Considerations

At the outset of this study, I sought and was granted ethical approval by Sweden's Ethical Approval Authority.[45] For the safety of the participants, the name and location of the congregation is not disclosed in this study. Converting away from

[43] On one occasion a sheep had run away and got stuck on a mountain and he had spent three days looking for it, worried that the owner of the sheep would make him pay for the sheep out of his own money.

[44] I discuss this further in the Limitations section below.

[45] Registration number 2019-04246

Islam does not always pose a threat to one's personal safety; however, it has historically been a matter which is controversial for many Muslims (Kraft 2013b, 3) and it is thus necessary, beyond the usual obfuscation of names and places required by ethics boards, to ensure that those participating in this study are protected. I chose pseudonyms for the participants which were culturally adjacent to their original names so as not to disrupt the feel of the text by importing names which are foreign to the participants' context.[46]

I sought informed consent from the participants at the outset of my study, at the beginning of interviews, and on a rolling basis during the project.[47] Initially this involved presenting participants with an information sheet with details of the project, and gaining written consent for their participation. In follow-up interviews I sought verbal consent after reiterating the project details and that they could withdraw from it at any time.

When I began this research project, one senior ethicist I encountered expressed concerns about my plan to conduct ethnographic work with this group. In her opinion, the precarity they face (for more on this, see Chapter 5) and the unavoidable imbalance of power between the participants and myself meant that they would be unreliable participants. She suggested that I would be better off changing my research plan to remove the direct contact element of the project. The idea, as I understood her, was that this group is so vulnerable, and our power relations so asymmetrical, that researching them in this way amounts to abuse; moreover, data collected through interviews cannot be trusted because they were bound to say whatever they thought I wished them to say. I was not alone in disagreeing with the idea of excluding the voices of the marginalised simply because there is a power imbalance in our relationship. While I think she raised important concerns, which I take to heart in my reflexivity on the subject, I side with others who have argued that we must consider the points of view of those we research within our work. Failing to do so, in my view, is tantamount to violence by omission. It suggests that only a certain type of person can contribute to the public debate, and overlooks the potential that I have to lend my power to those who are marginalised. As is clear in my previous comments earlier in this chapter, I did not change the substance of my research method in response to her

[46] An exception to this naming convention is Jeremiah, who had changed his name when he converted to Christianity, and whose pseudonym reflects this.

[47] What Herz and Lalander (2018) call 'verbal iterative' consent.

comments. I have, however, taken such challenges as an invitation to reflexivity throughout my research process.

As has been discussed elsewhere, ethical research demands more than just bureaucratic box-ticking or the obfuscation of names (Lind 2020, 77); particularly when working with vulnerable groups, it should be part of an ongoing negotiation in which research groups are actively invited to participate. I gained consent from the participants on a rolling basis during the project, first introducing the study verbally to the Bible study group and supplying its members with an information sheet in Swedish. At this first meeting, the priest asked if the group thought it would be okay for me to participate, and explained that I would like to do interviews with all who would be willing. Then, when we met for an interview, I would present the information sheet again and go through it in simple Swedish to ensure that they understood what I was asking of them. I responded to questions and highlighted certain facts, including that they could withdraw from the study at any time. It was common at this stage for them to tell me that I did not need to use a pseudonym, but could use their real names, and I took this as an opportunity to explain the risk that my doing so could pose them and why I could not legally use their real names.

Researcher Positionality

Before I began attending the Bible study group I reflected somewhat on what my role in the group would be. As an outsider, and older than they are, it was easy for me to be mistaken for a member of the staff team. I was concerned that such an identity could hinder my ability to get close to them because of the power relationship that exists between church staff and these young men. My hope was to aim for being a (non-Orwellian) 'big brother' character in the group, while being overt about my research intentions (O'Reilly 2012, 88). In my view, the big brother role would clearly acknowledge my difference while at the same time would not identify me too closely with the formal roles of priest or deacon represented in the group.

One of the potential barriers to being perceived this way was the fact that initially the staff at the church operated as gatekeepers to the group; it was by their invitation that I was able to conduct research in the first place, and it was they who introduced me the first time that I came. In order to reduce the power distance and not to be aligned too closely with the church staff, I made sure to sit with the Afghan group members during masses and to check in with them individually before we assembled as a study group. I would ask them about family

members and try to make humorous connections with them. During study times, I sometimes asked questions of the priest, making it clear that I was not in agreement with her on everything we discussed.

On a typical evening, when I greeted the participants after the mass and before the Bible group began, I was met warmly. We had known each other for an extended period of time, and I had followed their lives with interest, as both a researcher and a co-religionist. During my time at the church, I sought to emphasise the common ground I shared with the participants. I am not from Sweden and so have some experience of being an outsider in this society. I am a Christian, and was baptised in my late teens, which is a deviation from Church of Sweden norms that I share with the participants.[48] I have also spent time living in the Middle East, which is where I first encountered Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), or Muslims who 'follow Jesus', so I have a degree of understanding of the cultural norms to which they are accustomed, and some of the cross-pressures which Muslim-background Christians face. Having grown up in a variety of so-called 'free' churches, in particular a 'small-*p*' pentecostal movement (Smith 2010, xvii), my exposure to Lutheranism in general and the Church of Sweden in particular is fairly recent.

Yet there are many ways in which I am an outsider to the participants in this study. I do not speak their mother tongue—Dari (or their particular dialect, Hazaragi)—and so we are forced to use a second language—Swedish—to communicate. I am in my early forties, and they are in their early twenties. I have spent many years in post-graduate education, a privilege to which they have not yet had access to. In spite of my outsider status in Swedish society, I have sought and received both permanent residency and citizenship on my first attempt as the spouse of a Swedish citizen; and as a white European I have never experienced the kind of precarity to which they have been accustomed throughout their lives (and which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5). Furthermore, as an ethnographer, I am unavoidably implicated in the process of data collection and analysis (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 99). In the ethnographic method, the researcher is the primary tool by which data is gathered and the gathering of data is not a value-neutral occurrence (O'Reilly 2012, 185).

[48] Infant baptism is by far the norm in the Church of Sweden.

In discussing with others who have sought to conduct research in the Church of Sweden,[49] I have realised the privileged position from which I approach working within this church. Being from a non-Lutheran background, I had initially assumed myself to be an outsider to the context of the church. In reality, however, from the moment I first made contact with the priest responsible for facilitating the Bible study group, the doors of the church swung open for me. Lundström (2010) discusses the way in which she gained access to upper-middle-class Swedish emigrants to the US, drawing out her own methodological 'passing strategies'. For Lundström, far from its being a neutral endeavour, utilising her own 'methodological capital' made her complicit in 'reproducing structural privileges and white hegemony' (2010, 71). In gaining access to the church site, I was not trying to pass as Swedish, however, my position at a well-respected theological institution and my familiarity with church life in a general sense undoubtedly gave me access—allowed me to 'pass'—as one of them. Perhaps as a white, 40-year-old European with a Christian background I was actually something of an insider to this social space, even if not to the research group itself.

Parent-in-the-field

Without giving it much prior thought or planning, I involved my children in my fieldwork. Since I was attending the church at times when they were not in pre-school or school, I sometimes took them with me. My daughter Vera attended the occasional Bible group film night. Both Vera and my son Arthur attended church family nights, Sunday services, and festive occasions (like Midsummer and Epiphany) with me.

Unlike adults, children never participate from the margins unless they are shy or deliberately excluded. My children were no exception to this. This meant that by virtue of being there in the dual capacity of parent and researcher, I found myself more 'in the thick of it'—less marginal in my participation in the social or liturgical practices of the church. If the children were invited up on the stage to break the communion wafers (after applying a liberal squirt of post-COVID-19 sanitiser to the hands), I was also there looking out at the congregation. If they made friends with the kids from a particular family, there I was, surrounded by kids as we ate waffles or plant-based sausages together in the church hall. Being a parent-in-the-field also meant that I interacted with staff members I otherwise

[49] Including Ebru Öztürk, my final seminar opponent and co-editor of *Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity* (Rose and Öztürk 2024).

would not have—like the *församlingspedagog*[50] who ran the family nights at the church.

The children helped my integration into the church and facilitated my building an identity as not just a researcher and not just a participant in the Bible study group. Often the first question that the participants would ask me when we met, after the standard 'How are you?' was 'How are your kids?' This identity as a parent was more concrete to some of the participants than the researcher identity. This was demonstrated by the occasional question that I was asked even after knowing the participants for a period of time, and even after having carried out interviews with them: 'What do you do?' For some, the idea of being paid to conduct research or write a book is abstract, or too far removed from their day-to-day life experiences. Being a father, on the other hand, is a clear and visible status, one that transcends culture or class boundaries.

Anthropologist David Poveda discussed the dynamic of being a father-in-the-field in his 2009 article *Parent and Ethnographer of Other Children*. Although my participants were older than those of Poveda in his study of Gitano children in Spain, I similarly began to see my children as 'a key resource' in my relationship with the participants and as collaborators in crafting a particular type of identity (Poveda 2009). Parenting in front of the research group enabled them to view me as a competent and trustworthy adult, someone in whom they could trust (Poveda 2009). This was not a consequence I had anticipated, but in retrospect I can see the credibility that Vera and Arthur gave me.

Although the idea of involving children in fieldwork has received a great deal of criticism (Poveda 2009), there has in recent years—thanks to the persistence of feminist and decolonial scholars—been a shift towards a more realistic approach to ethnographic work that acknowledges the inescapable 'intertwining of the personal and professional' (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). This marks a shift towards an understanding of the researcher as embodied, and a further nail in the coffin of the idea of the abstract and impartial observer.

Poveda suggests three ways in which a researcher's children can complement the research capacities of their parent: 1) 'facilitating access to children'; 2) 'projecting positive identities on the adult'; and 3) as research collaborators (Poveda 2009). My children certainly contributed to the positive way that I was perceived (#2), but I would add an additional point to Poveda's proposal: 4) children contribute

[50] Literally 'congregation educator', but in practice what other churches might call a children's pastor.

social energy which can affect the research site for the better; this energy is an integrative force that assists in the enculturation of the researcher (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 11).

Delimitation and selection

Although, as I discuss in the final chapter, this study contributes to a broader discussion on identity formation, personhood, and migration, its primary focus is a group of unaccompanied refugee minors in the Church of Sweden in Scania, southern Sweden. Since my research questions require an understanding of both 1) the perspective of the participants and how they describe their trajectories, and 2) the practices in which they engage (particularly in the context of the church), an ethnographic approach over a period of several years seemed to offer the most fruitful outcomes.

While conversion to Christianity among URMs occurs in other churches in Scania, as well as in other parts of Sweden, I chose to study this congregation for a number of reasons. Firstly, Scania, with its southerly location and road and rail link to Denmark (via the Oresund bridge), was by far the biggest recipient of asylum seekers between 2014 and 2016. Malmö, the region's largest city, is home to one of the main processing centres for *Migrationsverket*, the migration agency, so conducting the study in Scania made sense geographically. Secondly, Svenska Kyrkan, the Church of Sweden, is interesting for two reasons. As discussed above, it is the former state church and, as such, is a particularly Swedish institution. Other Christian denominations, such as the Pentecostal Church, are likely to have a more transnational/globalised sense of identity and have certainly not had the same kind of influence on society as the Church of Sweden, which, moreover, does not subscribe to more traditional approaches to mission. It tends not to encourage proselytisation and does not promote the idea of recruiting new members through its broad domestic and international social work. Thirdly, I was able to establish a positive connection with this specific congregation. Although I initially tried to make contact with other churches in the town where I was working, and had several positive encounters with their pastors, when I tried to make plans with them I received little follow up. This can perhaps be explained by the more limited resources available to non-Church of Sweden congregations, and thus the more limited availability of staff members for activities like research, which may not be considered a priority. Finally, while ethnographic work is vital for gaining a deep understanding of the lived practices of communities of faith, it is a time-intensive activity. Having more than one field site would not have

allowed me to develop the kind of relationship I have been able to develop with these participants.

Working with the data

In this section, I describe what I did with the data once it was collected and transcribed: in other words, my chosen method of textual analysis and my coding strategy.

Coding Strategy

Once transcriptions were complete, I began by printing them out and reading them multiple times to familiarise myself with the text to gain a 'deep and intimate knowledge' (Braun and Clarke 2021, 42) of the dataset before I began to engage with it more critically. After this, I examined the texts more closely, taking notes about what was said, questions that I had of what was said, and potential themes that were already emerging.

Although I do not believe it is possible to approach the data without any kind of theoretical assumptions (Charmaz 2006, 59; Rubin 2021, 184), I wanted my first round of coding to be as open as possible: open to the possibility of finding the unexpected and, therefore, not overly constrained by theory. I began by coding a 'representative sample' of four interviews, from which I developed my codes in a codebook (Rubin 2021, 189). Even at this stage, I began triangulating with my research question, reflecting on theory in relation to the material at hand. After this, I began to 'pare down' my list of codes (Rubin 2021, 189). Beginning with a long list of codes, I began adding descriptions and examples to those which seemed to be repeating, and merging those which bore similarities into master categories. By grouping and focussing the codes during iteration I reduced my initial, almost 200 codes to just 31 main codes in the final round of coding.

Narrative and Narrative Identity

This study uses the concept of narrative identity to explore the work which participants put in to framing the present in light of the past and an imagined future. The data with which I am working are narrative interviews: detailed accounts of their lives, including their conversion to Church of Sweden

Christianity and their continued lives in Sweden. The social demands of life in Sweden, the pressure to create a plausible narrative for the migration agency, but also the need to establish themselves in a new social context, means that the participants in this study are active in the work of crafting their own stories.

Making sense of one's identity through story is at the heart of the human experience. Communitarian ethicist Alisdair MacIntyre tells us that the human person is 'essentially a story-telling animal' (MacIntyre 2007, 216), while Linde puts it like this: 'In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story' (Linde 1993, 3). Social Identity Theory tells us that the often antagonistic relationship between groups is driven by the strong human desire for a positive self-image and group identification (Pickel 2018, 18–19). According to McAdams and McLean (2013, 233), 'Narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning'; the authors add that such storytelling is the means by which individuals create a 'coherent account of identity in time'. Individuals who 'derive redemptive meanings' from the challenging experiences they have faced in their lives have been shown to exhibit a greater sense of wellbeing (McAdams and McLean 2013, 234). Narratives represent the ways in which the participants in this study and humans in general make sense of their experiences.

Should conversion narratives be treated as different to other narratives? While there has been a diverse treatment of narrative identity more broadly (Mishler 1991; Riessman 2008), some of the literature emphasises the particular character of conversion narratives (Coleman 2003; Engberg 2020; Stromberg 2008). Anthropologist Peter Stromberg (2008) has noted that conversion narratives should be understood not simply as a factual retelling of the events which led up to conversion, but as an active performance of one's new way of life. He notes that it is a mistake in common language use to 'assume that language points to an independently existing reality and that it can be used to describe that reality in terms that convey, without fundamentally distorting, its characteristics' (Stromberg 2008, 2). Yet, although his argument raises important questions for those who accept these common sense assumptions about the nature of narrative, it is unclear if Stromberg's observations are really limited only to narratives about conversion, or if they are simply traits of narrative in general. For Stromberg, the narratives of Evangelical Christians undergoing religious transformation take a ritualistic form, representing a particular genre of storytelling within their tradition, and carry with them an intent to influence reality itself. In other words,

the stories of participants should be understood as more than mere representations of the past; they are also creative acts intended to pin down a sense of identity in which the acquisition and re-purposing of a new language system play a decisive role. It is a negotiation that is at play between text/tradition and experience.

Perhaps one way conversion narratives from certain traditions differ from narratives more generally is in their intention of changing the mind of the listener;[51] however, this is not the primary intention that Stromberg proposes. Rather, he argues that the conversion narratives primarily serve to resolve the discomfort caused by the apparent conflict between common sense and experience. In narrating their story, Stromberg tells us, converts are extending the boundaries of common sense (Stromberg 2008, 17). The purpose of this is to improve their sense of psychological wellbeing. As he explains, 'If the attempt is successful, something that has been mysterious becomes articulable, and a profound sense of meaning is generated' (Stromberg 2008, 18). In spite of the existence of literature specifically addressing conversion narratives, it seems that the conclusions made in such works are usually consistent with more general literature on narratives. Although most scholars of narrative do not talk of narratives as ritualistic, they certainly acknowledge their importance to overall personal wellbeing and emphasise the need to interpret narrative with a degree of alertness to questions concerning the task the narrative is performing for the narrator. In Stromberg's words:

> The analyst cannot assume that the events narrated in the conversion story simply happened in the way the narrator claims, in part because much of the story may reflect emotional reactions which have taken shape since the time of conversion. Any analysis based on the assumption that the conversion narrative may be taken to refer unproblematically to a conversion event is seriously flawed (Stromberg 2008, 14–15)

Although there is no tradition of 'witnessing' in the Church of Sweden, the participants are accustomed to telling their stories in ways that are designed to persuade. In fact, their experiences as serial asylum seekers has given them some

[51] It should be noted that the Church of Sweden does not share the kind of 'witnessing' tradition of some other churches. It is uncommon for a convert to be asked to recount their story of conversion to the congregation. Indeed, in the course of my research I found that these kind of cognitively-oriented apologetics for the faith are uncommon in the practices of the Church of Sweden, which emphasises participation and practice more than intellectual belief. However, the office for migration does demand that participants tell their stories and priests and deacons are thus caught up in preparing these young men for these events.

experience in telling their story for a particular audience and with particular motivations. Indeed, during my time at the church, there were times when the interview questions that these young men had been asked during their migration agency interviews shaped the practices of the church as a result of questions asked by participants and material prepared for Bible studies. In this way the migration agency played a constitutive role in the way that Christianity was taught in the church.[52]

Riessman tells us that narrative, 'like all stories, […] is selective and perspectival, reflecting the power of memory to remember, forget, neglect, and amplify moments in the stream of experience' (Riessman 2008, 29). In the next chapter, we look at the role that communities of practice play in shaping such narratives, or *trajectories* as they are known. Wenger (2022, 88) tells us, 'Our brains convert our experiences of participation into replayable memories, and we subsume these memories and their interpretations under the fashioning of a trajectory that we (as well as others) can construe as being one person'. Interviews are thus not flat accounts, but enable the apprehension of layered meanings, something that is true for narrative in general and for conversion and migration narratives in particular. There is always a curation process going on in the telling of a story which presents an individual's experiences as part of a larger whole, a whole which some have argued amounts to a falsification.[53] I do not take this view of narrative identity, however I acknowledge that to equate the conversion narrative with the conversion itself in a 'narrative=experience' relationship would be naïve. There is call to reflect on the fact that while narratives may not be lies or falsifications, they are told with motive and intention and these forces can be somewhat hidden even from the narrator.

MacIntyre argues that story is an essential part of our ethical life since our stories shape our sense of virtue and vice from a young age.[54] In this sense, the narrative approach can be understood as tapping into the moral development of this

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[52] A finding which, while interesting, is not the focus of this dissertation.

[53] MacIntyre (2007, 214) identifies what he calls the Sartre/Roquentin attitude that narrative is always a work of falsification. This is coloured by their view that 'Human life is composed of discrete actions which lead nowhere, which have no order; the story-teller imposes on human events retrospectively an order which they did not have while they were lived.'

[54] 'Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is NO way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things' (MacIntyre 2007, 216).

particular group. Of course, it would be naïve to assume that the stories we tell ourselves or, in the case of social imaginaries, those that we pre-cognitively imagine, are the same that we tell others, but as a researcher in this domain, this is what I have to work with.

The importance of a cohesive life narrative has been illuminated in the field of medicine by sociologist Aaron Antonovsky in his theory of *salutogenesis*. Working with Holocaust survivors, Antonovsky took a novel approach to wellbeing. Rather than asking why his patients were sick, he started asking why other survivors were well. What he found was that those who reported physical and mental health shared a sense of coherence about their lives. The sense of coherence can be broken down into three factors: 1) *comprehensibility* is the sense that stimuli from inside and outside the subject are somewhat consistent; 2) linked to comprehensibility is *manageability*: subjects have the sense that when things do go wrong, they have the resources to cope; finally, 3) *meaningfulness*, which is where subjects have the sense that they are involved in shaping their everyday life in ways that are important to them (Antonovsky 1988, 18–19). Of course, while this research has been impactful in the world of medical interventions, it relates to a finding which is psychological—a sense of coherence is not something a subject possesses physically, but a way of making sense of the world.

Identity in Communities of Practice

Identity in communities of practice is processual rather than static. Wenger tells us:

> An identity […] is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other. As we encounter our effects on the world and develop our relations with others, these layers build upon each other to produce our identity as a very complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections. Bringing the two together through the negotiation of meaning, we construct who we are. In the same way that meaning exists in its negotiation, identity exists—not as an object in and of itself—but in the constant work of negotiating the self. (Wenger 2022, 151)

Thus, individual identities are comprised of a layering of experience which has been—or is being—negotiated into meaning, which brings together past, present, and future into a clear narrative. This does not, however, mean that identity is purely discursive. Although this study relies on what is said about the trajectories

of individual participants, I follow Wenger in arguing that identity is more than what is narrated:

> The experience of identity in practice is a way of being in the world. It is not equivalent to a self-image; it is not, in its essence, discursive or reflective. We often think about our identities as self-images because we talk about ourselves and each other—and even think about ourselves and each other—in words. These words are important, no doubt, but they are not the full, lived experience of engagement in practice. (Wenger 2022, 151)

Although in this study I analyse and draw conclusions based on what participants say about who they are and what they do, this represents just one part of their identity. Wenger (2022, 153–54) reminds us that since identity 'is not an object, but a constant becoming'; identity is too complex to be contained by a text or discourse. Narrative identity is just one part of a multilayered whole. By basing part of this study on narrative identities, which take the form of interview transcripts, I am reifying the participants identities as expressed at a particular moment in time. This means that there is an inherent imprecision to the method, and I can only hope to fairly portray the narrative aspect of their identities at a particular moment in time. Such are the limitations of research and the means by which we are able to communicate it—it is only possible for me to comment on a snapshot of an identity, or in the case of multiple interviews, several snapshots of a particular identity process.

Modes of Inference

In the course of this work I have utilised two modes of inference in seeking to explain the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity among this group. The first is abduction, which, according to sociologist Berth Danermark and colleagues (2019, 103), 'interpret[s] and decontextualize[s] individual phenomena within a conceptual framework or a set of ideas'. For example, in this work I have made use of Etienne Wenger's communities of practice as a framework of learning for describing what is taking place in the context of the field site. None of the group members talk about themselves as being on an 'insider trajectory', or as engaging in 'legitimate peripheral participation', but I believe the framework offers unique insight into viewing the activities as learning processes. The second mode of inference is retroduction, which is where you ask 'what has to be true about the world in order to explain the empirical event under investigation' (Decoteau 2017, 72). Sociologist Claire Decoteau is keen to point out that abduction and

retroduction, while often conflated in the work of their originator Charles Sanders Peirce, are better treated as separate movements in the process of inference: '[I]t is through abduction (recontextualization) that we introduce new ideas about how individual phenomena are part of a structure or set of social relations, whereas with retroduction, we try to arrive at what is characteristic and constitutive of these structures and their causal processes' (Decoteau 2017, 71).

In the case of this study, I have asked a range of retroductive questions related to the participants and their conversions in the Church of Sweden. For example: What must the lives of URMs be like for conversion to take place? What must Sweden (and the Church of Sweden) be like in order for young Muslims to convert to Christianity? This is a thought process which seeks to identify the most plausible explanation for a particular phenomenon. In Chapter 5 of this study, I describe the human need for recognition and, drawing on the work of Axel Honneth (among others), argue that recognition offers us a fruitful lens for explaining the conversion processes of URMs in the Church of Sweden. Decoteau offers a critical realist process for inference in ethnographic work which takes place over four stages: abduction, abstraction, retroduction, and testing. Due to the open and often messy nature of social structures, the testing of such inferences is an ongoing process to which this dissertation represents a single contribution.

Limitations

Gender

As I mentioned in the introduction, the results of this study are gendered, owing to the fact that all of the URM-background participants in the Bible study group were male. One of the reasons for this gender bias is that only 10 per cent of the 44,617 URM who arrived between 2014 and 2016 were girls. It has been suggested that this is because of the way in which gender is constructed in the countries of origin and that girls are conceived of as more vulnerable to exploitation while alone and in transit (Brook and Ottemöller 2020). While I believe that more research should be done which can make the experiences of girl URMs less 'invisible' (Ekström, Bülow, and Wilinska 2019, 9), this unfortunately fell beyond the scope of this particular study. Although I made enquiries about the existence of girl URM converts in the church, I was unsuccessful at making contact with those who were rumoured to have once attended the church. Since

this study is primarily focussed on a single community of practice, I decided to remain with this group in all its masculinity and to hope that this gap can be filled by later research, either by myself or others.

Language

Language was at times a barrier to free flowing conversation. I do not speak Farsi or Dari and, therefore, we used Swedish as our common language in interviews. Although most of the participants spoke Swedish very well by this time, some were insecure or struggled to express themselves freely. I offered to have a translator available for those who felt particularly self-conscious about being interviewed in their non-native tongue but, even though they acknowledged their limitations, they declined this opportunity in favour of speaking freely and directly with me.[55]

It has been argued that the best way to ensure accuracy in cross-cultural research is to employ 'at least two competent bilingual translators', one to translate forward from the original text, the other to translate back from the translated text (Regmi, Naidoo, and Pilkington 2010, 21). Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, I was not able to adopt such an approach for this study. Indeed, the process I followed involved only a forward-translation (Swedish to English) from the original recordings (Swedish) to written transcription (English). I acknowledge that while I have endeavoured to keep the meaning of the participants equivalent to their original intended meanings, there is inevitably some extra margin of error in this process. However, I derive some hope from Temple's argument that 'all researchers "translate" the experiences of others' (Temple 1997, 609), that there is an unavoidably constructive element to social research, and I am thus not alone in facing this dilemma.

Representativeness

While qualitative methods are not designed to show patterns over a large dataset, they do offer the opportunity to carry out in-depth work with a smaller sample. This work is not tailored to statistical analysis, but is effective in making generalisable claims related to causal mechanisms (Rubin 2021, 237). In other words, while this study does not make claims about conversion patterns over a

[55] They expressed discomfort at the idea of someone else 'listening in' on their stories.

large cross section of the population, it does offer a glimpse into the particular conversion processes of a particular group. Through this work I make claims about the character of identity processes and underlying mechanisms which I have studied in this particular group, but which may inform future engagement with other groups of converts. Such inferences are not intended to be airtight or infallible, but nonetheless contribute to a theoretical discussion on the nature of conversion and identity formation more generally (O'Reilly 2012, 225). They offer findings about a particular group which further research may find applicable beyond this case.

Reproducibility

While I have endeavoured to describe my ethnographic process clearly, there is undoubtedly an interpretive element to each part of my process and I therefore make no claims about the reproducibility of this study.

> You will never get exactly the same answers from two qualitative studies. You—even the same you who conducted the study in the first place—can never be at the same place, in the same time, with the same people, and the same larger context. If someone else tries to replicate the study, even if they are magically able to return to the same place and swap out your body for their, they may collect different data: What *you* choose to focus on, what *you* get access to, and what people tell or reveal to *you* will probably be measurably different from another person's experience going through the same process. (Rubin 2021, 239)

Ethnographic work involves the researcher as the research tool and therefore the subjectivity of the researcher is caught up in the different stages of the research process. That does not mean that the work is invalid; indeed, 'It is possible to produce valuable accounts of the social world that take into account (and even take advantage of) who we are and how we experience the world ourselves' (O'Reilly 2012, 227). Building relationships with research subjects, interviewing them, the particular settings in which interviews took place: all of these can impact the direction that interviews take. Added to this, the particular position in time in which I find the participants will affect how they articulate their narratives.

Time

In his work on the *conversion career* approach, Gooren (2007) problematises the fact that most research on religious conversion has been conducted on participants

under the age of 30, and does not represent the full lifecycle of the individual. The career approach is intended to emphasise the seasonal nature of religious affiliation: that while people may go through seasons of high religious engagement, we cannot assume this to be the case following conversion. While I agree with Gooren's claim that to understand conversion properly takes long-term work with people at different life stages, one of the limitations of this study has been time. The fieldwork for this study was carried out over a three-year period, one that represented a very particular season in the lives of the participants. All were in their early 20s when I met and interviewed them. All were reflecting on conversion processes that stretched back a maximum of five or six years. All were in the process of applying for, and waiting to receive, asylum. Although, in the pages that follow, I do my best to represent the changes that took place during my time at the field site, I cannot claim to have been able to study the conversion careers of the participants.

3. Religion as Practice

In this section, I introduce social theorist Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (2022) wherein he discusses a theory of social learning which he developed together with anthropologist Jean Lave (see Lave and Wenger 1991). While some stakeholders are ambivalent about applying the language of learning or formation to the processes in which converts in the Church of Sweden are engaged,[56] I would argue that such an approach offers a fruitful perspective onto this phenomenon. Drawing on my empirical material, I justify viewing this Bible study group as a community of practice and demonstrate the analytical value that the theory offers to this field. Before I do so, however, I will introduce the paradigm of embodied practice into which this study belongs, drawing from the work of James K. A. Smith and Magnus Weber.[57]

Contextualising the practice orientation

In his cultural liturgies trilogy, James K. A. Smith (2009, 18) argues that modern discourses on the human person tend to privilege the mind over the body. He regards this as flowing from the era that birthed Descartes' claim, 'I think, therefore I am' (Descartes 1968, 53). This, argues Smith (2009, 32), is an anthropology of man as primarily a 'thinking thing', a view that has dominated European discourses on the person since the Enlightenment. It can be traced through thinkers like Immanuel Kant and John Rawls who, through their emphasis on the universal, tend to treat embodiment as something that it is

[56] During my time at the field site, I found church staff reluctant to use the language of formation in relation to this group, apparently concerned about its pietistic undertones.

[57] This discussion—of formation through practice—intersects with a larger critique directed at Liberalism and state church religion by communitarian philosophers and theologians including Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, William Cavanaugh, and Charles Taylor (See for example Halldorf and Wenell 2014a)

possible to overlook.[58] This perspective has influenced Western protestant theology, with the interpretation of scripture and views on spiritual formation taking a cognitive orientation due to the idea that right acting is the natural consequence of right thinking and that, therefore, minds need changing if behavioural change is to follow (Smith 2009, 32). This perspective, while not entirely wrong, risks reducing the human person to a brain and the human body to merely its support system.

There have, however, particularly in the last 30 years, been scholars who have emphasised the importance of the body and the significance of social context for the formation of the human person (Sigurdson 2016). In the study of religion, these include Saba Mahmood (2005), James K. A. Smith (2009), and Tanya Luhrmann (2022), scholars who seek to understand the human person more holistically, taking into account the role that the body plays in formation.

The ongoing pluralisation of European societies has been an important driver of the discussion on the nature of religion and what it has to do with concepts like belief or faith. When interacting with people of non-Christian religions, long-standing assumptions about the nature of religion get challenged and shown to be inadequate. Magnus Weber reflected on this tension in his 2021 doctoral thesis, *Religion as a Lifeworld* (2021), in which he argues that the cognitivist definition of religion is an ineffective framework for shaping de-radicalisation interventions by social workers. With reference to empirical material, Weber found that assuming problematic doctrine to be the root cause of radicalisation leads social workers to focus on correcting ideas, while overlooking the influence that practice and social context plays in a person becoming radicalised. Drawing on a typology developed by post-liberal theologian George Lindbeck, Weber (2021, 96–98) suggests two alternatives to the cognitive definition of religion: the *experiential-expressive* and *cultural-linguistic*. The experiential-expressive type is similar to the 'expressive individualism' described by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, with a strong emphasis on inner beliefs driven by a resonant sense of authenticity (Taylor 2018, 299). The cultural-linguistic type is about religion and religious doctrine as a framework which an individual might be socialised into, perhaps similar to Taylor's (2004, 23) social imaginaries (which we will look at later in this chapter). Lindbeck (1984, 35) tells us, 'to become religious […] is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity

[58] Think, for example of Rawls' veil of ignorance, which assumes that if one's circumstances of class, bodily status, gender etc., are bracketed, the underlying individual is a neutral and unbiased judge of social principles.

with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated.' So this 'set of skills' is not primarily discursive, and therefore resembles Bourdieu's (1990, 52) *habitus*, that 'system of structured, structuring dispositions' which 'is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions'. According to Bourdieu, habitus is not doctrine, but rather a way of being in the world, a body of understanding that is drawn on as one goes about life in a particular context. This is what Smith (2013, 79) describes as 'the complex of inclinations and dispositions that make us lean into the world with a habituated momentum in certain directions'. How do these dispositions come about? Weber draws on Žižek and Althusser, who themselves draw on Pascal, to emphasise that belief follows practice rather than vice-versa (Weber 2021, 124). This is the same point that Luhrmann makes in *How God Becomes Real* (2022, x):

> If we start not with a presumption of belief, but with the question of whether the effort people invest in their faith helps them to feel that their gods and spirits are real, we are forced to focus on what people do when they worship gods and spirits, and on how those practices themselves might affect those engaging in them. Then we can ask whether the practices themselves help to make the beliefs compelling.

Too often, argues Luhrmann (2022, xi), it has been assumed that religious practice is the outcome of belief; her work emphasises that belief can be cultivated or 'kindled' through practice. Smith makes a complementary claim in *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009, 134–35): 'We have a tendency to think that doctrine and/or belief comes first—either in a chronological or normative sense —and that this then finds expression or application in worship practices, as if we have a worldview in place and then devise practices that are consistent with that cognitive framework'. Rather than affirm this view, Smith argues that we are motivated by a pre-cognitive conception of the good life, for which he borrows Taylor's term 'social imaginary', which Taylor defines as follows:

> I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. (Taylor 2004, 23)

Social imaginaries are not primarily cognitive, thus are not cultivated through intellectual interventions. Consider, for example, the Swedish discourse on sects and the normative views on the right and wrong types of religion that accompany them (Bogdan 2014). Such attitudes may be widely held, even if they are not carefully reasoned. As Smith (2009, 65) comments, 'To call this an 'imaginary' is already to shift the centre of gravity from the cognitive region of ideas to the more affective region, which is 'closer' to the body'. According to Smith (2009, 65), Taylor makes this distinction between imagination and cognition by drawing on Heidegger's distinction between 'knowledge' (*Wissen*) and 'understanding' (*Verstehen*). Social imaginaries are not theories, although theories can penetrate social imaginaries over time becoming sedimented as implicit understanding. In the process of penetration and embodiment, the theories become 'schematised' and are themselves transformed through practice (Taylor 2004, 30; 2018, 176).

Narrative plays an important role in cultivating our understanding, which is distinct from 'propositional knowledge' in that it is 'visceral and tactile—it runs off the fuel of "images" provided by the senses' (Smith 2009, 66). Whether conveyed through film, through speech, or through text, a narrative allows us to see the world differently; 'It enables those who hear or read it to enter in part into a different way of experiencing the world by eliding the narrated world with the ordinary' (Luhrmann 2022, 28). The relationship between practice and narrative is reciprocal. Although here I am emphasising the too often overlooked role of practice in religious formation, in doing so I do not wish to be dismissive of reflexivity. Attributing conversion entirely to practice risks a kind of downwards conflation in which agency is lost to a deterministic social process (Archer 1995, 3). On the contrary, by drawing on Taylor and Smith, I wish to make a distinction between *belief-as-knowledge* and *belief-as-understanding* and to propose that a definition of belief that is limited only to the former can lead to a reification of a rationalistic anthropology that mistakes human beings for 'brains-on-a-stick' (Smith 2016, 3). By including belief-as-understanding within our definition of belief, I want to suggest that it is possible to hold onto agency while not over-emphasising a kind of propositional, intellectualised view of belief.

Here, I believe Luhrmann's concepts of the *faith frame* and *paracosms* can be useful for situating the practices that cultivate social imaginaries within religious practice (Luhrmann 2022). In *How God Becomes Real*, she argues that the kind of work that humans do to *kindle* belief in gods can be compared to the work of imagination that children do when they play. Her argument is not that God or gods are figments of our imagination, but that knowing these invisible entities as real necessitates the use of imagination. A paracosm, according to Luhrmann, is

'a private but shared imaginary world' (Luhrmann 2022, 25). For children, these worlds are the immersive sites in which play takes place—at times inspired by grand stories like *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* (Luhrmann 2022, 25–26).

> When a religion becomes a paracosm, the religious institution provides the narratives, in rituals and sermons and tales told around the campfire. If a follower takes these stories and begins to live within them, they grip the private imagination so powerfully that—I will argue—they kindle a sense that they are true. The faith frame comes to seem salient, and gods and spirits feel more real. (Luhrmann 2022, 27)

Luhrmann makes it clear that there is agency in the involvement that one has in a paracosm of religious practice. Even if, like the participants in this study, one comes from a 'never-secular' background that does not offer the options of a pluralistic religious landscape, one can choose between engaging with rituals actively or merely carrying them out mechanically (Luhrmann 2022, 56). For whatever reason, the young men at this church give themselves to the rituals in which they participate and, as a result, report being shaped by them; they marinate themselves in the narratives of the church and in rituals which are designed to immerse them in the story of God. They light candles earnestly, with the expectation that what they are doing has implications beyond the material.

Ritual theorists Seligman and Weller (2012) contrast ritual practice with the more modernist emphasis on sincerity of belief.

> [R]itual is not necessarily concerned with what we often call 'sincerity.' In any ritual, as with saying 'please' and 'thank you,' performing the act marks acceptance of the convention. It does not matter how you may feel about the convention, if you identify with it or not. In doing a ritual, the whole issue of our internal states is often irrelevant. What you are is what you are in the doing, which is of course an external act. This differs significantly from modernist concerns with sincerity and authenticity. (Seligman and Weller 2012, 95)

When a person engages in a ritual, they are entering a practice in which the embodiment of a tradition takes precedence over what one believes about that tradition. Seligman and Weller (2012, 94) tell us that this is a space of play and creativity, that 'ritual unshackles the mind from a need to believe in a dogma of our choosing'. This is a space in which movement and formation can take place, because it de-emphasises the role of the mind when it comes to matters of belief. For the participants in this study, I wish to argue, it is precisely the unshackling effect of the rituals of the church which allow them to imagine another identity

for themselves: at first as a playful rehearsal, and later as an expression of commitment in the form of another ritual—baptism.

Some readers might doubt the applicability of Luhrmann's ideas to national church contexts; after all, is she not more interested in esoteric practitioners and Neo-Pentecostals? But Luhrmann argues that all religious communities practice this kind of 'real-making'. While she has given attention to magic practitioners in London and Vineyard Church members in Chicago, among her case studies is Christ the King, a 'Black Catholic Church' in San Diego which seems to have more in common with my field site than the other two. While those in the other churches she follows place a more pietistic emphasis on a personal relationship with God, people at Christ the King talk about experiencing God, not as a 'still small voice', but through connection to others in their congregation (Luhrmann 2022, 47). While not everyone might engage in the liturgy wholeheartedly, those who do are participating in a practice that is rich in narrative. By applying the imagination to such practices, one can become immersed in them.

In Magnus Weber's (2021) study, the social workers were concerned with the risk of radicalisation among their clients. Although (as far as I know) the participants in my research are not viewed by their social workers as at risk of radicalisation, they undergo a similar kind of scrutiny from their migration caseworkers. Most of the participants have included conversion to Christianity as grounds on which they are applying for asylum—that they should not be deported to Afghanistan since it is a country hostile towards Christians, especially to those who have converted from Islam. This means that when they are called for an interview at the office for migration, or face a judge at the appeal court, they are asked questions which are intended to determine whether their conversion narrative is credible and also whether deportation would put them at risk of persecution. In making such determinations, the theory of religion employed by the migration official is of great consequence. But what if the manner in which conversion is assessed is faulty or privileges a certain kind of conversion?

There are certain key assumptions at play in the particular approach that migration case workers take to interviewing the participants in this study; indeed, the interview questions which these officials bring with them to the encounter and their assessment of the participants betray a specific view of what it means to be a Christian that I will unpack with the help of the participants themselves. Sohrab, one of the longer-term members of the group, converted to Christianity in the so-called underground church in Iran and, after spending several years in the town where I carried out my fieldwork, has since moved to another town in Sweden.

He told me of the last interview he had with the migration office before he was granted asylum:

> She asked me a lot of questions from the Bible and my beliefs and Jesus. And yeah, some interesting things happened during my interview. She asked so many verses from the Bible, and asked me, 'Which book do these verses come from?' But, you know, in that time I couldn't remember which verses came from which book of the Bible, and […] I really felt the Holy Spirit help me and I said, for example, 'in John'. And then I checked it after the interview and it was the exact details.[59]

Although this narrative is, for the most part, positive—a story of God's provision during a very stressful situation—it also illustrates the type of questions asked of the participants. In this case, there is an underlying assumption about the kind of relationship that a Christian has to the Bible, as well as about how the Bible as a text works. Note that the case worker did not ask Sohrab, 'How do you interpret scripture?' or what kind of text he thinks the Bible is. Instead, the questions focussed on what the Bible says, and where. In other words, a Christian is someone who has intimate knowledge of the text, particularly in terms of its structure. The question could be framed: '[a] You claim to be a Christian. [b] Christians know how to navigate the Bible. [c] Therefore, you claim to know how to navigate the Bible. [d] Prove it to me.'

Another participant, Haji, described being pushed hard by his interviewer on the question of the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the church. I recorded his story in my field notes:

> Haji told the story of his [migration office] interview. He said that the migration officer had asked him 'Is this your interpretation?' when she began hearing his views about Christianity. He responded, 'I'm no theologian or priest, but we can all think and I think that this is the best that I can understand Christianity using my logic.' He had apparently told her that he has learned that all people are equal and she stopped him and said 'the Bible doesn't say that homosexuals are equal.' She had looked up references to homosexuality in the Bible and brought up the story of Lot and the men who came to demand that he hand over his angelic guests to them. He told her, 'The Bible says that we should love our neighbour. It doesn't say who that neighbour is. It could be you. It could be him [points to someone else in the room]. The Bible doesn't distinguish between you. It means that we

[59] Interview with Sohrab, 10/02/2021

> should love everyone.' She replied, 'Is this your interpretation? What about the parts of the Bible that speak badly of homosexuals?'[60]

In the above passage, the caseworker takes a specific interest in a certain doctrine that she seems to believe represents core Christian beliefs: that is, that according to the Bible, homosexuality is wrong. Underlying this assumption is the idea that the Bible works in a particular way: that passages provide direct answers to specific dilemmas without the need for interpretation. She herself interacts with the Bible with a literalist hermeneutic that is perhaps almost a parody of the Lutheran doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It seems to assume that there is a correct answer to her enquiry which would prove whether or not Haji is a real Christian.

Haji's response to this is interesting since he offers her more than she has asked for. While she is asking for a kind of yes/no response to whether or not the Bible is anti-LGBTQ (and, presumably, how he can possibly believe such a document to be true), he tells her: a) that although he is not a trained theologian, he is able to interpret scripture; b) that the Bible says that all people are equal; c) that the Bible says that we should love our neighbours, and that means LGBTQ persons. He demonstrates that he has an approach to this question which he has reached using his cognitive faculties, but that the answer is drawn from a process of interpretation.

These questions are focussed on belief in a narrow, cognitive sense: do they know their way around a Bible? How do they reason? Such an emphasis overlooks pre-cognitive formation and emphasises the cognitive aspect of religious conversion: the participants' relationship with doctrine. It is a secularist approach to religion which, in its attempt to make what they are analysing understandable, becomes reductionistic.[61] This view is at odds with modern Swedish Lutheranism, which (as I develop in Chapter 4) tends to emphasise belonging and participation over doctrine.[62]

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[60] Extract of field notes, 16/03/2023

[61] Seligman and Weller use the term *notation* to describe the categorisation process by which liberal bureaucracies attempt to define and manage ambiguity in social life. They tell us, 'Context or experience tends to stand in an uneasy relation to notation, just as it does to ritual. At its most abstract extreme, notation obviates all particular contexts and provides only the most general (and generalizable) grids for all experience' (Seligman and Weller 2012, 167)

[62] At this point, I should also note that such an approach to ascertaining authentic Christianity also privileges those who can communicate effectively.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the process whereby the participants in this study begin to identify as Christians, and, therefore, develop this discussion further. For now it suffices to say that it is this practice orientation with which this study is concerned. Now we will turn to situated learning theory, a framework which supplies a vocabulary for discussing the practices of the Bible study group.

Situated Learning in Communities of Practice

In this section, I introduce the situated learning theory which anthropologist Jean Lave developed together with her PhD student Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991). In *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, which is based on his PhD thesis, Wenger (2022) develops the theory into a coherent framework of learning which has some resonances with Bourdieu's field theory, but with a more concrete framing of how social change takes place.

> A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage (Lave and Wenger 1991, 98)

As the name suggests, the community of practice concept is attuned to practice and social identity-in-process. When Wenger and Lave developed the concept, it was intended to highlight and describe the informal social units of learning which exist all around us in society, rather than the institutions to which they may or may not belong. For Lave, it was her work with apprentice tailors in Liberia which helped to shed light on the level at which learning in communities of practice take place: 'it is not in this relationship [to the master], but rather the apprentice's relations to other apprentices and even to other masters that organize opportunities to learn; an apprentice's own master is too distant, an object of too much respect, to engage in awkward attempts at a new activity' (Lave and Wenger 1991, 92). On a day-to-day level, learning takes place between fellow apprentices who may be just one or two steps ahead of each other in their development as tailors. It is due to their mutual commitment to the same activity and to having just recently learned this skill themselves that they are able to guide the development of these skills in others. It is this latter form of learning—learning as a community—which typifies a community of practice.

Although this study is not about apprenticeship in its traditional sense, Lave's findings are nonetheless relevant to it. In the context of the church, priests and deacons are the masters, and the other participants in the group are novices of different degrees or recent full members. During my time at the church, I noticed that learning takes place in several tiers and through a variety of practices. Formally acknowledged learning takes place when the priest teaches the group and for most of the time I was at the church, teaching was organised in this way.

Wenger defines communities of practice as a combination of three things: *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and a *shared repertoire* (Wenger 2022, 73).

Mutual engagement

Wenger tells us, 'practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another' (Wenger 2022, 73). The young men in this study gather with a shared focus. They meet regularly in the same place and at the same time. If someone is not there, they contact them and ask them if they are on their way. Learning takes place in the environment of the church, and in the homes where they meet.

Joint enterprise

There are three factors in joint enterprise: (1) it has to do with 'a collective process of negotiation', which is (2) 'defined by the participants' and constitutes their 'negotiated response to their situation.' Finally, (3) the joint enterprise causes 'relations of mutual accountability' (Wenger 2022, 77–78). This group shares in the enterprise of learning the Bible and deepening their understanding of the Christian life. They are together negotiating what this means for them as asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, or temporary residents. While the group participates in a tradition that predates them, that tradition is not static. Their joint enterprise involves co-opting that tradition and adapting it. They are both reproducing and modifying the tradition through their enactment and embodiment of its practices.

Shared repertoire

As participants in a community of practice continue their enterprise, they come to share particular 'resources for negotiating meaning'. These might include 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence' (Wenger 2022, 82–83). Evidence for the existence of such resources can be witnessed at the end of each Bible study session, when there is a

moment of prayer. Although it is the leader who initiates the prayer, each member of the group understands that they will have an opportunity to pray in whichever language they choose and each does so without hesitation. The prayers follow a common pattern: they tend to be universal ('I ask you to touch everyone who is sick tonight') rather than particular ('please heal Sammy') in scope, and the time ends with the priestly blessing from Leviticus 6 read by the priest or deacon.[63] They conclude the prayer time by making the sign of the cross, touching the hand to the forehead, then the chest, and then to each shoulder in turn.[64] Each of these elements—the style of prayer and type of language used, the shared understanding of how it should be performed, deference to the leader in the group, and the gestures involved in making the sign of the cross—are examples of the repertoire that this group shares by virtue of being members of this community of practice.

Learning in Communities of Practice

Learning in communities of practice is always grounded in a context; it is, to quote the title of Lave and Wenger's book, *situated learning* (1991). Although identities may gain meaning through appealing to universal discourses, learning is built on a connection with actual emplaced and embodied people. While the tradition of Christianity is used to inscribe meaning and identity on the group, it is in face-to-face, local practice that these identities take shape; it is in this small group that the otherwise theoretical concept of *Christian* is enfleshed through negotiation within the group.

For Wenger, learning is a social process with the negotiation of meaning as its core activity. 'The negotiation of meaning is a productive process, but negotiating meaning is not constructing it from scratch. Meaning is not pre-existing, but neither is it simply made up. Negotiated meaning is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique' (Wenger 2022, 54). It is a hermeneutic circle in which the participants in the Bible study group draw from scripture, language, tradition, history, and social norms to form a living interpretation of the here and now and their place in it. The participants are not generating an entirely new

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[63] 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace' Leviticus 6:24-26 (New International Version)

[64] On one occasion during my fieldwork, one of the priests led a study in which she explained the standard order of service and also taught participants how to make the sign of the cross in the order practiced in the Church of Sweden.

practice, but neither are they taking on one that is pre-existing. From the very beginning of their involvement with the church, they are caught up in a history that can be traced to before Martin Luther. Alasdair MacIntyre, writing more generally about narrative, puts it this way: 'The characters of course never start literally *ab initio*; they plunge *in medias res*, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before' (MacIntyre 2007, 215). That said, they are negotiating the meaning of that history for their own subjectivities and situatedness, since there are no givens when one talks of integrating a new identity into an already historied person. This resembles the axes of *continuity* and *discontinuity* which Stuart Hall argued are the crucial dialogic on which cultural identity is constructed (Hall 1990).

So, as in the example above, what it means to be Christian relates both to the meaning of this concept prior to this group, but also to the negotiated meaning of the concept produced by the group. In the context of the group, the concept *Christian* already informed the practices of the church, already had a history and a history of negotiation throughout time, but that does not mean that the concept is just absorbed, pre-chewed, by these young converts. It is worked into their own being-in-the-world through practice in community. In the next chapter, we look in more detail at how this process takes shape.

Negotiation of meaning is constituted by two parts, participation and reification. *Participation* involves belonging to a group and being actively engaged in that group (Wenger 2022, 55). 'A defining characteristic of participation is the possibility of developing an "identity of participation," that is, an identity constituted through relations of participation' (Wenger 2022, 56). So, unlike expressive individualism, where you look within to find your authentic self, identity in communities of practice emerges through (inter)action.

Reification has to do with making something concrete or tangible which otherwise is not. A written law, for example, turns an agreed-upon practice into an artefact. As Wenger comments, 'Any community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form' (Wenger 2022, 59). Even within this small community of practice there are too many of these reifications to list, but they include baptism candles, meeting structures, patterns of behaving, and even the bread and wine used in the Eucharist. The very act of baptism is a reification of the long process by which a participant in the community formally recognises and is recognised as being Christian.

Trajectories

The equivalent of narrative identity (discussed in Chapter 2) in the language of situated learning theory is the concept of *trajectory*. An individual makes sense of the past and anticipates the future by imagining themselves heading in a particular direction and originating at a particular point. 'To me, the term trajectory suggests not a path that can be foreseen or charted but a continuous motion—one that has a momentum of its own in addition to a field of influences. It has a coherence through time that connects the past, the present, and the future' (Wenger 2022, 154). So, although a trajectory is processual and ongoing, it has coherence. 'A sense of trajectory gives us ways of sorting out what matters and what does not, what contributes to our identity and what remains marginal' (Wenger 2022, 155). It is thus a hermeneutical device used to interpret circumstances. Individuals are constantly reconstructing their identities as projects which are affected by the social context(s) in which they participate. A trajectory gives language to the individual's own identity process as it plays out in relation to the group.

Situated learning theory has a lot in common with Bourdieu's theory of fields. Both emphasise the role of practice and social formation as well as group dynamics; however, their most significant difference is related to the question of identity and change. For Bourdieu, the concept of *habitus*, a person's particular set of dispositions, is formed most significantly during early childhood—in the home and early years of schooling (Bourdieu and Passeron 2000, 43–44). Bourdieu describes habitus as 'embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus', and explains that it 'cannot be transmitted instantaneously' (Bourdieu 1986, 18).[65] One's habitus is generative of practices, so, for example, the practices of the group, in Bourdieu's theory, would be the product of an underlying and fairly stable habitus. Conversely, Wenger's view is that 'the habitus would be an emerging property of interacting practices rather than their generative infrastructure, with an essence unto itself' (Wenger 2022, 289). So communities of practice are generative of identities through the process of the negotiation of meaning. This, in my view, is a clearer account of social change than Bourdieu offers. This means that within the situated learning framework, identity is clearly malleable, and shaped by practice. While I think that Bourdieu's theory has been unfairly critiqued as heavily deterministic, it has certainly tended to be read that way since it lacks clarity in explaining how

[65] Indeed, according to Bourdieu (1990, 68), acquisition of a new habitus is a slow process 'equivalent to a second birth'.

individual change takes place (Elder-Vass 2007, 328). Wenger's theory, on the other hand, has a clear conception of individual change and avoids an explanation of early-years formation that would inhibit the potential for later change. That being so, we will return to Bourdieu's logic of practice in Chapter 6.

In spite of my siding with Wenger on this question, I think contrasting the two should remind us not to overlook the impact of one's primary habitus, which may not determine one's actions but may still inform the way in which one reasons and responds to circumstances. If I were to take a purely forward-looking (futuristic) approach to social change, I could overlook the effects of the participants' first 13-16 years of exposure to a Shiʿa Muslim context and, therefore, be blind to the impact that that social imaginary might have on them (which I discuss further in Chapter 4).

Wenger describes five different trajectories that a person might take in relation to a community of practice (illustrated in Figure 3.1). The first and most straightforward is the *inbound trajectory*, which is the trajectory whereby a non-participant becomes a full participant. This was the most common of those described during the interviews I conducted. The participant begins as a non-member, usually Muslim or, by this point, agnostic (see Chapter 4 for more on this). During the course of the interview(s) they described coming to a point where they identified as Christian and were baptised, all of which involved joining the group and becoming full members after a season of preparation.

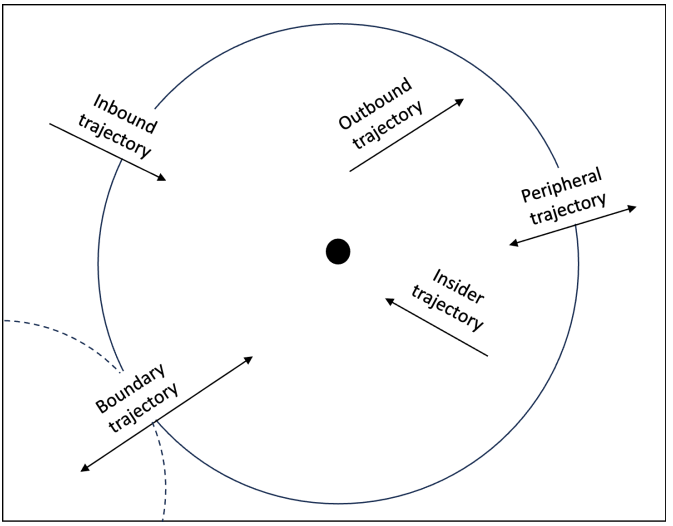

Figure 3.1: Different types of trajectories described by Wenger (illustration mine).

An *outbound trajectory* is followed by those who have been full participants, but are now moving away from full membership; they are essentially on their way out of this community of practice. This should not be mistaken for de-conversion, since being Christian is not dependent on membership in the Bible study group. An example of this is Abdullah, who participated in the group for a period of time as a full participant but decided to move to France after being denied asylum in Sweden. After leaving, there was no way for him to continue participating in the group, although I was informed by his 'Swedish mum' that he sought out a church when he arrived in France.

The *insider trajectory* represents the continued learning and formation of those who are already full members. While in some communities of practice, the insider trajectory is clearly defined, within the Church of Sweden, it is less so. Aziz, like other full members of this community of practice, experienced a clearly structured process between non/pre-membership and full membership, participating in the Bible study and baptismal classes for a year prior to baptism. Although he has continued to be actively involved in the church since he was baptised, it is unclear what his 'next step' might look like. While there may be some who would choose to train as deacons or priests, for the majority of converts there is no clear way to structure one's learning in the community of practice post-baptism. As I argue in Chapter 4, this is one factor that may explain why group members tend to be less involved in the group after receiving residency.

Those with *boundary trajectories* 'find their value in spanning boundaries and linking communities of practice' (Wenger 2022, 154). They are those whose work involves bridging different communities of practice. A prime example of this at my field site is the priest, who is both a full member of the Bible study group and a full member of the staff team at the church. This multi-membership is part of the role of the priest as she bridges the identity of the group with the broader identity of the church.

Finally, a *peripheral trajectory* takes two forms. First, it can be a stage that someone on an inbound trajectory goes through prior to becoming a full member: for example, Aziz when he first began visiting the Bible study group. Second, it can represent the entirety of a person's involvement with a community of practice, as they participate on the sidelines for a time before leaving the community of practice altogether. Although up to this point he had participated in the liturgy, including the lighting of candles, he left before the Bible study group began and did not return to it during my time there. Wenger tells us that even 'a very peripheral form of participation, for instance, may turn out to be central to one's

identity because it leads to something significant' (Wenger 2022, 155). Kraft describes another example of a peripheral trajectory in her work with Syrian refugees who are exposed to Evangelical churches through their relief work and later attendance at church services. The group that she studied seemed somewhat transformed by their first-hand experience of these churches even though few regarded themselves as having converted:

> It is therefore possible that, as part of the process of displacement and forced migration, many refugees may begin to travel down a road that resembles religious conversion, but few ever come to see themselves as people who have converted religiously. They spend time in the process of 'converting', but never come to describe themselves as 'converts'. (Kraft 2017, 222)

Kraft opens the door to seeing conversion processes as not necessitating an end point of religious re-identification, thereby creating the potential to recognise the kind of transformation and exploration which is inherent in the fluidity and change characteristic of migration.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Wenger and Lave call the process by which an individual participates before they fully belong to a group *legitimate peripheral participation*. This activity is legitimate because participation is granted by other members of the group. It is peripheral because it takes place on the sidelines of full membership. Legitimate peripheral participation is an important part of the process whereby a novice outsider becomes a full member of the community of practice. Legitimate peripheral participation is an 'approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice' (Wenger 2022, 100); it is a practice phase in which novices participate in practices in a manner that may not be fully formed, but which is close enough to draw them towards full competence; it is a low-risk introduction to full membership.

Let us look at each part of legitimate peripheral participation in order to understand what it entails. The first aspect is legitimacy—to be able to participate at this immature and underdeveloped level, the novice needs a group member to vouch for them, to make participation feel safe for the newcomer and acceptable to the rest of the group. The other members must be able to imagine this novice as a potential full member. 'In order to be on an inbound trajectory, newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members' (Wenger 2022, 101). Although a person may be inclined to join a community of practice,

it is essential that they receive a warm reception and are treated by existing members as potentially part of them. For this group, this is not difficult, since all have recent memories of having joined the group themselves and, since its inception, it has been open to newcomers.[66] Lack of acceptance, according to Wenger, hinders learning. He goes on, 'Granting the newcomers legitimacy is important because they are likely to come short of what the community regards as competent engagement' (Wenger 2022, 101). For a trainee bicycle mechanic, this legitimacy, and therefore entry into a community of practice of bike mechanics may be founded on adjacent knowledge—being a keen cyclist or having a family member who is a bike mechanic—traits which the existing members accept in lieu of the ability to repair a bicycle. For these young men in the Church of Sweden, legitimacy is offered to them by priests and deacons who have the authority within the group to welcome them in. Legitimacy secures them the opportunity to practice being a Church of Sweden Christian prior to accruing the relevant understanding and experience to be perceived as full members. It gives them the entitlement to stay and participate, even if that participation is imperfect and marked by mistakes.

Within the Church of Sweden, there is a clear demarcation of membership; full membership is marked by the ritual of baptism (Svenska Kyrkan 2023a). During this ritual, the person being baptised stands at a baptismal font dressed in a white robe similar to that worn by the priest. They then have water poured on their head three times, once for each person of the trinity.[67] Baptism is an important subject matter for the church and was brought up regularly at Sunday services during my fieldwork. It gets revisited in family services, where children are reminded of their baptisms and invited to receive a book. The priests talk about 'living in your baptism' as a kind of daily act.[68] At this particular church, the lobby of the church hall is decorated with photos of staff members—priests, deacons, musicians, church educators, and so on—along with the name of each staff member and the year in which they were baptised. On several occasions during my time at the church, the priest leading the Bible study class asked those participating to tell the

[66] There is a strong sense of solidarity built around the group's shared deviance from the religion of their birth. I discuss solidarity more in Chapter 6, where I look at Honneth's recognition framework. This fairly swift sense of solidarity differs from the 'ambivalent process' described by Stausberg and the reception that Shanneik's Shi'a convert participants reported, in which 'No one notices that you are here' (Shanneik 2018, 134).

[67] 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'

[68] Although this is a concept which I do not remember being concretely defined by the priest.

rest of the group when they were baptised. During these moments, participants would reminisce about the day of their baptism, how they felt, who came, and what gifts they received. It is in these ways that the church emphasises that all members are united as one body through a common act.

Paradigmatic Trajectories

One final trajectory type that Wenger suggests is the *paradigmatic trajectory*. These represent the pre-trodden paths or blueprints of an ideal or typical trajectory in the community. It might be the trajectory followed by a character from the history of the community, or an ideal composite narrative (Wenger 2022, 156). Cejvan (2023, 66) comments, 'I understand paradigmatic trajectories as narrative arch, beyond the individual that helps shaping individual life stories while also providing evidence of old-timers' attainment of the same.'

The Church of Sweden has a paradigmatic trajectory that has been well-established by generations of Swedish Lutheran Christians. It is a sacramental church, and the paradigmatic trajectory can be traced through these sacraments. Although the church is keen to point out that a person can be baptised at any age,[69] the most common practice is to baptise children under one year of age, something reflected in their promotional material which describes it as '*livets första fest*' (life's first party) (Svenska Kyrkan 2023d). This baptism is later confirmed in the Confirmation ritual, which follows a period of preparation with teaching from a priest and several weeks at a confirmation summer camp, most often in the year that the person turns 15 (Svenska Kyrkan 2023f). Other elements of the traditional paradigmatic trajectory of the Church of Sweden are marriages and funerals (Svenska Kyrkan 2017).

It should already be obvious to those reading that, because they were raised Muslim and arrived in Sweden in their mid-to-late teens, the young men in this group do not follow the typical trajectory. Indeed, one could say that there is a paradigmatic trajectory specific to this community of practice. The sacraments are still involved, but they begin later. After stating that they are interested in baptism, the young men spend roughly a year in preparation. This time involves attending church activities and receiving teaching from a priest. Since they are baptised as

[69] Svenska Kyrkan (2023e)

older teens or adults, it is not necessary for them to confirm their baptism.[70] Ongoing participation in the Bible study group is part of this paradigmatic trajectory, as is keeping track of the stories of those who leave the group, particularly those who receive residency and move away for work after becoming a full member.

Is the Church of Sweden a Community of Practice?

While there may be some overlap between communities of practice and institutions, one does not map directly onto the other. The young men in this community of practice are members of both the Church of Sweden and this Bible study group, and their membership in the latter makes sense in part because of their relationship to the broader church. It would be unusual for someone to join this group for an extended period without choosing to be baptised into the Church of Sweden. But the overlapping membership does not make the Church of Sweden a community of practice.

What does make a community of practice? As we discussed earlier, the attributes that Wenger identifies are *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire*. One of the biggest obstacles to the Church of Sweden being a community of practice is its size. With a membership of just over 5.5 million people, it is one of the largest membership organisations in the country. One is a member by virtue of being baptised, and one remains a member by being registered and by paying a membership fee that is drawn from the taxes of all members who are also residents (and taxpayers). Although membership costs money, the fact that it is taken directly from income tax means that it is not routinely drawn to the attention of the church member. In this sense, membership is a relatively passive enterprise. It has been calculated that only around 80,000 people attend Church of Sweden services on a weekly basis, and 300,000 on a monthly basis (Ekenberg 2016, 31). This means that the Church of Sweden lacks both mutual engagement and joint enterprise, since active presence and interpersonal connection are fairly limited across the 5.5 million members. The level of engagement of the membership of the church—the participation, which is at the core of the work of the negotiation of meaning—is not high enough to warrant viewing the institution as a whole as a community of practice. Where the Church of Sweden most resembles a community of practice is in relation to a

[70] This is true of others who join the Church of Sweden as adults, such as non-members who wish to get married in the church.

shared repertoire. Members of the church have a common handbook: the prayer book. They have a canon of hymns that they sing when they gather. They have traditions which they follow according to events and seasons.

I would propose that it is correct to view some groups within the Church of Sweden as communities of practice. Besides this Bible study group, these may include staff groups within the parishes, international aid and development committees (ACT groups (Svenska Kyrkan 2023c)), parish councils, confirmation groups, parent and toddler groups, research committees, and other small social units in which negotiation of meaning takes place. This is consistent with Lave and Wenger's original use of the concept—as related to, but distinct from, more formal structures. In Wenger's words, 'A community of practice itself can be viewed as a simple social system. And a complex social system can be viewed as constituted by interrelated communities of practice' (Wenger 2010, 179). In this language, the Bible study group is a simple social system, while the Church of Sweden is a complex one.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the theoretical framework for this dissertation. I have described the practice orientation and have argued with reference to Magnus Weber that, in order to understand and make claims about conversions and the identity processes that these young men undergo, it is fruitful to view them not simply as a cognitive, doctrine-oriented processes, or as an expressive individualist act of 'finding one's self', but as also involving embodied practice and social relationships. Taking this shift towards practice does not necessitate leaving the cognitive behind, but hopefully helps to avoid reducing a complex and highly relational process to a simplistic and individualistic one. After this, I introduced Wenger and Lave's situated learning theory as a framework for explaining the situated learning process by which an outsider becomes an insider after passing through peripherality in relation to the group. In the next chapter, I develop my analysis, looking at the form that conversion takes in the lives of these young men and this will help us to see the role that practice and legitimate peripheral participation plays in the formation of unaccompanied, refugee minor-background Christians.

4. The Three Bs: Belonging, Behaving, Believing

In this chapter, I draw on my data to describe a generalised process of conversion which is common to all members of this group. I do so by focussing on three aspects of religious life—belonging, believing, and behaving (the 'three Bs')—whose interrelation of these three has not been given sufficient attention in the academic literature. Following learning theorists Lave and Wenger (1991), I argue that through experiences of belonging and *legitimate peripheral participation* (described in Chapter 3) participants predisposed themselves to experience a sense of authenticity when confronted with the possibility of embracing the truth claims of the church. This process was hastened by plausibility structures which were embodied in the community of practice and also the participants themselves. During the course of the chapter, I also iterate on my initial process diagram to demonstrate that a deeper look at the data revealed a closer relationship between the three Bs than I had initially understood. First, however, I introduce you to Jeremiah, whose narrative gives flesh to these processes.

Vignette 2: Jeremiah

Jeremiah is Hazara. He was born to Afghan parents who had lived in Iran for several generations before he was born. However, because he is not Iranian, he lived in fear of being deported to Afghanistan. His family are pious Shi'a Muslims, his uncle an imam, and before he left for Europe Jeremiah was being trained to one day become an imam himself. During his childhood he did not meet practitioners of other religions, but he recalls hearing about Jews and Christians on important occasions like Ashura when he heard imams describing these groups as enemies of Islam and he heard them praying for their demise.

In 2013, when Jeremiah was 15, his family decided that it would be best for him to leave Iran. He was tired of living in legal precarity and they hoped that he would

find a better future in Europe. With the help of smugglers, he travelled to Turkey and then on to Europe. The journey to Sweden took him almost a year as he spent two to three months in different countries along the route.

Jeremiah's first encounter with Christians was in Bulgaria, where he was helped by a group of Christians from Poland. This raised questions in his mind about what he had been taught to believe about Christians, but at that stage he did not have time to reflect on this, since he had to continue his journey to Sweden.

When he initially arrived in Sweden and applied for asylum, Jeremiah lived in a group home in a small coastal town. In time, he began to feel that it was safe to pursue the curiosity he had about Christians. He discovered that one of the staff members in the home was Christian and asked her to take him to a church. She took him to a service one Sunday but, not long after arriving, he was overwhelmed by a strange feeling ('I felt heavy, very heavy') and left the building immediately. Jeremiah was concerned that by entering the church he had sinned against Islam, and so did not go back for a considerable time. When he started school, however, he met some young Christians who spoke Farsi. They invited him to hang out with them and he began to ask them questions about their faith. He was surprised to discover that they did not view Muslims as their enemies and was impressed by the simple way in which they described their faith ("the only thing that's important for Christians is to believe in Jesus and to follow his message"). Jeremiah began to seek out information about this message.

Around this time, he received his first rejection letter from the migration office, and became depressed. He describes his depression as stemming not only from the rejection, but also from his new thoughts about people. He liked the new ideas he was learning about, but was also afraid that embracing them would mean rejecting his birth culture.

Not long after this, Jeremiah developed kidney stones and was in a great deal of pain. One day, he was in so much pain that he collapsed and became unconscious. He asked some of his peers for help, but they took a long time to respond. When they finally came to see him, they told him not to worry and did not take the pain he was in seriously. He eventually contacted Maria, a Swedish woman he knew who he hoped could help him. By this point, Jeremiah had given up on Islam. He was disappointed with the religion of his upbringing and was not actively pursuing any form of relationship to God. When Maria told him that they should seek assistance from the Pentecostal Church, he initially refused. He did not want to repeat his negative experience of church, and did not want to be around religious

people. But she managed to persuade him that this was one of the only remaining options for getting help that she could suggest.

The pastor at the Pentecostal Church did not ask about Jeremiah's religious background, but took him to get help and advocated on his behalf when healthcare professionals questioned his legal status.

Eventually Jeremiah began to feel better and started attending a language café at the Pentecostal Church. He made friends and became curious about other aspects of the church's work. He had been having suicidal thoughts and had felt that his life had no meaning, but found talking about it with his friends at the church made him feel calmer. One day, seeing his curiosity, they invited him to a prayer meeting and he was prayed for ('in the Pentecostal Church they lay hands on you when they pray'). Although this experience was strange to Jeremiah, he reports that he began to feel peaceful and safe. At this point, he had not decided to be Christian, but no longer considered himself Muslim.

Being undocumented, Jeremiah continued to have difficulty accessing healthcare. Some friends from the Pentecostal Church took him to a hospital in the present town where he could get help. These friends paid for everything that he needed out of their own pockets ('it wasn't the church paying for this, it was this couple!'). He decided to remain in this town because he needed to attend regular appointments at the hospital there. The couple who had brought him to the city found a woman with a room where he could stay.

As time went on, he began to have trouble living without a god. He was depressed and felt like his life was meaningless. 'I had always believed in a god, so it didn't work to just stop believing', he told me. He was not willing to return to Islam, so he began researching online, trying to understand the options available to him. He told me that the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches reminded him too much of Islam, but his research and prior experience of Protestantism made him curious to learn more about it.

Jeremiah began attending services at a Church of Sweden congregation in the city where he was living and was impressed by what he observed. On the first Sunday he was there, a priest invited him to come forward to sit with the rest of the congregation ('in Iran, it is only the wealthy who sit close to the Imam. The poor people sit at the back'). This was done without asking him who he was or where he came from, which he took as a sign of acceptance. He was also surprised when one of the deacons prayed for people in other countries, people that Jeremiah knew were Muslim. This was an important moment for him as it contrasted with his memories from Iran of imams praying for bad things to happen to Jews and

Christians. As the weeks went by, Jeremiah was invited to join different programmes at the church, and was asked to help out in the kitchen. All of this gave him a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Becoming Christian was a difficult decision for Jeremiah, one which he considered carefully. He was worried about what it might mean for his relationship with his family, what it might mean for his status in the country (would it make it easier to find him?). On Easter Saturday 2018, he was invited to sleep over at the church with his Bible group. During the evening they discussed faith, asked questions, and prayed. They fell asleep. Jeremiah remembers being woken early in the morning by the priest and reminded that this was the morning of the resurrection. As they prayed, she said, 'He is risen. Jesus is among us.' Jeremiah closed his eyes and recalls, 'At that moment I felt God's love—the Holy Spirit's power—and that Jesus was right there with us […] I felt like Jesus had said 'yes' to me, and that now I was a Christian […] It was the biggest decision of my life.'

Some time after this, Jeremiah was baptised at the church. In a picture taken on the day, he is dressed in his white baptismal robe, beaming, while surrounded by his 'Swedish family'—a collection of older men and women dressed in their Sunday best—the church altar their backdrop.

A Process of Transformation

After an initial read through of the interview data, I created a model to illustrate the conversion process that the participants in this study underwent on the way to defining themselves as Christians and being baptised in the Church of Sweden. Figure 4.1 (below) presents this generalised overview.[71] In what follows, I describe the figure from left to right in order to give clarity to each stage of the process. Before I do, it should be pointed out that although I believe that such models offer a worthwhile insight into the shape that these processes take, the processes themselves are, like all social phenomena, far more complex, and the steps within them far less distinct than such an illustration might imply. When assessing my

[71] Although the word 'behave' has some unfortunate connotations, I use the 'three Bs' of belonging, believing, and behaving as they offer a useful tool for unpicking aspects of Christian social identity from a 'functionalist' perspective (Saggau 2020, 44–45), as can be seen in literature in sociology, mission studies, and Church history [Friesen and Wagner (2012); Saggau (2020); Weyers (2012);].

data, I have sought to identify 'demi-regularities' (Edwards and Burton 2021, 495)—patterns in the data which offer a meaningful way to understand the phenomena of conversion among this group.

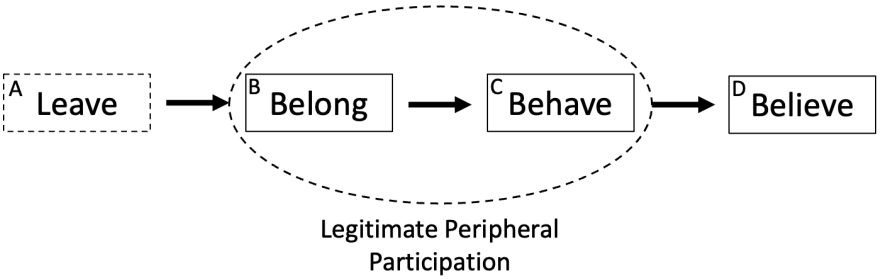

Figure 4.1: The general process of conversion that participants follow. Since this is based on my first reading of the material, I present a revised version of this model at the end of the discussion.

Leave

Beginning on the left, with the dotted border (A), we have the word *Leave*. I include this because, as Kraft has pointed out, converts from Islam to a new religion often go through a process of leaving Islam and enter a period of avoiding religious engagement before they begin to participate in any other religious practices (Kraft 2013b, 6–7). According to the accounts of participants in this study, they either became disillusioned with and left Islam prior to engaging with the church, or, although they still considered themselves to be Muslims, were somewhat ambivalent towards the religion of their birth at the time of their first encounter. As can be expected in conversion narratives (Stene 2020, 212), during interviews, Islam was routinely described in negative terms, with Amin, for example, comparing the church with his religious experience in Iran:

> We had lots of pictures at home: of Imams, and prophets, lines from the Qurʾan. And my mum told me the whole time: 'They're watching you when you are home. You must be careful to do your best, otherwise God will punish you.' And so I was afraid. I was afraid of Islam and I was afraid of God.[72]

While the presence of Shiʿa 'saints' was ubiquitous in his home, the overarching impact was to create a sense of social control and surveillance. Shaheed described

[72] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

a similar sense of feeling surveilled in relation to the permissibility of speaking about God: 'I remember when I was little […] I asked my friend, "Who is God? Can you tell me?" And he said to me "No, no! We are not allowed to think about God. Maybe we would doubt and then we would go to hell."'[73] Shaheed later told me:

> In Islam, they tell something different [to Christianity] about God. For example, the whole time you must be afraid of God. There isn't a nice connection between people and God. The whole time there is a threat—a threat—that you must follow God or you will be punished.[74]

According to these participants, in the particular context in which they were raised, religious discourse was carefully regulated by more knowledgeable others; for these young men it was imams and parents who played a role in defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for their religious milieu. Most of the participants knew little about Christians prior to leaving Iran. Those who had knowledge had been warned against mixing with them:

> If I mentioned anything to my uncle he would say 'Oh yes those are the enemies of Islam.' […] I learned that Jews are the biggest enemy of Islam and that Christians are second. When I went with my parents to important Muslim celebrations, we would always pray good things for Islam and Muslims and bad for Jews, Buddhists, Christians.[75]

This strong exclusivist approach, highly critical of Christianity and Judaism, led the participants to view Christians as their enemies. This was relatively unproblematic when they did not have contact with Christians, but when they entered a more pluralistic setting, their first-hand experiences contradicted what they had been told. Jeremiah described his first encounter with Christians as follows:

> In Bulgaria I met all kinds of groups. And that's where I first met Christians. And I saw how they were on fire for people. They were passionate about refugees. And we were mostly from Muslim lands. They did everything to help us. […] And when I saw that one of them was wearing a cross I asked them about it and

[73] Interview with Shaheed, 25/06/2020

[74] Second interview with Shaheed, 02/07/2020

[75] Interview with Jeremiah, 05/03/2021

> someone told me, 'Oh yes they are Christians from Poland.' I thought, 'Christians? Should I receive help from them? They're supposed to be our enemies. But they're here and they're helping Muslims. And Muslims are not helping us. Why is that?'[76]

Such apparent contradictions produced a degree of cognitive dissonance in the participants. They were forced to question which was right—their parents or their experiences? For some, discovering these 'cracks' in the narrative which they had been taught was the beginning of a loss of trust in their preconceived notions about the world. In time, these cracks led to an openness and curiosity towards those whom they had previously been taught to view as their enemies. This effect is like that experienced by Öztürk's Iranian participants whose loss of trust in the institutions of their homeland brought with it a destabilising effect on their identities (2022, 227–28).

It is important to point out that these accounts represent Islam in a very particular locale and as experienced by a group who chose to convert away from it. Since I do not wish to imply that these critiques apply to all instances of Islam, it is crucial to contextualise them. While these participants are using rather generic language to talk about a seemingly monolithic 'Islam', it is clear from their comments that they are referring to the particular expression of Shi'a Islam into which they were socialised at home. While some describe being treated harshly by imams, the majority of commentary on the subject of Islam is localised around the home setting and how their families negotiated religious practice. Added to this, it is to be expected that converts will portray their past experiences in negative terms and juxtapose these negative experiences with their new positive experiences of transformed faith (Stene 2020, 212).

It is also worth mentioning here that the Western gaze tends to over-emphasise the centrality of Islam in the lives of ordinary Iranians. Benedikt Römer has sought to add nuance to the somewhat monolithic way in which Iran is understood by many in the West, and to suggest that the conversion of Iranians to Christianity in Europe is reflective of 'an ongoing religious transformation of Iran' (Römer 2024, 158). Although this may be true in the case of Iranian converts, my data indicates that the participants in this study were somewhat sheltered from the religious pluralism that Römer portrays. This is perhaps because of the precarious social status and marginalisation to which Hazaras are subject in Iran (Monsutti 2007, 171; Glazebrook and Abbasi-Shavazi 2007, 191–92). There were, however, participants in this study who acknowledged the ambivalence toward Islam

[76] Interview with Jeremiah, 15/10/2020

among their peers who remained in Iran, particularly as they have become older teens and young adults and, thus, less under the influence of their parents. Perhaps the seeming unanimity among other participants on the 'very religious' nature of their families reflects the age they were when they left Iran, rather than the reality for Hazara adults today. Shaheed, who is the only participant who has been back to Iran since coming to Sweden, told me:

> I have met [them] in Iran and there are many who are here. There are still some who are here who are religious and they are even more religious [than before]. I don't know why. But I have met many who have lost one hundred percent of their faith. Like, they are atheists, real atheists. But in Iran too it's like this. I've met many who really hate Islam. One of them is my brother. He wasn't like this before, but now he is like…totally closed for Islam. If you speak of this, he gets irritated. He says, 'I don't want to hear about that.'[77]

This is an interesting observation that supports one of the central theses of this dissertation: that in the course of migration, identity is always in motion. Even if an individual does not convert to another religion, or atheism, their commitments to, or understanding of their present identity morph as they encounter a multiplicity of lifeworlds in a pluralistic society. Shaheed's Muslim friends in Sweden have become more religious since arriving here. Others have become passionate atheists. Still others, for example in this group, have adopted another religious identity entirely.

For some members of the group, the disillusionment they experienced with Islam was strongly relational in nature. Karim, for example, became involved with an Afghan religious group when he arrived in the city. They met to pray and eat together in private homes. However, the older men in this community accused Karim and his friends of not being interested in Islam for the right reasons:

> And those last days in 2016, I got into trouble with those older people…those older Afghans who we had met in the city, and we gathered in their house and we prayed together and went together. But after a while they had said to us, me and my friend, 'You are not serious about prayer. And you just come to eat food and joke around. But you're not serious.' And I became sad at them and I thought that

[77] Interview with Shaheed, 21/04/2023

> it was good that I am Muslim and I pray on my own in my room. And I was disappointed in them and I didn't want to be with them anymore.[78]

According to Karim, the older men thought that these younger men were involved simply because they wanted to get free food. Being accused of this by men whom he had looked up to caused him to withdraw from them. For Jeremiah, the disillusionment came at a time when he was physically vulnerable, struggling with his health.

> It was really hard for me and my faith got weaker, and I had problems with my stomach and kidneys, and trouble with my mental health. Because I was…I felt totally dead—I felt like I was going to die! And, yeah. My faith got weaker and weaker. And I ended up falling at a friends house. I fell there and I woke up and had a lot of pain in my back and all of this side [of my body] here. And I had had these rejections, so I couldn't call the police or ambulance because I thought they would arrest me. So I rang those Muslim friends that I had. I rang them and said 'I have a problem, I can't get up.' I asked them to help me and they said that they couldn't help me today, they were in school or job, or whatever. And two of them when they came, they had a car. They came and they looked and they said 'No, it doesn't look like anything dangerous. Rest a bit, you're going to be fine.' And I was very disappointed, very disappointed. How could he do this? He just left.[79]

If these friends of his had helped Jeremiah, perhaps he would not have sought the help of the church at all.

Possibly because they are crafted under the gaze of migration officials, the narratives of participants often portray a long-term dissatisfaction with the religion of their birth. According to his account, Amin lost interest in Islam when his father died and he heard an Imam describe the trials that a person goes through after death. He told me, 'My dad was a good man, a kind man. Even if I wanted, I could not be religious like my dad for God, for Allah. But why when he died, did that Mullah say those scary things?'[80] Amin could not believe that God would punish his father in spite of his devotion and good character. Shortly after that, his mother enrolled him at an Islamic school:

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[78] Interview with Karim, 12/02/2021

[79] Interview with Jeremiah, 15/10/2020

[80] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

> I had to learn things I didn't like, for my family's sake. And when I started at the Islamic school I only had a negative perspective. I only saw bad things. When I was that age, eight years old, it was too early for me to start with this. [At] that age, kids play, they are totally free,[81] they don't think about these things. But for me, because I had lost the most important person in my family, I had begun [thinking about these things] that year. And then I didn't want to learn about the Qur'an.[82]

Here Amin suggests that, after his father's death, there was a rupture between the self that he presented to the world, and his authentic inner self. According to his account, living as a Muslim did not make him Muslim since his thinking had already begun to diverge from the norms around him. His view of the world was different from that of his society, and so in order to protect his family, he behaved in one way while thinking and feeling another. In the quote above, he remarks on the discomfort this caused him at a time in life when he felt that he really should have been just enjoying being a child. After leaving Iran, Amin is able to resolve this sense of division in his identity and begins to admit to others that he is no longer Muslim. He tells the story of an encounter with a priest in a refugee camp in Germany who had come to visit his Afghan neighbours and asked them if they were Muslim:

> I raised my hand and said 'No, I'm not Muslim.' Because by then I could say that in front of people. And the priest was a bit surprised—he looked at me in a way that showed me he was surprised. I realise it was maybe a bit strange—a guy who was young, who came from Afghanistan, who isn't Muslim—how could this be? In the end, about two hours later, they were going to leave and he said to me first of all 'Do you know that what you said could be dangerous for you? It might be better not to say it so directly.' I told him, 'No, I'm not afraid.'[83]

This part of his narrative illustrates a crucial moment for Amin—a point at which, by aligning his public description of himself with the reality he feels within, he resolves a tension he has carried with him for a long time.[84]

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[81] It is interesting that here he seems to be describing the Western ideal of childhood.

[82] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

[83] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

[84] In writing this, I am drawing on the work of Peter Stromberg (2008), who argues that conversion narratives are performative acts which resolve psychological conflicts by converting the unspeakable into a socially acceptable codified language.

There are thought to be two distinct processes that take place when a Muslim becomes a Christian. First, there is the rejection of Islam, and second, the adoption of Christianity (Kraft 2013b, 6–7). While the main focus of this dissertation is conversion to Christianity and its implications, it is important to take into account where these young converts come from because it makes it possible to understand the phenomenon more fully and avoids treating refugees as *blank slates* with no prior history (Zaman 2016, 44–45). In this section, I have introduced some of the background to how the participants describe coming to leave Islam or beginning to consider themselves something other than Muslim. It is interesting that the participants narrate the religious context in which they were brought up as fairly closed and strict. In Chapter 1, I introduced the work of Ines Jindra (Jindra 2014, 5), who described two patterns in her data. The first was that converts moved from closed to more open and theologically liberal religious environments. The second was in the opposite direction, from unstructured to structured. This first pattern is worth bearing in mind as we look at the characteristics of the participants' journeys into belonging in the Church of Sweden.

Belong

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the experience that a participant has when on the periphery is vital to whether learning takes place. This stage in the process is described by the next box (B) in Figure 4.1: *Belong*. The participants in this study usually came into contact with the church after being invited by a friend or, less commonly, by independently seeking it out following a period of intense curiosity about Christianity. They began attending services at the church long before they decided to become Christian and get baptised.[85] Indeed, participants report arriving at the church with a high degree of scepticism about its truth claims. In spite of this, they described being offered a warm and non-judgemental welcome and the space to be present without having to account for their presence or indicate commitment to a particular creed.

One of the most common themes to emerge from the data was that, according to the participants, the church views everyone as equal, something communicated in words but also in the welcome that participants reported receiving when they

[85] In order to establish a genuine interest and understanding of Christianity in the participants, priests require that these young men spend one year participating in the life of the church before they can be baptised.

made contact with the church. This is particularly important for the participants because of their status in society and the contrast it makes with the exclusivity of what they experienced at home. Jeremiah recounts arriving at the church for the first time: 'I sat far back from the others because in Islam I had seen that when you go to the mosque, those who are rich get to sit around the imam, but those who were poor were always furthest back, or somewhere else. […] So I arrived at the church and sat far back from the other Swedes who were there.' He arrived hoping to learn about the church, but not expecting to be included as a participant. But he continued:

> […] the priest came forward to me and invited me to sit at the front with the others. When they said this to me, I thought this was really nice. They respected me as a person. They didn't ask who I was or about my background. They just asked if I would like to sit with the others.[86]

They welcomed him without asking questions about his background. Rather than being categorised by social status or nationality, Jeremiah was included on an equal footing with any other person in the mass. The priest used her status to offer Jeremiah the opportunity to participate—she gave him legitimacy in a context where he was a novice. This positive impression was reinforced by the topics raised during the prayer time:

> She started the prayer time by praying for everyone in the world, in different countries, for Muslims in Muslim countries like Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan. I thought, 'Wow, this is so good.' It sat well in my heart. And I thought 'This is how we should treat strangers!' I really liked it.

The church did not just refrain from criticising Muslims, but prayed for their wellbeing. This was the opposite of the hostility that Jeremiah had anticipated from Christians when he came to Europe. He told me that this warm and non-judgemental welcome increased his curiosity about Christianity:

> Because of this experience I had of Christianity, of Protestantism, I became curious. I said, 'Okay, I know this is a risk, I know that I might get attacked if

[86] Interview with Jeremiah, 05/03/2021

someone finds out that I go to Church', but I continued going to church because I was interested in how they lived.[87]

I mentioned in the previous chapter that full membership in the community of practice is marked by the rite of baptism; the form of belonging described in this section is not to be confused with full belonging in an institutional sense, but could perhaps be understood as performative belonging: a belonging from the periphery. It is no substitute for full membership, but is a crucial part of the process by which the members of the group find their way into the community of practice. It is a form of legitimate peripheral participation.

Behave

After experiencing a sense of belonging, the participants *Behave* (C). They participate in the mass, sing hymns, read scripture passages out loud during services, light candles in prayer, and volunteer to serve coffee and tea after these gatherings. In this stage, the participants are able to rehearse membership without the commitment of calling themselves Christian. In the previous chapter, I described Lave and Wenger's concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2022). The involvement of URMs in the life of the church is peripheral in the sense that it is a somewhat lessened form of full membership, while still allowing them to build competence and progress towards full membership (Wenger 2022, 100). There remain certain rites from which they are excluded,[88] such as full participation in the communion meal.[89]

These two stages, belonging and behaving, have less to do with the propositional logic of the cognitive view of religion than they do with pre-cognitive learning or 'belief as understanding' that we discussed in Chapter 2. They are not about thinking about ideology and creating an argument for why they should or should not believe; rather, they are more focussed on experiencing or embodying the

[87] Interview with Jeremiah, 05/03/2021

[88] At the same time, it should be noted that as a folk church the Church of Sweden has a tradition of offering close to full participation to anyone who wishes to participate, the main exception is during the eucharist, when those who are not baptised are encouraged to indicate that they wish to receive a 'blessing' rather than eating the communion wafer and drinking the wine. In this particular congregation, they even allow children to take part in the Eucharist.

[89] Those who are not yet baptised are encouraged to come forward when the bread and wine are served, but to place a hand across their chest so as to indicate that they will receive a blessing instead of the bread and wine.

practices of the church. Even the second stage in this model, 'belonging', is an embodied practice—one puts oneself in a space and experiences the belonging through feelings, sights, smells, handshakes, smiles, and a general sense of the disposition of others towards one's embodied self. This is not about an encounter of a disembodied mind with a disembodied ideology, but of flesh and bones embodiment. I reflected on this in my field notes after attending a Taizé mass at the church:

> Then comes an extended time of silence and the shell of the sanctuary is filled with an other-worldly peace. This is the calm that my participants speak of in their interviews as one of the first factors that attracted them to the church. With lives that are often chaotic and fraught with challenges, this space of peace holds great meaning and allows the kind of spiritual centring that the world outside does not.[90]

During my time at the church, I got into the habit of asking the participants not only why they came to the church, but why they stayed. The responses rarely involved some kind of 'theological' or doctrinal answer, but usually revolved around the sense of peace, the silence, and its accompanying calm that they find at the church. Stark and Finke are well known for emphasising the non-ideological aspect of conversion. They have suggested that conversion has less to do with being ideologically persuaded and more to do with becoming like those you are close to (Stark and Finke 2000, 117), or, as Kraft paraphrases their theory: 'when attachments to members become stronger than attachments to nonmembers, it becomes more socially expedient to join the group' (Kraft 2013b, 7). Such a network theory offers insight into the importance of embodiment to conversion, and reminds us that even though most conversions involve ideological change, there is usually a strong social aspect to the process (Kraft 2013b, 9). As Stark and Finke put it, 'social networks make religious beliefs plausible' (Stark and Finke 2000, 117). Jeremiah said something that illustrates this in one of our interviews:

> It was through the church that God changed my life. It has had a big role in my life. It's a place I can really feel that I am secure. I can really feel that I am like everyone else. Sometimes I think when I go to church on Sunday or another day, that it's a whole other world. There's no difference between people. And when I am away from church for a while, I see that there's injustice, evil, wrong, together

[90] Extract from author's field notes, 17/09/2020

> with light. But in the church, I feel that there is no injustice, there is no difference between people, everyone is equal. That means a lot to me.[91]

While this description of the church is somewhat rosy, it serves to illustrate the importance Jeremiah places on the behaviour of those who call themselves Christians. Having experienced disillusionment with Islam after his Muslim friends failed to help him when he needed them, he looked to the church to embody the message that it preaches. This is perhaps a lot to ask consistently of any community of people, but for now this congregation has sufficiently met that expectation for his engagement to remain high.

Believe

Belief (D) is perhaps the most contested of the 'three Bs' in this model, particularly when it is used to describe cultures other than one's own (Lindquist and Coleman 2008, 15). As Engberg comments, 'Not only is belief something interior, invisible, and thus ultimately inaccessible to an observer, it is also a term with a broad palette of entangled meanings' (Engberg 2020, 18). Importing the standards of belief from one religion to analysis of another risks a form of intellectual colonisation (Tinker 2013). One of the critiques of the concept of belief as a tool for analysis relates to its rather slippery nature—it is used to mean different things in different contexts (Lindquist and Coleman 2008, 1)—and that it is, therefore, something of a blunt analytic instrument. In spite of its shortcomings as a concept, however, I wish to retain the term because I think, adequately defined, it represents an aspect of the conversion process that belonging and behaving do not. It is also a term which the participants use in their everyday language, and which is in used by the migration authorities.[92] Since, in this work, I am discussing conversion to Protestant Christianity in Europe, belief is also a term emic to my field, and, therefore, the critique that exists within the study of world religions—that this is a term that merely reinforces the Christian roots of the discipline of anthropology—is somewhat moot. However, I still wish to foreground the contributions of the participants in this study, and since they are coming from a non-Christian background and culture, this involves highlighting the rupture

[91] Interview with Jeremiah, 05/03/2021

[92] They of course use the Swedish word, *tro*, which encompasses belief (in both noun and verb form) and faith (I can *tro*, and I can have a *tro*.)

between the Western secularist definition of belief, embodied by the migration office, and that used by these young men.

The conversions of members of this community of practice are unavoidably politicised by the asylum process. When used as one of the grounds for their asylum applications, or appeals, migration officials apply their own criteria for belief—criteria which have been dismissed by some as revealing religious illiteracy (Wernersson 2017). In secularised Sweden, such criteria are constructed from a mishmash of post-enlightenment Protestant conceptions of belief and stereotype. This model of belief is affirmed by migration officials who, for example, ask their interviewees to, explain the trinity. Halonen characterises this view of conversion as *internal religion*: 'By internal religion, I mean discourses that treat religion as an individual cognitive or emotional matter, a question of knowing, believing, or decision-making' (Halonen 2024, 24). She points out that this take on religion is at odds with the way in which religiosity is embodied in Finnish society. This is close to what Weber captured as the cognitive definition of religion (see Chapter 3).

Within the church itself, it is priests who define belief. When they are met with a young person who wishes to be baptised, they respond by encouraging them to participate in the activities of the church for a year while attending baptism classes before giving them the go-ahead to be baptised. I was told by Astrid, the priest, that this is because, as they are coming from another religious tradition, it is important that they understand what their decision to convert means. The decision to be baptised is made together with the priest, who makes an assessment of whether the person's knowledge is adequate to warrant baptism:

> **Jonathan:** So, part of your job, as I understand it is to assess and to gain an understanding of whether the person is ready to be baptised […] what are the ways that you you deal with that?
>
> **Astrid:** And that's also a question that I've been struggling with and I feel like I've reached a point where I'm very comfortable with my way of dealing with it, and I'm very firm on the fact that you have to be here for a year. I have some basic knowledge requirements—like you have to know what Christmas and Easter are about. I want you to learn the creeds by heart in your language or in Swedish—doesn't matter. I want you to have a cursory […] understanding of the services […] I don't have a lot of [other] requirements. The most important is that you know the creed and you have a basic knowledge of the Christian life, with the holidays and and the services. But other than that, I don't want to be in a position where I have to assess if you're, you know, fervent enough or pious enough […]

> and that's why I've decided that as long as you have a basic knowledge, as long as you've been here for a year, as long as you still want this. And as long as you have an understanding of the consequences, both the positive of being in a fellowship but also perhaps the risk you face. As long as that's…as long as I'm satisfied with that, all of those requirements are filled then I do baptise […] It's kind of proof enough for me that they're serious about moving into this community.[93]

Astrid tries not to involve herself in measuring the religious fervour or behaviour of the young people she baptises. Instead she focusses on basic knowledge: do they understand what the church is celebrating at important moments in the calendar? Have they committed the creed to memory? Have they been actively involved for one year? She is essentially asking these participants whether they understand what they are participating in, and whether they have participated for long enough to have developed this knowledge. She tells me that the year of participation offers the opportunity for these young men to develop mentoring relationships with others in the group who are further ahead of them in their conversion processes: 'It's kind of an unspoken strategy that they form relationships with other people who are further along and can kind of guide them and mentor them into the Christian life'.[94] Astrid understands belief as a process, and, beyond their knowing the creed, does not ask them to demonstrate a great deal of biblical knowledge. Indeed this question came up in my last interview with Jeremiah:

> I lived with a Swedish family. They were religious. I mean they worked in the church as well. They said to me a number of times, 'You can get baptised and then learn about Christianity as a religion.' And the priest said to me that I can get baptised and then I can read about Christianity. But I said, 'No, it's not that easy for me.' Unless I knew what Christianity stands for and what it's about, I wouldn't get baptised. I want to know for sure that I can follow it. I wanted to be certain. I wanted to feel for real that I was deciding this […] I really wanted to make the decision for myself, not have someone else decide for me. That's why I wanted to think, feel, with my feelings, and then choose.[95]

The family with whom Jeremiah lived saw baptism as the beginning of a process of learning, perhaps indicating a 'Belong → Believe → Behave' understanding of conversion. Jeremiah, on the other hand, wanted to understand and think

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[93] Interview with Astrid, 14/01/2021

[94] Ibid.

[95] Interview with Jeremiah, 27/03/2023

through 'what Christianity stands for' before committing to it. For him, participating in the group prior to believing was not a problem, but he did not wish to commit until he had reached this stage. This is indicative of his awareness that changing religions is no small decision, especially when coming from a Muslim cultural background.

The gaze of these two authorities—the migration agency and the church—may regulate the authentication of belief at different levels (the state and the ecclesial), but this tells us nothing of how the participants themselves understand belief. Therefore, before discussing belief further, I introduce the responses of three participants to the question, 'How did you know that you wanted to become Christian?'.

First, Jeremiah, who appeared in the vignette earlier in this chapter. Jeremiah describes a clear point of conversion, a moment in which everything that he had learned as he had participated in the community of practice converged with an ecstatic experience in which he describes Jesus choosing him. It was at this moment that his question about whether or not to be baptised was answered. He attributed the answer to a decision made not by himself but by God. Although he did not wish to be baptised until he understood what Christians believe, it was the ecstatic experience that finally convinced him.

Second, we have Amin. Amin's process took an intellectualist form. He read a book by the American spiritual writer Florence Scovell Shinn in which he was exposed to Christian teaching. From this, he began comparing the anthropology of Islam and Christianity, asking—'What are people for?'—in both religions. Rather than describing a moment of spiritual encounter like Jeremiah, Amin describes a kind of intellectual resonance: a sense that 'this makes sense'.

> **Amin:** What is the reason that God made the world and people? It was like this, if you write this [writes on a piece of paper] 'God in Islam'—God in Islam made the world and people. Why? What was the purpose in Islamic ideology? Okay…[writes again on the paper]…'God in Christian ideology'…[continues writing] he made the world and people. Why—that was my biggest question: why did God make the world and people? Why are we here? And why did God leave us here? In Islamic history, they say that because of a mistake, Adam and Hawa,[96] God punished them and sent them to Earth so that they can prove that they want God, but because of

[96] Hawa is the Arabic/Qurʾanic version of Eve (and also Eve in the Hebrew language Bible)

our mistake we have to show through our lives that we love him, otherwise he can punish us. That's the purpose in Islamic thought.

Jonathan: So God created the world as a place that he can leave Adam and Hawa?

Amin: Yes, and Adam and Hawa, in their whole life must show God that they like him and love him, they listen to him and do what he wants. That was everything. But in Christian ideology, it's almost the same thing: Adam and Eve made a mistake, God sent them to Earth, maybe to punish them, but it took a very long time to show what God wants from people. Until he sent his son here to Earth in order to save all the people who are here from punishment. But this [idea] isn't in Islamic thought. This was my biggest question. Islamic thought has Jesus in its project, or history, but why don't they talk about this? Why have they hidden this story? And it feels, for me, better, this ideology that they [Christians] have.[97]

Such was the intellectual reasoning central to Amin's process of becoming interested in becoming Christian. That said, the doctrines that he discusses are not conventionally soteriological stances. He is looking for what he considers to be a compelling view of why humans exist. It is important to note that this reasoning does not take place in a vacuum but rather in the context of the Bible study group, as its members negotiate together what they are learning. While this work could indeed be labelled 'cognitive', I want to suggest that it should still be regarded as a social practice.

When I asked the third respondent how he decided to become a Christian, Abas told me:

> I was really afraid of life after death when I was in Islam. I didn't pray and I did some things wrong when I was there [in Iran]. So I was afraid about when I would die. I didn't want to…you know in Islam, when you die they bury you, and then I heard that after three days you are punished a lot. I don't know what it's called. You must answer for everything. 'Why didn't you pray?' 'Why did you look at…'—you know if you look at a girl that you shouldn't then it's a sin—'Why did you drink alcohol? Why did you do this this this.' I was afraid, back then when I was Muslim. I thought a lot about this […] I started [attending the group] and I read the Bible and such. I later got the answers to the things I was curious about. At the beginning, it was a bit hard for me, you know. You know I was Muslim before and I had my family [to think about]. Then, after a number of months I thought, 'Yeah'. You know, I was afraid of death. When I was Muslim I thought

[97] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

> 'I don't want to die.' Yeah, so they said, 'You will die, you will go to hell, and this and that. It will be…' Then, that's why when I was Muslim I couldn't salah…pray or anything. That's why I was afraid of death. Then I read the Bible about life after death and Jesus and what would happen after you die. It was a big difference between Muslims and Christians. There is a big difference. I thought, 'It's this that I want.'[98]

According to his response, Abas was drawn to Christianity by what he understands as the increased certainty of a good life after death, and by the fact that it seemed less legalistic than his experience of Islam.

All of the examples above demonstrate that conversion, for these young men, involves a great deal of reasoning. They ask questions about matters that are important to them, seek to understand what it is that Christians believe, and compare the doctrines of the church with the beliefs they have inherited. This is important to understand, since emphasising embodied practice can tend to make it seem that doctrine or reasoning is irrelevant. In foregrounding practice, I do not wish to negate the inner cognitive process or to describe the participants' processes in a deterministic manner which minimises their individual agency. Rather, this kind of reasoning should be viewed as one of the modes of practice. These cognitive processes are intertwined with the emotional—take, for example Jeremiah's statement: 'I wanted to think, feel, with my feelings, and then choose.' They are also intertwined with practice.

Belief, in this sense, can be characterised as something articulated in some way, something which is affirmed in the rite of baptism. It is cognitive, but not in the sense of being pure 'intellectual grounds' for a lifeworld. It is the reasoning of someone already operating within a specific paracosm (as discussed in Chapter 3).

In the previous chapter, I introduced an alternative to the discourse of belief as cognitive—religion as a *lifeworld* or *social imaginary*. I also introduced Luhrmann's concepts of paracosm, faith frame, and kindling. During the stages of belonging and behaving, the participants learn through legitimate peripheral participation what it means to be a Christian in the Church of Sweden. Key elements in this process, I argue, are their imaginaries; the way they pre-cognitively understand their social setting is shaped through practice, as well as through embodying the social imaginary which is carried by the liturgy. Although the welcoming nature of the church, and the easy-to-acquire sense of legitimacy

[98] Interview with Abas, 24/03/2021

offered to them, gives the sense that participation is a low-stakes activity, such participation is by no means value neutral. Instead, engaging in such practice, while weighted towards the embodied rather than the cognitive, predisposes the participants to experience a sense of resonance (Rosa 2019) or authenticity (Taylor 2004) when they encounter the truth claims of the church. It is in this way that the faith frame is kindled, as the narrative of the liturgy is embodied by the participants and their co-religionists in the Church of Sweden.

Paracosms (or social imaginaries) make certain beliefs, certain ways of seeing the world, plausible. Weber puts it, 'Certain emotions, inclinations and desires become available in a specific context, whereas others are unavailable' (Weber 2021, 100–101). This is an important factor in explaining why these young men did not become Christians in Afghanistan or Iran. There were certain inclinations and desires which became available to them when they came to Sweden. For all the introspection that they might have carried out in their home contexts, there was no Christian option in their lifeworlds of origin. Christians, when they were mentioned at all, were only portrayed as other, as *not what we are*. This meant that actual understanding of what it meant to be members of this other was lacking. Even the idea of religion as a personal choice, rather than something that one is born into—a concept that is well established here in expressive individualist Europe—was not something to which these young men were exposed. I mentioned earlier that in his interview Amin tells of distancing himself from Islam when he was eight years old. While this may have been the case, he still performed the Muslim identity because that is what was available to him at that time and in that context.

When Jeremiah first visited the congregation, he was in a state of dissonance, confused by the experience of being told to believe one thing (that Christians are his enemies) and then experiencing its opposite (receiving their help). When he heard the priest praying for Muslims in different countries, he did not navigate this clash of information by resorting to theological debate, pitting the claims of Islam against the claims of Christianity. This process took place on a more intuitive level. He told me, 'It sat well in my heart.' It was a process of negotiation between belief and experience that took place in a context in which certain modes of reasoning, certain options became plausible.

In *The Ethics of Authenticity,* Taylor makes the case that the modern age is permeated by the morally grounded ethic that 'there is a certain way of being human that is my way' (Taylor 1992, 28–29). Being true to this authentic self is not just a nice-to-have, but a moral imperative. Amin's story seems to be marked by traces of this ethic. He narrates his story as though becoming Christian enabled

the fulfilment of this underlying inner identity, a way of remaining a believer while escaping religiosity that he had experienced as troublesome. At one point during the interview, he emphasised the individuality of his faith by contrasting it with Shaheed's: 'We have different, different experiences or feelings. But the most important is that feeling that can warm the heart.'[99] While his previous environment stressed the importance of outward activity, the current one has to do with finding his own way of being with God, which is highlighted as he contrasts his own relationship with God with that of Shaheed. Rather than framing Shaheed's views as wrong in contrast with his own, he argues that this divergence demonstrates the importance of knowing God in your own way.

Since conversion narratives cannot be understood as purely factual accounts, but also as meaning-making performances, it is difficult to know if the perspectives that these participants claim to have had when they lived in Iran—including thoughts about no longer being Muslim—really represent their state of mind at that time, or are simply an attempt to understand their process of transformation as long-term and predating their contact with Christians. If it is a new perspective that is being inscribed on old events, this could be understood as evidence of value acquisition: evidence that the ethic of authenticity has left its mark on these young men during the seven years that they have lived in Sweden.

Conclusion

Plausibility structures

In order to have a faith, or to change faiths from one to another, the new faith must seem plausible. Peter Berger proposed that in order for religious beliefs to exist, the 'worlds' to which they belong require a particular 'base' of ongoing social processes. He calls this base a 'plausibility structure' (Berger 2011, 57–58). A plausibility structure makes belief possible because it connects a narrative with the situated embodied practice of a social context. Wenger describes the way in which communities of practice make possible certain ways of seeing the world:

> Being a claims processor, doctor, parent, social worker, salesperson, beggar, folk dancer, gives us a certain focus. It moves us to understand certain conditions and

[99] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

> to consider certain possibilities. As an identity, this translates into a perspective. It does not mean that all members of a community look at the world in the same way. Nonetheless, an identity in this sense manifests as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences—all by virtue of participating in certain enterprises. (Wenger 2022, 152–53)

In other words, a community of practice promotes a particular way of seeing the world, providing a set of social processes which underpin the possibility of seeing the world as a member of that community sees the world. It is a perspective that makes a particular interpretation more likely, and makes possible things which previously were not. One aspect of Stark and Finke's work on religious conversion is that it is promoted by social networks: 'social networks make religious beliefs plausible and new social networks thereby make new religious beliefs plausible' (Stark and Finke 2000, 117). Following Berger's logic, in the absence of a community, it is unlikely, if not impossible, for a particular belief system to survive. While in mission lore there are tales of individual persons discovering Jesus for themselves without having contact with a single other believer, this is not the norm. For these young men, the idea of becoming Christian prior to leaving Afghanistan or Iran was unimaginable. The only exception to this is Sohrab, who converted to Christianity while in Iran; however, his is the exception that proves the rule since he became a Christian after being exposed to the community of the underground church. None of the other participants report encountering Christians before they embarked on their journey to Europe, and thus they lacked both the Gospel message and the social structure that would promote religious change.

One could look at it conversely. These young men, while surrounded by their home social structures, did not consider themselves anything other than Muslim. Their whole lives were built on the 'base' of Islamic community. Even Amin, who claims to have given up on Islam as a child, did not replace it with anything until he came to Sweden. It was not until this community and its structures were taken away, due to migration, that the plausibility of their previous lifestyle came under threat. Indeed, they could have sought out Muslim community but, for whatever reason, they did not.

For the participants in this study, there seem to be two important factors/processes underpinning their ability to believe. First is belonging: they are invited into a community which embodies certain values. For perhaps the first time (discussed in Chapter 5) their otherness does not result in persecution. Indeed, the community of the church was eager to include them in its activities and to

withhold questions about their past during their early days at the church. This community embodies a set of beliefs, and in doing so make those beliefs plausible.

The second factor I want to point to is practice. This group is not a rigid corpus of doctrine, but a living community of practice. The participants were invited to practice Christianity before they were asked if they believe. Practicing the liturgy, embodying the shared repertoire of the group, developed a familiarity, a muscle memory for the practices of the church.

The gospel taught by this congregation is an embodied gospel, worked out in practice and reinforced by doctrine. It is what Weber might describe as a 'lifeworld' which has been constructed through practice. My argument, following Weber, is that this structure makes the cognitive decision relatively straight forward, and thus that portraying belief in the cognitive definition as the big change makes the process seem far more ideological than it is in reality.

A Revised Model

At the start of this chapter, I presented Figure 4.1, which sought to illustrate the process which the participants in this study underwent in the course of becoming Church of Sweden Christians. As I looked deeper into the material, triangulating it with the help of theory, I noticed that the distinction I had presented between parts B (Belonging) and C (Behaving) overstated these two categories as discrete stages. In reality, the stage of legitimate peripheral participation is a stage in which belonging is negotiated through practice (behaving). In light of this, in Figure 4.2 I have brought belonging and behaving closer together. Their relationship is much closer than I had initially believed and could perhaps be likened to the operation of pedals on a bicycle: they work in unison to drive forward the process of conversion.

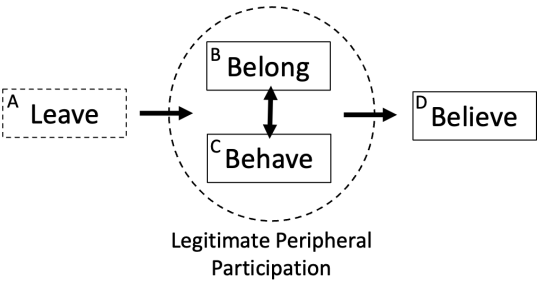

Figure 4.2: A revised version of the conversion process followed by the participants.

In this chapter, I have sought to complicate our understanding of the phenomenon of conversion among this group. By framing the process of URMs' conversion in the Church of Sweden as belonging-behaving-believing, I have described the general pattern by which these young people become members in the church, a process which culminates in baptism. It is my hope that by using learning theory—for example that of Lave and Wenger—it is possible to move beyond reductionistic accounts of motivation and to look towards formation, that is, how these young people are formed through their legitimate peripheral participation (and eventually full participation) in the life of the Bible study group. I have shown how this enabled participants to gain first-hand experience of the group's lived practices. They were exposed to a creedal faith which was itself a social practice and which paved the way to a sense of resonance with the practices and truth claims of the church.

While in this chapter, I have looked at the how of conversion—the processes by which conversion happens according to the accounts of the participants—in the next chapter I examine recognition theory, which further complicates the asylum capital hypothesis.

5. The Struggle for Recognition

The young men in this study have experienced precarity throughout their lives. In this section, drawing on the work of Axel Honneth, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Jaana Hallamaa, I look at these prolonged experiences of precarity and relate them to an accompanying struggle for recognition, offering a theoretical frame to the empirical material. I ask what role the Church of Sweden, and this community of practice in particular, play in the lives of these young men when it comes to their lived experiences of misrecognition and precarity. I propose that the church is able to meet the participants' need for love-recognition and solidarity-recognition, but not legal-recognition. While being part of a community in which one is recognised as belonging to a struggle for legal-recognition can be an important substitute for full legal recognition, we will see later how this sense of solidarity is short-lived when the participants are granted asylum (legal-recognition) and they begin to question the legitimacy of their membership in the group. Let us begin, however, with a vignette which sheds light on these themes.

Vignette 3: Shaheed (Part 1)

Shaheed's Afghan parents moved to Iran before he was born. He remembers clearly feeling like an outsider there, even though it was the only home he had ever known: 'In Iran I remember that it is systematically against Afghans.' He recalled watching TV series in which they derided Afghans: 'One of them was Char Khooneh where they make jokes about Afghans and call Afghans bad things.' Because Hazaras are often more recognisable than other Afghans, he could not avoid being identified as a foreigner in spite of speaking Farsi like a local: 'My face shows that I am Hazara […] the others have the same face as Iranians [but] we have this kind of look—like…Chinese face.'

There were struggles at home, and Shaheed recalled his dad regularly beating his mum.

> My dad was working outside and he had a really difficult job. When he came home he had cuts on his hands, and […] he was tired and he wasn't able to be nice towards us. He was really angry all the time towards us and he would hit my mum but he never hit me, just two times that I remember because I am the youngest child and he didn't hit me so much. […] I remember one day we were home and there was a fight—I was little, so I don't remember so much—but there was a fight and we didn't have…we had…what do you call it…you make it warm in the house using oil. It works with oil. And my mum was boiling water with it. And there was a fight between my mum and my dad and my dad hit my mum a lot and then finally he kicked the cooker and it burned my mum on the leg. It burned from here [indicates]… and there's still a mark from the burn. But that wasn't the only time. Every day, my dad hit my mum.[100]

In telling this story, Shaheed was pointing to the undercurrent of pressure felt by their family during this time; his father was forced into back-breaking work and treated in a way that he resented. This pressure emerged as anger and violence in the home. But Shaheed's memories of his dad are not all negative. When he decided to travel to Europe, his father became very emotional and tried to persuade him to stay. He does not intend to apply for family reunification, but he was determined his parents should experience things that he has experienced since coming to Sweden—like the sea. In 2020, he sent his parents money to travel to see the Iranian coast, so that they could experience the same feelings he did when he first saw it.

When Shaheed arrived in Sweden, he was taken to a small village outside a large town in mid-Sweden, where he would live for two years in a camp with 400 other asylum seekers. It was cold, and although he tried to learn Swedish using apps on his phone, there was no one from the host culture with whom he could practice the language. After two years there, Shaheed managed to enrol on a language course in the town nearby. This allowed him to move out of the camp, to live more independently, and to meet Swedes with whom he could practice his Swedish language. But it was not long before his asylum application was denied and he was evicted from the group home where he had been housed.

> I became undocumented. At the beginning I was shocked…a bit stressed. They cut off my money. I got no support from the migration agency and there was one month when my friends shared their food with me in the migration agency home. And one day I was home and the migration agency came and knocked on the door.

[100] Interview with Shaheed, 25/06/2020

> And I was suddenly very afraid because they were searching for me. They said—it was a woman and a man—and the woman asked, 'You are Shaheed [surname]?' And I said, 'Yes, I am Shaheed [surname]'. And she said to me, 'You can no longer live in a migration agency home. Now you are undocumented and you must leave here.' And I said, 'I have nowhere to go. Where should I live?' She said, 'You can decide for yourself. You can live on the street, or you can leave Sweden.'[101]

This experience was destabilising. Whereas life had been relatively predictable for almost four years, he was suddenly homeless. He moved south, to the town where I met him, acutely aware of his own precarity.

> [I]n one go I was afraid of everything. Whenever the police were there, my heart started beating fast and I would want to hide myself or walk in a different direction. That troubled me and I began to get panic attacks. Anxiety really affected me. I remember I was in [area] in a little student apartment where I lived with another Afghan. And one night I was there I had a panic attack. I don't know where it came from. […] at once my brain didn't work and it just confused my thoughts and twisted them. And I wanted to control them but I couldn't. And my hands started shaking and I couldn't control [them].[102]

As a result of this experience, which at the time he did not understand, Shaheed sought professional help.

> I was forced to speak to a psychologist. I went to Save the Children and I told them, 'I am really stressed and I can't control this stress and it is affecting me a lot. And I can't walk.' I couldn't walk. I meant to walk, but my feet were like [indicates lack of balance]. At night I couldn't sleep. It was four or five days that I couldn't sleep. And I became exhausted. […] when I was going to sleep I would think, 'It's going to come again and again.' […] One night I said, 'Okay, tonight I will die.' I said to myself 'I will die.' […] It began with the stomach and my stomach was like [indicates upset with hands]. And I thought that maybe I had eaten some bad food. But in the night when I was going to sleep it started: all the stress came at once. […] I thought that maybe I had become mad and lost my mind. But it became harder and harder until I thought 'I'm going to die.'[103]

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[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

At first, Shaheed did not have words to describe the experience he was having. He was not aware that the physical symptoms—heart racing, hands shaking, insomnia—were caused by his mind. Or, more precisely, the only language that he had for this experience was that he was either dying or going mad. Visiting a psychologist at Save the Children gave him some preliminary understanding of what was happening, but was far from comforting:

> I spoke with the psychologist and he said, 'You have had a panic attack.' When I heard that word, 'panic attack' I became even more scared. I thought that maybe it is a very very bad sickness. […] Maybe I would become mad or something. But he said to me, 'No, it's okay, everyone is in different situations and they survive those situations.' … But…I couldn't accept it. I was very afraid. When I finished talking with him I thought, 'No, I won't talk to him more.' I said to myself, 'I need to look after myself. I shouldn't speak to a psychologist because he makes me more stressed out.'[104]

Initially, learning that what he had experienced was a panic attack made Shaheed more anxious. He found this new, unfamiliar language threatening, and at first he did not want to return to therapy. He instead confided in his friend Amin and told him that he had begun having panic attacks. Amin told him that this was understandable considering his circumstances and suggested he might feel calm if he went to church. Amin took Shaheed along, but his first time at the church was difficult. His stress increased and he was troubled by the thought that, as a Muslim, he was doing something wrong by attending a Christian place of worship. Shaheed decided not go back to the church. But the anxiety persisted.

> One day at Save the Children we had an activity in [another town] and that day I was very stressed and I couldn't sleep and my eyes were very red. And one staff member who worked with Save the Children […] asked me, 'Why are your eyes very red?' I said to her […], 'I can't sleep […] because I am very stressed' […]. And I said to her, and my hands were like [shows hands shaking], and she said to me, 'You can speak to me.' And I spoke to her and she spoke very calmly and I became a bit better. Then I was just trying to wear myself out. I went to the sea and I swam until I was tired in my whole body because I wanted to sleep that night. At that time, I hated night […]. I couldn't sleep and it was really difficult. And then I started…I spoke with her too and another psychologist [I told her] that when I began going to church my stress became more. She said, 'No. That's not because of the church. When you go to the church it is totally quiet, five seconds, ten

[104] Ibid.

> seconds, and that quietness affects you and your stress comes again to you […] it's not because of the church.' And I was afraid in the beginning of the church, but when […] I started at the church and I spoke to the priest and I spoke with others, it [the anxiety] became less and less. […] But the anxiety still comes sometimes but it's not as strong, it's just…like…heart pounding.[105]

Shaheed told me that until he started having panic attacks, he had been distracting himself from his situation by immersing himself in a world of online gaming, in particular the battle game PUBG. He notes that during this time in his life he had a short fuse and his friends knew him for getting angry easily. Becoming anxious and having panic attacks, while not an enjoyable experience, changed the way that Shaheed viewed himself and his way of thinking about the world. When he ignored his thoughts, he became anxious, but by learning to slow down and appreciate his surroundings and acknowledge his emotions he began to feel better. His anxiety has not been totally alleviated, but he now has strategies for dealing with it when it returns.

Nested Precarities

We will return to Shaheed's narrative later in this chapter, to look at his experience of life after receiving residency, but for now I want to reflect on the time before he was granted asylum, as Shaheed's case effectively illustrates the precarity experienced by all the participants in this study. Later in this section, we look at the different forms of precarity the participants face, and how they seek to address it.

Judith Butler is one of the predominant theorists of precarity. Butler distinguishes between precariousness and precarity. Precariousness, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is a trait which all human beings share. As such, it represents the ideal grounds on which to form coalitions. Precarity, on the other hand, is politically induced and experienced disproportionately by members of particular categories: 'Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009, 25–26); it is 'differentially distributed' (Butler 2015a, 96). Theologian Surla Stålsett (2023), channelling

[105] Ibid.

Butler, explains the relationship between precariousness and precarity, two terms which may be related but are not identical:

> Precariousness is a general term that indicates a universal or common condition of human existence. In fact, it is shared by all living creatures. Nonetheless, the form and gravity of precarious life conditions or situations certainly vary from person to person, group to group, class to class, and people to people. Precarity is unevenly and unjustly 'distributed' according to often violent antagonisms based on gender, race, class, age, ethnicity, or culture. Hence, although intimately personal, human vulnerability is also essentially political. It implies a demand for justice. (Stålsett 2023, 4)

Discussing the precariat, Stålsett (2023, 31) writes, 'Struggles for recognition, I contend, both demand and reveal an inherent power in precariousness, resting on the inalienable and paradoxical value of vulnerability', a point that I will return to in Chapter 6.

Taking inspiration from Bakic-Hayden's (1995) concept of *nested orientalisms*, anthropologist Sarah Bakker Kellogg (2018) has suggested that the early academic career should be understood as involving *nested precarities*. Although, in this study, I am not looking at precarity in an academic context, I will apply the concept of *nested precarities* more broadly to mean the convergence of a multiplicity of precarities in the life of a single subject, and the somewhat hierarchical (nested) nature of these precarities. Kellogg comments:

> The precarity of graduate students, postdocs, and adjuncts is nested within a broader condition of precarity that shapes the field of social relations we call 'knowledge production' in complex ways. But all of this complexity converges in the basic fact that a perceived ontic divide between precarious and secure academics is an unavoidable consequence of university hiring practices—too many universities rely on contingent labor to keep their doors open. (Kellogg 2018)

This approach is a form of intersectionality that takes into account that the subject is experiencing what could rightly be understood as an array of interlocking experiences, encountered by virtue of their belonging to a multiplicity of marginalised categories—in this case: racialised minorities, solitary minors, undocumented asylum seekers, and Muslims. This may seem obvious to most readers, but I want to argue explicitly for this approach in relation to the participants in this study since throughout their lives they have experienced protracted periods of nested precarity, which have undoubtedly shaped their identities and dispositions. Before I discuss the ways in which participants seek to

overcome these precarities, let us look in detail at some of the specific ways in which they are experienced.

Racialised minority

As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the participants belong to the Hazara ethnic group, which accounts for around 15 per cent of the population of Afghanistan (Barfield 2010, 26). Anthropologist Thomas Barfield (2010, 23) describes Hazaras as defined by their 'common Shia religious faith, Persian language, and reputed Mongol ancestry'. As Hazaras, they continue to be subjected to persecution and structural insecurity from birth, although there have been recent attempts to remedy the historic mistreatment by constitutional mandate (Barfield 2010, 27). In their homeland of Afghanistan, they are a Shiʿa Muslim minority among Sunni Muslims. Among those Sunnis are the Taliban, an Islamist nationalist group who are known to persecute Hazaras (Phillips 2011). Zohaib, one of the participants who grew up in Afghanistan, had several run-ins with the Taliban. The following occurred after he had spent a season as a cook's assistant at an Afghan military base before moving to Iran:

> **Zohaib:** […] I worked with the [Afghan] military so I got some money from them. It wasn't enough for my family and me and that's why we had a bit of a difficult situation. And then I came to Iran and I lived there hmmm…two years or two and a half and then I…and then the police in Iran, I had no ID card…they took me and sent me back to Afghanistan…to Afghanistan. And then when I went to Afghanistan, so in the middle of Iran and Afghanistan…and then I was going to Kabul…from Herat to Kabul and then in the middle of the city in Afghanistan, they took me—the Taliban—
>
> **Jonathan:** Oh wow.
>
> **Zohaib:** —yeah, yeah. So they recognised me because I am Hazara and they don't like Hazaras. And then when they took me, there were many…we were twenty people there. They knew that we were Hazara—everyone who had the face of the Hazara, they said, 'You come.' Those who didn't look Hazara, the Pashtun or Tajik, or whatever, they said, 'You can go.' And then they took us. First when they took us they hit us a lot. They said all the time, 'Why do you [not] cooperate? You must cooperate, we'll give you weapons. You must go and fight the Americans.' And then we didn't want to because when they took us they hit us on our hands

> and on our faces, and then they sent us to another area two hours up in the mountains.[106]

According to his account, Zohaib grew up in a Taliban-controlled area. The instability this caused was the reason that his family moved numerous times. This quote tells of a time after he returned to Afghanistan after a period living and working in Iran. During his journey, he encountered a group of Taliban, who recognised him as Hazara and kidnapped him and held him hostage before letting him go.

As Shaheed commented in his interview, in Iran, they are a visible minority, the butt of jokes. While other Afghans are able to pass for Iranian, Hazaras—with their distinctive features—become symbols of the cultural other. In Iran, like other Afghans, they are not eligible for residency and struggle to access basic healthcare (European Network on Statelessness 2019). It is this precarity that is often a push factor in their migration to Europe, especially after they hear stories of the humane treatment of migrants in European countries like Sweden.[107]

Solitary minors

Although at the time of our interviews, the participants were in their early twenties, they left their homelands in their early- to mid-teens, when they were still minors. As children separated from their families, they were forced to come to terms with life in Sweden alone, or together with peers in their age group, and with the help of professional adults. Indeed the entire group graduated to adulthood while still asylum seekers. Heaven Crawley (2011, 1172) has noted the difficulty that unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) often face when reconciling their home country experiences with the socially constructed norms of the Western view of childhood. Receiving countries, Crawley argues, tend either not to take their prior sexual or political experiences seriously, or interpret these experiences as somehow undermining their status as children. As children, they are vulnerable, and in the early years of this group's time in Sweden there were reports of children going missing from care homes (Ericson 2017, 8). There

[106] Interview with Zohaib, 24/03/2023

[107] In our interview, I asked Zohaib what he had learned about Sweden before he travelled there: 'I heard that in Sweden it's a good land and they give residency to refugees and they need refugees and those who are under eighteen, they also…Sweden also gives under eighteens residency […] and takes care of them.'

was discussion in the media, confirmed by police spokespersons, that these children were being exploited by criminal networks (Svensson 2016; Sjövall 2018). While it was not a widespread phenomenon, these cases illustrate the potential results that such vulnerability can have, and the increased likelihood of being recruited or forced into criminal activity or abusive circumstances when one is alone in an unfamiliar environment at such a young age.[108] In such cases, the precarity of childhood and social precarity overlap with economic and legal precarity.

Asylum Seekers

On arrival in Sweden, the URMs' precarity gains a new dimension when they become asylum seekers. Although they came to Europe in the hope of a change in circumstances, as Shaheed's story shows, the precarity does not end on arrival. Indeed, they are forced to live in a state of deferred hope as they wait an indeterminate amount of time for a decision to be made on their asylum cases, then again while they appeal negative decisions. This is a sharp contrast to the warm reception that some of them received when they arrived in Sweden, greeted by organisations like Refugees Welcome. One of the participants, Abas, was greeted by the police when he arrived: 'The police stopped the train and said to us "Welcome to Sweden. You can go to school, and work, etcetera." So I stayed here'.[109] All of the participants were initially denied residency and spent three to four years in hiding while waiting for another opportunity to apply. During this time, they were not supported by Sweden's welfare state and were thus dependent on the kindness of friends and strangers. They lived outside of the safety net of the state.

In the vignette above, Shaheed recounts being forcibly removed from the home where he was staying when it was decided that he would not be granted asylum. When this happened, he did not leave Sweden, as the police officer had suggested, but lived in hiding, depending on friends for food and NGOs for money and other forms of support. The liminality of being an alone-coming asylum seeker is compounded by youth. Precarity is pronounced when set against the backdrop of the Swedish welfare state, and the years in which these young men managed to

[108] It was beyond the scope of this study to ask questions of my participants related to sexual or otherwise traumatic experiences that they did not choose to raise in the course of their narratives.

[109] Interview with Abas, 24/03/2021

get by in Sweden are a testament to both their perseverance and the informal networks of support that exist in society. Public discourse often addresses the idea of parallel economies in terms of those who work unofficially—without paying tax—but such parallel economies also include those who are supported through unofficial channels. I have referred several times to the 'Swedish families' of these young men—the Swedish citizens who take it on themselves to befriend and take care of their material and social needs. During my time at the field site, I met a number of these individuals—usually nearing retirement, usually women—who quietly advocated for this group and the individuals that make it up. I encountered some of these women when I attended a large public demonstration on a town square shortly after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021; standing in solidarity with their 'Afghan sons', chanting slogans about women's access to education or that the Swedish government amnesty for the asylum-seeking Afghans within its borders. One of the women, Pamela, lived in a small wooden house on an allotment. She had invited two young men to live with her for as long as they needed.

Existential Precarity

As discussed in Chapter 3, arriving in Sweden was transformative for the participants' sense of self. Whether confronted with discrepancies between their family's account of the world and their own experience, or simply transitioning to a more pluralistic, individualistic society, these young men were forced to grapple with discordant anthropologies and notions of meaning. This liminal state—hysteresis—in which one's habitus does not match one's context, is psychologically taxing. In Chapter 4, we discussed the cognitive dissonance experienced by the participants when they encounter Christians in Swedish society. Added to this, and their separation from family, is the often traumatic experience of the journey to Europe. For example, Zohaib tells the story of travelling from Turkey to Greece in boats that were not fit for the task:

> Between Turkey and Greece, when I went the first time, I couldn't swim. It was the first time I had seen the sea so I was very scared. Then at two in the night we took the boat we went from the beach, near the beach towards Greece, then we went like fifty meters and our boat broke. We tried to come back. Then back, there were many people, there were kids, young people, teenagers and old people, and women and kids. And when we came back, we waited in the middle of the forest in a very thick forest. […] we waited about twelve hours […] he arranged the boat again. And then we went by day. By day from Turkey to Greece. Then we were

> two hours on the boat. After we got to Greece. It was very difficult. It happened again, lots of water came into the boat and all the people cried and they prayed to God, everyone in different ways, and they threw much water [out of the boat]. We had a small [mimes bowl-shaped object] and we threw water so that no more came into the boat. And it was a bit better. And then all the people, not everyone could swim, they were very afraid and we thought that we were all going down under the water. So there was very much threat because we couldn't swim. It was the first time we had seen that big sea.[110]

Just a short distance from the Turkish coast, the first boat on which his group embarked filled with water. He could not swim, and was terrified that he would drown. The next boat began to fill with water after two hours, when they were in Greek waters. Other young men I spoke to mentioned similar experiences but made it clear that they did not wish to discuss them in any detail. Such traumatic experiences can have a strong impact on those who go through them, whether or not they culminate in post-traumatic stress disorder.

There is a close relationship between precarity (discussed above) and another concept that Butler develops: grievability. For a life to be grievable is for it to be acknowledged as having value:

> To be grievable is to be interpellated in such a way that you know your life matters; that the loss of your life would matter; that your body is treated as one that should be able to live and thrive, whose precarity should be minimised, for which provisions for flourishing should be available (Butler 2020, 50)

While grievability should not be understood as the direct opposite of precarity, it would tend to be the case that the more grievable a life, the less precarious it is. But what reduces precarity, or causes an increase in grievability? For Butler, the answer is the outworking of a 'radical egalitarianism' through

> a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity" (Butler 2020, 24)

[110] Interview with Zohaib, 24/03/2023

Such nonviolent activism is an act of solidarity that exposes those grievability-denying structures to the presence of human need and thereby vies for the recognition that these lives matter.

Recognition

Another counterpoint to the concept of precarity is recognition—a concept discussed at length by philosophers and social theorists including Nancy Fraser (2000; 2003), Charles Taylor (1994), Judith Butler (2009, 2021), and Axel Honneth (2003; 2005, 2021). These four trace their arguments to Hegel's conception of recognition. Saarinen (2016) also agrees on the importance of recognition for human formation, but resists tracing its origins merely to Hegel; instead, he seeks to tap earlier theological resources to bring together the human need for recognition with concepts such as righteousness and toleration.

In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel Honneth argues that humans have a basic need for recognition. At the core of identity formation, is the struggle for three types of recognition: love-, solidarity-, and rights-recognition.

> For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem – provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition – that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires. (Honneth 2005, 169)

Identity formation is a reciprocal, intersubjective process involving individual persons, networks, and institutions in dynamic agonistic processes of recognition both granted and withheld.[111]

[111] I would suggest that Honneth's argument is realist in terms of its anthropology since, while it acknowledges that institutional and family forms may shift over time, his conception of the good life as having to do with a degree of 'bodily integrity' and a need for recognition is regarded as temporally stable. His view of human identity as socially constituted and maintained is not historically contingent, and the need for social affirmation is not a product of a particular late modern social milieu. See, for example, Anderson (2005), xiv

Type	Modes	Self-Relationship	Sphere
Emotional	Love and care	Self-confidence	The intimate sphere
Social	Appreciation and solidarity	Self-esteem	The social sphere
Legal	Rights and respect	Self-respect	The legal sphere

Table 5.1: Honneth's types of recognition (based on table found in Warming (2015, 250))

Table 5.1 (above) offers an explanation of the different types of recognition according to Honneth's typology. Love-recognition is that which is provided by intimate relationships including those with friends and lovers. Such relationships build self-confidence in the subject. Solidarity-recognition involves people being recognised for their 'concrete traits and abilities' (Honneth 2005, 121). This form of recognition leads to self-esteem. Finally, rights-recognition is that which is offered by society in the form of recognition as a legal person. Legal recognition, according to Honneth, leads to self-respect. All three forms of recognition are intersubjective, so they are not only received from others, but also granted to others in processes of recognition.

Judith Butler (2021) regards Honneth's model of recognition as lacking an important preceding element. She sees an important aspect of the recognitive process as involving what she calls recognisability, which is distinct from, and prior to, recognition. Recognisability, according to Butler, involves possessing the qualities that allow one to be acknowledged as a person. Before one can receive love, or solidarity, or legal recognition, one must be identified as a subject capable of being assigned those things. According to Butler, Honneth disregards this vital stage, instead moving directly to a perhaps conveniently distinct three-part model. However, it is this recognisability which is the hardest won.

How does Honneth's work relate to the trajectories of the participants in this study? As described above, unaccompanied refugee minors inhabit a complex space in Swedish society. They reach Sweden as undocumented children, to be greeted with suspicion by the authorities.[112] Legal recognition is withheld for long periods of time, as application after application is made to the migration agency.[113] On top of this, they are separated from family, friends, and the society which is

[112] These authorities generally demand that asylum seekers prove their identities in order to be granted residency.

[113] Most participants in this study have been in Sweden since 2015 or earlier, and are therefore, at the time of writing, more than eight years into their time here.

familiar to them. The social and symbolic capital on which they would depend back in Iran, whether linguistic or cultural, is only recognised by other migrants, but not by the majority of the population.

For some of the participants, including Amin, the lack of legal recognition in their homelands is a significant push factor in their decision to migrate to Europe:

> Two years passed and after that we decided to leave Iran for Europe […] we lived in Iran, but we were totally undocumented for twelve years. Twelve years! It was really difficult, and we couldn't go back to Afghanistan and the whole family decided that it was time to leave Iran. Because we can't be undocumented our whole lives. We need to find a solution to this. We should live like people live. So our family decided to travel to Europe. It was about 2015.[114]

Amin's father had died when he was eight years old, and his uncle, wanting to hold on to his brother's land, had threatened to marry Amin's mother if she ever returned to Afghanistan. The continuous precarity of their lack of status in Iran meant that the family did not feel that they could put down roots there. They decided to travel to Europe because they thought that they would be able to pursue a better life there, and to find greater stability through legal recognition.

Lack of stability in Iran was also a push factor for Shaheed. In our interview, he described raising this with his dad when—in an uncharacteristically emotional moment—his father tried to convince him to remain in Iran: 'I said to him, "No. You are almost 30 years in Iran. What have you done? You don't even have an ID to be able to buy a SIM card. Or have a driving license: nothing." I said, "No, I must have a life. I have dreams. I have these things…I must pursue them."'[115] Shaheed reminded his father of their lack of legal status and the continuous challenges which it brings. Of course, he was not leaving his family behind merely in order to get a SIM card, or a driving license, but such inaccessible artefacts had come to symbolise the status and stability which they had lacked in Iran. Despite being born in Iran, Shaheed could not establish himself as a legal person there. His father, 30 years after migrating there, was in the same position.

Jeremiah's family decided that he would leave Iran after the family had lived there for several generations without receiving legal status in the country. As he

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[114] Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021

[115] Interview with Shaheed, 25/06/2020

approached his late teenage years, the risk that he would be deported to Afghanistan increased:

> For several generations we've lived in Iran. So I wasn't born in Afghanistan but we have a background in Afghanistan. But we haven't been there for two generations. I lived in Iran until 2013. Then I left Iran because I had no residency there. I was born there but I didn't have any rights. I didn't have much education. All I could do was work black.[116] And there wasn't much work for me because I was just a teenager. Then when I turned 15 there was a risk that I would be taken by the police and deported to Afghanistan. That's why my family and I decided that I would leave Iran. That I would leave Iran and go to a safe country.[117]

In terms of recognition, life in Sweden is far from what the participants expected. As I already mentioned, they were faced with drawn-out asylum processes and an unpredictable political environment in Afghanistan which meant that the migration agency policy on deportation could change very quickly.

During one of my interviews with Sohrab, he described the idea of having a 'European mind', which he and his friends had developed, making it difficult to return to Iran, but which is not recognised by the Swedish authorities. This concept of being one thing on the inside while being recognised outwardly as something different, was a common theme in the interviews. For most, this plays out in their change of faith, which, while recognised by the church, is often not recognised by the migration agency.

For recognition to be possible, the particular identity that one is identified as possessing must be a viable option in the environment in which one lives. To return to Butler's language, 'recognizability precedes recognition' (Butler 2009, 5); one must be recognisable before one can receive recognition. One must be able to relate to others who share the same identity and who are able to grant, and be granted, recognition.[118]

In this section, I have introduced Honneth's take on recognition, which for him is constituted in three parts: love, solidarity, and legal or rights-recognition. Each of these relates to a different level of social life, from the personal, to the group,

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[116] A colloquial way to describe informal, non-taxpaying work.

[117] Interview with Jeremiah, 15/10/2020

[118] This primarily relates to the solidarity level of recognition and to the way in which individuals identify as sharing the same identity markers, or struggles, as others.

to the society level. I have also discussed the role that the pursuit of recognition played in the participants' decisions to travel to Europe.

Entering a Struggle for Recognition

According to the theorists I consider in this chapter, being denied recognition has serious implications for one's personhood. However, being denied recognisability or recognition in the way that the participants in this study have been does not mean that their identities are left unformed. According to Pickel (2018, 18–19), human beings are inclined to strive for a 'positive self evaluation'. Describing how this struggle takes shape, Honneth accounts for both the reciprocation of recognition—when another person, institution, or group legitimates you as a particular kind of person—and for the denial of such recognition—through disrespect, or, in a legal sense, the failure to grant legal status. Denial of recognition is harmful to a person's sense of self and can hinder identity formation:

> [S]ocial shame is a moral emotion that expresses the diminished self-respect typically accompanying the passive endurance of humiliation and degradation. If such inhibitions on action are overcome through involvement in collective resistance, individuals uncover a form of expression with which they can indirectly convince themselves of their moral or social worth. For, given the anticipation that a future communication-community will recognise them for their present abilities, they find themselves socially respected as the persons that they cannot, under present circumstances, be recognized for being. (Honneth 2005, 164)

One way to acquire a short-term sense of self-respect for those who have faced misrecognition is through belonging to a community whose members together seek to attain recognition, a community with shared experiences and goals.[119] Such communities may be so-called new social movements that have achieved public recognition in lieu of an anticipated legal recognition, but Honneth (2003, 134) emphasises the centrality to his thesis of those communities that have not. Indeed, his theory accounts for individual recognition which is derived from solidarity within an as-yet unrecognised group by virtue of solidarity. This

[119] Somewhat complementing Honneth on this point, Margaret Archer discusses the process by which agents, under pressure from society, become primary agents—collectivities of persons who have a shared status in society—and how these primary agents develop corporate agency as they acquire the desire and level of organisation to transform society (Archer 2000, 253–82).

distinction is rooted in a desire to understand not only the place of recognition in established groups, but a desire for 'a theory of recognition that locates the core of all experiences of injustice in the withdrawal of social recognition, in the phenomena of humiliation and disrespect' (Honneth 2003, 134).

In a recent literature review, Kauhanen and Kaukko (2020) look at the experiences of URMs in European societies with regard to Honneth's forms of recognition, pointing out some important markers of the experience of recognition in their everyday lives that are relevant to this work. For example, the literature demonstrates that being invited to participate in the activities of a community can constitute an important factor in the nurturing of loving relationships of recognition, thus nurturing self-confidence. The church in this study is, of course, one such community that counters the common experience of 'utter loneliness and […] difficulties in creating trust' reported by many URMs (Kauhanen and Kaukko 2020, 4). Kauhanen and Kaukko (2020, 4) also note that professional caring relationships—where boundaries are firmly established around a working relationship by, for example, guardians, teachers, social workers—are frequently seen as insufficient to establish this form of recognition since they often lack an affective sense of connection. In Scania, this finding has been highlighted by Herz and Lalander (2018, 1) who have noted that the social worker in Sweden tends to be viewed by URMs as something of 'a bystander with power' who swoops in to disrupt the lives of clients with little notice, and whose practice of 'pop-up social work' means that they lack the relational foundation for such far-reaching powers to be understood.

It has been argued that the relationship between recognition and redistribution should not be overlooked. Nancy Fraser takes what she calls a two-dimensional approach to injustice, arguing that there are most often elements of misrecognition and maldistribution present in classes of injustice which cannot be indirectly remedied by addressing only one of the two. Categories like sexuality and gender, traditionally understood as involving injustices of misrecognition have accompanying class-based injustices. Likewise, class injustice, which is traditionally interpreted as economic injustice (injustice of maldistribution) also includes the cultural elements of misrecognition. In the case of the young men in this study, with their nested precarities, there are certainly elements of the maldistribution which they face that are not merely reducible to the lack of recognition. For example asylum seekers may experience misrecognition as the 'Muslim other' while also experiencing economic inequality of maldistribution. Changing society's conception of Muslim immigrants alone (addressing recognition) does not remedy their economic precarity.

So far in this chapter I have described the nested precarities of the participants and have introduced Axel Honneth's three-part recognition framework. I have discussed how, in the absence of legal-recognition, the participants in this study find solidarity with other converts, entering into what I would describe as a struggle for recognition which serves as a proxy for legal recognition. Now we will consider misrecognition as I analyse the work of the migration agency.

Misrecognition and the Swedish Migration Agency

As already mentioned, the participants in this study have been denied residency by the migration agency more than once, lived undocumented and in hiding for long periods, and subjected to interviewing which was designed around a particular stereotype of what it means to be a Christian. Denial of legal recognition has had consequences for their access to education, healthcare, and ability to work. In this section, I introduce a recent typology of misrecognition by Finnish ethicist Jaana Hallamaa (2023), and discuss how this relates to both the season prior to receiving asylum, but also the receipt of residency itself.

Drawing on the example of the #MeToo movement, Hallamaa nuances Honneth's recognition framework by demonstrating the different ways in which it is possible to be misrecognised. Recognition-proper, she argues, is based on an accurate reading of the 'actual characteristics of the other' (Hallamaa 2023, 181–83). It is not based on misinformation or false compliments, but on reflecting back to the person a realistic picture of themselves. The first and most straightforward form of misrecognition is non-recognition, which is 'a failure—or refusal—to identify relevant features upon which to base acknowledgement or recognition'. The person experiences 'total or partial invisibility' and a form of 'social non-existence' (Hallamaa 2023, 183). The next two relate to what Hallamaa calls inaccurate recognition on the individual level: *misrecognition* and *surrecognition* are two sides of the same coin because both are rooted in attributing inaccurate characteristics to the person based on the personal prejudices of the recogniser, however they differ by outcome. Misrecognition is where an individual is recognised for negative attributes without proper justification. Surrecognition, however, is where positive attributes are mistakenly attributed to the individual. The final category of misrecognition types is what Hallamaa calls misled recognition, which includes *disrecognition* and *pseudo-recognition*. Disrecognition is where 'features of the other are identified as typical characteristics of a member of a certain group' (Hallamaa 2023, 183). This might be, for example, where women who exhibit communicative assertiveness that is recognised as masculine

are labelled 'bossy'. The flip side of this is pseudo-recognition, which is where a person is seen as embodying positive characteristics by virtue of belonging to a particular group.

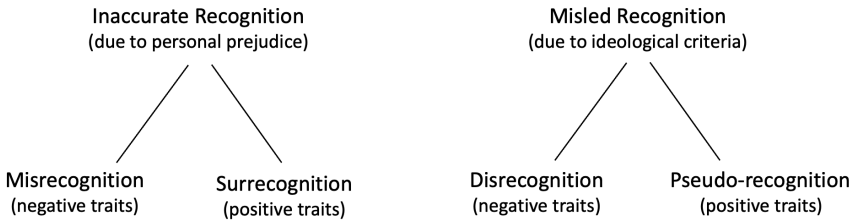

Figure 5.1: Types of misrecognition (Hallamaa 2023)

The reason I introduce Hallamaa's typology of misrecognition is that I think it can contribute to our understanding of what is taking place when the participants in this study encounter representatives of the migration agency. For example, in Chapter 3, I introduced the types of questions that Haji and Sohrab were asked about Christianity, an approach that I characterised as literalistic and based on stereotypes about what a Christian is. The participants are asked to prove that they match a particular picture of a Christian that the migration officer has. This picture is, it seems, based on a narrow understanding developed from information garnered from the media and direct searching in the Bible (following the literalist idea that there is no need to interpret or contextualise scripture). It is a picture rooted in religious illiteracy (Ellis 2023).

When the participants face the migration officials, they are of course driven by the desire to prove to them that they are real Christians. They therefore adapt their presentation of themselves to the picture of Christianity that they believe the migration officials have. When they receive legal recognition, in the form of a residency permit, this is in part because they have proven their religious conversion to be credible in the eyes of the authority, according to this arbitrary measurement.[120] When a person is deemed to be a Christian by the migration agency, they are, I would argue, being misrecognised. By this, I do not mean to imply that they are not authentically Christian but that since a faulty and highly contingent method for assessing the credibility is in use, the successful candidate

[120] What is problematic about this process is not only that it is based on partial or stereotypical information, but that the migration officials have so much power in defining how one should prove religious faith to be credible.

is being recognised as having attributes which are mistakenly assumed to be those of a group.

If we assume that the participants in this study are not faking their interest in Christianity and their conversions—which, based on my fieldwork, I have no reason to believe they are—then when their applications for asylum are denied based on the lack of credibility of their religious faith, they are—according to Hallamaa's criteria—experiencing either misrecognition or disrecognition: that is, they are being misrecognised as being non-members of the category Christian either due to personal prejudice or ideological criteria. What is perhaps more interesting is that it seems that those applications which have a positive outcome for the applicant—where they are granted residency—may also be based on a type of misrecognition.

Let us take Sohrab as an example. The officer interviewing him read out quotes from the Bible and asked him to identify which book in the Bible they came from. The assumption underlying this is that real Christians know their way around the Bible. Of course, for a great many Christians this is the case, but there are also many for whom it is not. In the Church of Sweden, little emphasis is placed on knowing your Bible in a functionalistic manner: memorising verses or where in the Bible they can be found. Nonetheless, the Church of Sweden is the majority church, and therefore the majority of Christians in Sweden are Church of Sweden Christians. Defining *Christian* in this manner would exclude many of those who would identify themselves as Christian should they need to apply for asylum based on religious belonging. When an individual is granted residency based on such criteria, I would argue (using Hallamaa's typology) that it is an instance of either *surrecognition* or *pseudo-recognition*. Since the decision is positive, we can interpret the decision as an application of positive attributes to the person (at least, positive according to the view of the official), but that those attributes, since they are based on a flawed definition, are at odds with the category itself. In this instance, Sohrab is recognised in an inaccurate or misleading manner based on being seen to conform to an inaccurate picture. The question to consider when deciding whether this is surrecognition or pseudo-recognition is whether the migration official is basing their decision on personal prejudice or on ideological criteria. Although the case could be made that this is pseudo-recognition, I would describe this as surrecognition because of the degree of discretion granted to the individual case officers and therefore, the strong degree to which individual prejudice and assumption can play a role in their decision making.

In Chapter 6, with the help of theologian Tink Tinker, I describe the implications of having a positive asylum decision based on misrecognition and what this might

mean for the individual human person who is being misrecognised. For now, however, I have established the uneasy relationship between the migration agency and the participants on the grounds of recognition, which can offer a useful counterpoint to the relationship between the participants and the Church of Sweden, particularly the Bible study community of practice.

The Church of Sweden and Recognition

So far, we have looked at the nested precarities of the participants in this study, and the protracted period over which they have played out. I have said little about the role that the church plays in this struggle for recognition. It is important to remember that, for Honneth and, indeed, Hegel, recognition is closely related to personhood. It is a prerequisite for realising oneself as a person. Recognition is, in the way it is used by Honneth, a basic human need. The examples of precarity above illustrate some of the ways in which recognition is denied the participants in this study: as Hazaras in Afghanistan they are treated as a deviant religious other, in Iran they are 'Afghans' who are denied legal recognition and also experience xenophobia. As alone-coming children, they are deprived of the loving relationships that represent an important part of Honneth's trinity of recognition. As asylum seekers, once again, they are denied legal recognition and are, thus, deprived of the protections and provisions of the welfare state. And they are denied solidarity on a societal level.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I described the legitimation that the priests offer to the participants on their arrival at the church. This legitimation takes the form of a welcome greeting and an invite to participate in the Bible study group. For the participants in this study, being granted this form of recognition, not dependent on the priest's knowing who they are or where they are from, speaks to a need to be identified as human beings prior to any other category. In time, the priests certainly learn the history of these young participants and come to understand their cultural backgrounds, but to begin with the notion of acceptance as you are speaks to this particular need. In Chapter 4 we looked at Jeremiah's story, and the significance he assigned to being invited to sit at the front of the church during the mass. In other settings he was seen as Hazara, as Afghan, as an asylum seeker, even as the Muslim other, but in that moment in the church, he was simply a welcome guest. He told me:

> I had been there a few months and they hadn't asked who I was. They just trusted me. They gave me things to do in the church, let me participate in different programmes, to different teachings. They gave me responsibility to help them with different programmes. They treated me like a person.[121]

Zohaib described a similarly warm welcome when he first visited a church:

> So when we went to the church and there were two, one man and one woman, they came and then they said, 'Welcome', and they were really helpful, they were very good and when we, after we introduced ourselves, they also introduced…said, 'We work in this church.' Then we went into the garden and ate tea and ate cake and such and then after we went into the church, and then when we went there in the church, they played piano and we asked how they start the service. They told us, when we start the service, we light candles and those who have problems or those who…someone who has a problem, and then we first light the candle and we play piano and then there was a big difference from the beginning […] when I saw this church, they…it was a big difference. They all laughed, showed lots of love…and they played piano…from the beginning, for me it was a big difference.[122]

The church offers acceptance and a space in which to cultivate loving relationships. Through the Bible study group it also, I would argue, provides the opportunity to belong to a solidarity community. That is, a community which may not yet have recognition, but which can offer solidarity to those who engage in the struggle for recognition together. The participants in this community of practice provide for one another the recognition that is denied them elsewhere. Of course, the group cannot offer legal recognition, but it does represent a larger unit which together can face the lack of legal recognition and, to some degree, it operates as a kind of proxy for legal recognition. What these kinds of groups possess, according to Honneth (2005, 121), is 'an intersubjectively shared value horizon', which is 'an orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other'. They draw on what Wenger (2022, 82–83) would call their 'shared repertoire' as a resource for mutual recognition. However, as we will see later, the solidarity of the group is vulnerable precisely because of its lack of legal status, and prone to fracture when individual members are granted the status denied to others.

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[121] Interview with Jeremiah, 5/03/2021

[122] Interview with Zohaib, 24/03/2023

A Second Season of Precarity

On receiving residency in Sweden, members of the Bible study group are suddenly eligible to become participants in a narrative they have been excluded from since their arrival; they are eligible to become participants in the welfare state. They are invited to orientation classes, consider educational routes, and get themselves registered with the tax agency. The state begins to fill the roles that the church, as a community, has been filling. It is no longer Pamela who is providing a place for Shaheed to live, but rather *Socialstyrelsen* (the social services). Jeremiah no longer needs to ask God to protect him from the police, since he now has an identification card. Abas can stop attending church-run language cafes because he is entitled to *Svenska för Invandrare*, the language programme for those who are 'in the system'. In this section, I look at the experience of getting residency and how this change affects the participant's relationship to the Bible study group.

Vignette 4: Shaheed (Part 2)

In November 2021, Shaheed became one of the first members of the group to be granted residency. He described the experience of being allowed to stay after so many years:

> I was at school and then I heard, Torbjörn my lawyer rang and then I got really nervous. […] I went out in the corridor and then I took a deep breath, 'Hello, it's Shaheed.' 'Hi Shaheed, it's Torbjörn. Congratulations!' And then I was totally closed off, I didn't speak, I was quiet for some seconds. He said, 'Hello, hello! Did you hear me?' I said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I hear you.' He said, 'Aren't you happy?' I said, 'Yes, I'm happy but I don't know how I should react.' Like it all came at once and I didn't know whether to be happy or cry or like I should laugh. So I was totally closed off. But after some minutes I understood properly, 'Now I can relax.' And it felt very, very good, a very special feeling. You feel alive. After so many years.[123]

He rang his Swedish mother and his family in Afghanistan to tell them the good news. But this initial elation was short-lived. The residence permit that Shaheed had been granted was for three years. In order to be granted a renewal after three

[123] Interview with Shaheed, 21/04/2023

years, he had to find permanent employment. After taking a couple of months to slow down and get his head together, Shaheed applied for a job with the local council as a carer at a home for people with disabilities. He was given the job, but his contract was for 75 per cent, or 30 hours a week. There is a way for him to receive a fixed contract on these hours, but he told me, 'If I work like this, it will take maybe two and a half years.'[124] Shaheed works overtime in the attempt to boost his weekly average, but has had to put his hopes of further education and a career on hold: '[S]ometimes I think I'd like to study but then I think, "Okay, if I study what will happen to my life?" I need a permanent job. You're in between two options, I don't know whether to take this one or that one. So it's a bit hard to choose. But I would like to study.'[125]

Although he has legal status, the temporary nature of that status inhibits him from planning further than three years ahead. He would like to enhance his employability—to work towards gaining skilled employment—but he must first think of gaining permanent employment. These circumstances create an extended feeling of waiting, a new form of precarity. Alongside the pressure to get permanent employment, Shaheed and his peers are aware of the fickle nature of politics, and that what is government policy now may not be so in three years' time.

Receiving legal status has also created disjunctures in his relationships with those of his peers who have not received it. Because of his additional time commitments and his ambivalence about how others feel about his receiving asylum when they have not, he seldom attends the Bible study group. He still maintains contact with members, and attends Sunday services at the church when he is able, but for the time being he does not feel entirely at home there. On the last occasion he attended the group, he seemed to be struggling with doubt about his faith, unsure whether some of the beliefs he held during his asylum process were true.

Having struggled with anxiety, Shaheed's psychologist told him that his situation prior to receiving residency was inducive of anxiety. When he received his permit to stay, he expected the anxiety to go away. 'She said to me, "You are set up for anxiety because you live in a difficult situation so things can stress you out easily." But now I've come out of that situation, but at the same time I'm stressed because

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

I'm stressed about the extension [of residency].'[126] In reality, his anxiety did not go away when he was granted asylum. In this new season, he may not be seeking asylum, but he has a limited period in which to prove himself to the authorities.

Shortly before the end of my fieldwork, and eight years into the participants' lives in Sweden, Karim, Jeremiah, Abas, Amin, and Haji were also granted residency. Overnight they went from being asylum seekers to being members of society; they were invited to register with the tax office (in order to receive a personal identification number) and attend orientation programmes, and offered work training. They contacted their family members and told them of their good news. They celebrated with their 'Swedish family', and they tried to figure out how to tell this news to their friends who had not been granted asylum. Although they were understandably glad to receive the news, it was overshadowed by the fact that the period granted for residency was three years, rather than indefinite. In essence, they had been granted three years to prove that they could be productive members of society, which, in the eyes of the Swedish welfare state, meant finding permanent employment, a task which can be more difficult than it sounds. This factor tainted the experience of receiving asylum since it meant that they could not really relax and they could not fully take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the state. They are faced with the demand of making quick decisions about the trajectory of their working lives, including giving up or putting on hold ambitions of pursuing careers requiring further academic training.[127] Family members who have been patient during their long asylum processes now expect them to begin sending remittances home to Iran or Afghanistan. Those, like Shaheed, who find work tend to meet a degree of precarity in their entry level jobs that do not guarantee permanent contracts.

All this culminates in what I have come to regard as a second season of precarity in Sweden. Their lives may objectively be more secure than when they were when undocumented and in hiding, but this security is time-limited and conditional. Added to this, they must renegotiate their identities. They are no longer asylum seekers and are unsure about their place in their community of practice. Do they still belong? How do those who have not been granted residency feel towards them? They are of course happy on an individual level to have been given legal status, but experience shame due to their shifting status in the group. Group

[126] Ibid.

[127] Three years is not enough time to get a place on a course, complete it, and find permanent work in that field.

solidarity is shaken as the tacit criterion for group membership makes itself known. Their love relationships with other group members are also strained. I asked Shaheed about his relationship with the group after he received residency (and before the others did) and he described the way in which his relationship to Amin had been challenged by his change of status:

> **Shaheed:** It was difficult with Amin. When I got residency, he was the first person I told. Before I rang my family. I thought, 'Okay, I should tell Amin, he will be happy.' But he was shocked when I told him and still I think he got a lot of feelings when I said it. Because we've been through almost everything together and then at the same time he thinks 'Now Shaheed is on another level, but I must still struggle.'
>
> **Jonathan:** Yeah.
>
> **Shaheed:** So I understand him one hundred percent but from the beginning I was a bit sad that he couldn't be happy for my sake, but still when I think about it I have a bit of a problem with it…with that part. Because I've always tried to figure out in a good way, 'Why did he feel sad? Why did he react this way?' And then I began to understand it. He has a difficult situation. He's with his mum and his brother; they have like lots of bad situations.
>
> **Jonathan:** And I can understand because he always tries to be positive and think in a positive way, but it's maybe unexpected that he would get that news.
>
> **Shaheed:** Yeah and one day I spoke with him and said, 'Why are you sad?' And then he told me, 'I'm really happy for your sake that you got residency, but when I think about myself I get sad and a bit disappointed.' And then I also understood, and I began to understand him. Then that feeling I got, 'Why isn't he happy?' That went away, it got smaller and smaller and then I forgot it…and now we have a good relationship. But from the beginning, when I got residency, we became distanced, we got some distance between us. And I didn't want to ring him, he didn't want to ring me. We clashed in some way. But now it's over. Our relationship has gotten better again.[128]

Amin was Shaheed's closest friend in the group, and so Shaheed was taken aback by his unenthusiastic response to the news that he had received residency. Although their relationship recovered from this rupture, it illustrates the complexity of the relationships on which the group is built and the powerful

[128] Interview with Shaheed, 21/04/2023. This interview was carried out before the migration agency granted Amin residency.

emotions that surround the asylum process. In terms of recognition, I want to suggest that this post-residency season destabilises the participants in two ways: by disrupting their framework of recognition and by reconfiguring redistribution. Firstly, since the lack of legal recognition has been a rallying point for group identity within the community of practice, these young men experience an alienation from this identity. In the moment they receive news that they have been granted residency, they become less able to identify themselves as rightful members of the community of practice. Implicit to membership in the group is legal misrecognition, and once this evaporates the group members lose an important element in their mutual identity. All of the young men I spoke to after they received residency were ambivalent about their relationship to the group. Here, in several interviews, Aziz becomes symbolic of the tension they experience toward the group after receiving residency. Aziz is a highly committed member of the group who has been part of the church since 2016. During his time in Sweden, he has suffered a number of stress-related health issues, including problems with his stomach and also a diminished ability to communicate in both his mother tongue and Swedish:

> **Jeremiah:** It's a bit tricky to meet them, because I meet Aziz sometimes and he says, often, 'It's great that you have been able to start your life…I don't know when mine is coming.' And it's hard to hear that. Because…I don't know how to explain it…but it's difficult to see that they haven't received residence. Aziz needs it more than I do, actually.
>
> **Jonathan:** What do you mean by that?
>
> **Jeremiah:** I've known Aziz eight years and when I first met him, it was in [town name] and he was really jolly. He's still jolly, but he was good at speaking, there was no problem. He could express himself really easily. He was a whole other person compared with today. Today it is really difficult to understand him, even when we speak the same language I don't understand him. He mixes words to build a sentence to say what he means. And I'm really sad about that because he needs more than us others because he is doing worse and worse each year.
>
> **Jonathan:** Yes, I've noticed that he has difficulty communicating. And I wondered… so that's interesting, or good to understand that it hasn't always been like this.
>
> **Jeremiah:** No, no. He could speak very clearly. But it's affected him so much that [now] he mixes things, babbles about things so that you can't understand what he means. Yeah. So it's affected his wellbeing, physically and mentally, a lot. A lot.

> And I'm really sad about that, that they can't see that. I've been with him to his contact person and told her about this and said, 'You need to raise this with Migrationsverket, that he has trouble speaking.' But they are like, 'Ahh okay, they don't listen. They don't care if he can speak or not.' That's been difficult.
>
> **Jonathan:** And it's so hard because the whole process involves being able to tell…
>
> **Jeremiah:** To convince them.[129]

Receiving residence means being granted legal recognition (albeit for a limited period of time). The wait, an experience shared by the other members of the community of practice, is over. The destabilisation of their identity within the community and the accompanying institutional recognition means they begin investing time in shoring up their place in society, perhaps in order to remedy this sense of instability. They busy themselves with orientation courses, paperwork, and registration processes in order to make this official decision more tangible. This leads us to the second destabilisation that occurs during this time: redistribution. During their time as asylum seekers, they oscillate between receiving basic subsistence allowances from the welfare state and, when in hiding, receiving no such provision. The shortfall during these times is picked up by their social networks, and ranges from shared meals with others in the group, to financial support from official and unofficial church-related (and non-church related) sources.

Not only do these young men experience the pressure to acquire a fixed work contract before their three years are up, they are also faced with a government who could, at any moment, change the rules of the game. Over the course of their time in Sweden, the political situation has changed from being, at least rhetorically, very positive towards migration, to being outspokenly hostile toward it. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the current government—a right-wing alliance—is thought to have been elected as the result of a shift toward a right-wing populism in which anti-immigration sentiment was an important factor. This means that the concerns of the participants are grounded in a realistic analysis of the situation.

[129] Interview with Jeremiah, 27/03/2023

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the young men in this study remedy their extended experiences of nested precarity through finding recognition in the context of the church. The recognition offered by the church is a combination of love-recognition and solidarity-recognition in Honneth's model. They are accepted into the community of the church and find loving connections, particularly among others with the same background, and older men and women who 'adopt' them as surrogate family members.

With the help of recognition theory, I have also offered an explanation of the shape of their relationship to the Bible study community of practice in the aftermath of their asylum applications being granted. All three participants who received legal recognition during my fieldwork (via residency) experienced a crisis of sorts in their relationship with the group. No longer could they claim ties of solidarity, or parity in the struggle for recognition, since they had been officially granted residency. No longer were they facing maldistribution as an undocumented person unsupported by the welfare state. This overnight transformation disrupts their status and sense of belonging in the group and means that they no longer feel 'at home' in this community of practice. Although there are other demands which also redirect their attention—such as needing to send remittances to family, the search for permanent work, and society orientation processes—none of these adequately explain the sense of inner conflict towards the group expressed during interviews by the participants who had received residency.

6. Conclusion

I introduced this dissertation by describing the way in which the religious conversion of migrants is commonly reduced by popular narratives to merely a desperate attempt to remain in Sweden. I called this the *asylum capital hypothesis* because it proposes that conversion to Christianity offers, or is believed to offer, the converts some kind of advantage—capital—which positions them more advantageously in Swedish society and increases their chances of receiving asylum. I also introduced the religious landscape of Sweden and argued that the reason why religious conversion can be so easily brushed off by Swedes is connected with Sweden's self-understanding as a secular country for whose citizens *religious* is something that others are. Moreover, the general hermeneutic of suspicion in Swedish society makes other explanations for religious conversion seem more plausible than that these individuals are attracted to Christian faith and practice and change their beliefs as a result. It also renders their religious subjectivity invisible by offering a one-size-fits-all explanation for the phenomenon of conversion.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how the Bible study group can be considered a community of practice. Using Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory helps to foreground the smaller units where organic learning takes place over institutional hierarchies. This led into Chapter 4, where I showed that participants 'belonged' and participated ('behaved') in the church before they 'believed', and that this was indicative of a process in which belief is the byproduct of practice. This belief should not, however, be reduced to the dogmatic cognitivism found in the migration agency's working definition of religion,[130] but should instead be framed as an embodied belief-in-practice. In Chapter 5, I showed how belonging in the church and experiencing solidarity in the Bible study group became an important means whereby the participants remedied their misrecognition and precarity. I also looked at the disruption that the receipt of residency caused to the sense of belonging that the participants had established in the group. Drawing

[130] This was illustrated by the kinds of questions asked of the participants in Chapter 4.

on both Honneth's threefold framework of recognition and Hallamaa's typology of misrecognition, I contrasted the bases for recognition in the church with those of the migration agency. I argued that, due to the faulty grounds on which the migration officers base their credibility decisions, they are in fact participating in a form of misrecognition—*surrecognition*—even when they are providing the participants with the legal status they seek.

In this chapter, I draw together these themes in order to argue for what I think is a more fruitful way to understand conversion to Christianity among URM-background converts. I return to the context of the Church of Sweden and look at the specific traits which make it conducive to conversion among this group, examining the approach that the church takes to dealing with ambiguity in its reception of the religious and cultural other. I also address identity formation more generally, paying attention to processes of recognition. I tie all this together in the claim that, in the process of conversion, the participants are co-opting a waiting period intended to benefit the political authorities as an opportunity to attain visibility. In doing so, I argue, they are challenging processes of bureaucratic invisibilisation.

Ritual and Recognition in the Church of Sweden

As you might expect, the way in which the church receives those entering its doors differs in important ways from that of the migration agency. In this section, following the previous chapters, I describe two of these differences and how they promote a sense of belonging. The first is how the church deals with ambiguity. The second is how it receives the religious other.

In *Rethinking Pluralism*, Seligman and Weller (2012) describe three alternative ways of dealing with ambiguity: *notation*, *ritual*, and *shared experience*. In this section I focus on the first two. Notation is 'the attempt to conquer ambiguity by creating ever more categories and rules' (Seligman and Weller 2012, 6). In contrast, ritual enables the crossing of boundaries. Seligman and Weller tell us:

> [R]itual is not necessarily concerned with what we often call 'sincerity.' In any ritual, as with saying 'please' or 'thank you,' performing the act marks acceptance of the convention, if you identify with it or not. In ritual, the whole issue of our internal states is often irrelevant. What you *are* is what you *are in the doing*, which is of course an external act. This differs significantly from modernist concerns with sincerity and authenticity. Getting it *right* is not, as in the latter cases, a matter of

> making outer acts conform with inner beliefs. Getting it right is doing it again and again and again—it is an act of world construction. (Seligman and Weller 2012, 95; emphasis original)

In ritual, you temporarily set aside questions about belief or authenticity and embody a reality constructed together with others. This is an important distinction for understanding the different ways in which the migration agency and the church navigate ambiguity. The legal recognition offered by the migration agency is notational. The modern nation state must use notation as a means of eliminating ambiguity from otherwise ambiguous circumstances because of the bureaucratic means by which it manages power. Legal cases are themselves usually ambiguous, having to do with a set of circumstances which must be interpreted according to the relevant statutes (Seligman and Weller 2012, 5). Judges take an abstract text and apply it to specific circumstances through a process of interpretation, filling the categories created by the text with specific defined meanings. The result of such a cycle of interpretation is a new set of notations. It is the role of the courts to eliminate ambiguity by applying notational categories to a case. For asylum applications, the question is whether an individual meets the eligibility criteria for protection under migration law. The migration officer, and, on appeal, the judge, interpret the law and apply it to the circumstances of a case. Öztürk comments that 'the truth is discursively constructed, and it is nothing more than what judges decide to be true' (Öztürk 2024, 167). In this sense, we witness a breakdown of notation even in the state's mechanisms and the use of ritual to handle ambiguity. While ambiguity is a feature of legal cases in general, this is especially true for cases in which asylum is sought on religious grounds. In such cases, the migration official is required to assess the sincerity of that which can never be observed—the inner beliefs of the applicant (Hurd 2024, 189). They do this by using the things to hand—the narratives and practices of the applicant. There are additional complexities to asylum cases besides this. Rose tells us:

> Religion-based asylum grounds are some of the most complex asylum applications to examine. The reasons for this are manifold: they raise questions about the definition of religion, appropriate means of credibility assessments of religious converts, the assessment and definition of 'persecution', and the interaction between fear of religious persecution with other asylum grounds. (Rose and Öztürk 2024, 5)

There is, thus, a high degree of subjectivity and ambiguity in determining the 'truth' of an asylum claim.[131] The very category of religion is both extremely important to this process and ambiguous. As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd tells us:

> It appears simultaneously as a stable and knowable, but also complex and elusive, quantity or attribute that is continually threatening to escape the adjudicators' grasp while also somehow existing (or not) in the petitioner independently of and prior to the asylum seeking process. (Hurd 2024, 190)

Religion is by nature resistant to the notational impulses of modern secular bureaucracies and so, although it makes humanitarian sense to offer protection to those persecuted for their religious identities, this tension and complexity is unavoidable for the legal system. The church is perhaps somewhat more comfortable with ambiguity than the state, and deals with it differently. While notation is present in the church—for example, when a priest decides who is ready to be baptised—there is limited expectation about what can be known about a person's relationship to God. This was demonstrated in Chapter 4, when Astrid, the priest, told me that she is not interested in judging the piety of the particular individual. She instead focused on developing an individual's understanding of what it is that they are participating in, and in the memorisation of the creed. She accepts the ambiguity between what can be observed and what is unseen and chooses not to police it. However, the church does invite the participants into their shared story via engagement in the ritual of the liturgy. This space, as Seligman and Weller describe, brackets the notational 'in or out' questions and enables the crossing of boundaries.

Here, the creed—a distillation of core doctrine recited liturgically at regular intervals—represents the meeting of practice and theory. An individual can learn and recite a creed at any point in the cognitive belief process—whether in the hope that it is true, as a curiosity, or out of deep conviction. While the ritual of creedal recital is going on, the question ceases to be *Do you believe?* as cognitive belief is bracketed so that practical belief can be enacted together with others. When I mention *practical belief* here I am drawing on Bourdieu (1990, 68), who used this term to describe a form of belief which 'is not a "state of mind", still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines ("beliefs"), but rather a state of the body'. In his work on *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu (1990) sought to subvert overly intellectual accounts of what

[131] This has been further problematised by Rasmauer and Çağlar (2024)

practitioners do, arguing that theorists tend to look for a theoretical logic where only a practical logic exists. Bourdieu (1990, 66) likens the habitus to the feel that one has for a game of sport. In his discussion of Bourdieu's habitus, Smith tells us, '[O]ne can have a masterful feel for the game without ever being able to articulate what one "knows" in that respect' (Smith 2013, 87). Consider the young men in this study who have gone through years in which they participate in the liturgy, in prayer, in Bible study. They have learned the 'game' of their community of practice bodily. It has become part of them. Now, when confronted with the migration agency, they are asked to account for this practical belief theoretically. According to Bourdieu, it is more likely that an outside observer could give a good theoretical account than the practitioners themselves because the outside observer has the advantage of a more objective perspective (Bourdieu 1990, 91). Here we see the influence of the context—the structure in which the participants practice religion—and how the social imaginary works its way into the participants' bodies.

As the participants go about seeking asylum, doing so using their new found religious identities as grounds, they are faced with pressure to conform to particular interpretations of religion as understood within a secular institution—the migration agency—whose employees have been characterised as 'religiously illiterate' (Wernersson 2017). The process of asking such questions from a particular position of power is by no means ethically neutral. Indeed making one's view of the world understandable to another involves a renegotiation of identity. Post-colonial theologian Tink Tinker (2013) argues that distortions to the social imaginary of a group take place when the group is forced to adopt the language offered to them by the powerful. Tinker's case explores the distortion of Native American cultures through being forced to import the concepts 'god, creator, and belief' into their languages, or the accompanying appropriation of emic words to express etic concepts which they previously did not. This process causes a remaking of the colonised culture in a form adapted to non-native norms, such as top-down hierarchy and the masculinising of power. In the case of the participants in this study, the migration agency is asking the applicants to re-invent an embodied practice according to the linguistic framework that it considers appropriate. In doing so, its officers are doing more than simply seeking clarification, they are asking the participants to reinvent their lived reality in a way which finds favour with the Swedish bureaucratic system. The individual subject might be found to be acceptable, but only after they have recreated themselves according to an image defined by those with power. One might ask, along with Tinker: after this process has taken place, do their identities remain the same?

Being Really Seen

One of the ways that personalist philosophers have suggested for avoiding the notational tendency of reproducing others according to our categories is an ethical encounter that Martin Buber (2018) describes as *I-Thou*. According to Buber, the all-too-common way in which human beings interact leads them to treat others as 'its' rather than as 'thous'; that is, they become objects in our life courses rather than subjects in their own right. Buber suggests that really seeing the other involves stepping beyond the other's it-ness and acknowledging their thou-ness. In the particular case of unaccompanied refugee minors in the church, it would involve setting aside the various factors that make the participants 'its'—their status as asylum seekers, as Hazaras, as minors—and looking to the person that exists behind those categories. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero, education theorist Sharon Todd (2011) argues for a re-personalisation of the political realm. For Todd (2011, 102), it is social categorisation which reduces a person to 'an aggregate of her cultural attributes' and thus stands in the way of embodied encounter. Allowing the individual to emerge from this aggregate requires a shift of approach from dialogue to narrative, and towards emphasising the 'who' instead of the 'what' of an individual identity. Exemplifying this, Jeremiah described two instances in which not being asked about his background was experienced as something positive: the first, when the pastor of the Pentecostal church helped him without asking where he was from; the second, was when he first came to the Church of Sweden:

> [T]he priest came forward to me and invited me to sit at the front with the others. When they said this to me, I thought this was really nice. They respected me as a person. They didn't ask who I was or about my background. They just asked if I would like to sit with the others.[132]

When I first heard this, and similar stories from other participants, I was puzzled by the idea that not asking someone about who they are could be a way to express hospitality. My thinking at the time was that one demonstrates an interest in another person by asking them questions like *Who are you?* or *Where are you from?* However, my discussion on precarity and recognition offers an explanation as to why, for this particular group, it might be precisely the right way in which to offer a warm welcome. At the migration agency, they are continually asked who they

[132] Interview with Jeremiah, 5/03/2021

are, and are interviewed at length to establish whether their claims are plausible. Some URMs have been subjected to medical age-testing to assess whether they are the age that they claim to be. In Iran, according to some participants, they are considered to be members of a class—Afghans—who are consistently treated as an unwanted presence. In Afghanistan, they are Hazaras—a Shiʿa minority whose religious practice is seen as deviant from Sunni norms. These nested precarities have followed them from birth. And so, to enter a context in which they are, initially, not asked *Are you Muslim?* or *Are you Afghan?* but are instead simply invited to participate, is a striking experience. It is one in which ritual and legitimate peripheral participation is given priority over notation.

This disruption of the typical approach to conversation, whether a deliberate strategy of the church or not, has the effect of allowing the participants to present themselves as they wish to be seen, and, I would suggest, creates the opportunity to be recognised for who they really are, rather than who the discourses of society determine them to be. In the words of Buber, when Jeremiah came to the church, he felt treated as a *thou*, and therefore felt truly seen. Being seen in this way is different from the experience that Tinker describes, in which the Native American community were asked to define themselves and their beliefs according to the categories of the powerful (the colonisers). As I have already mentioned, it also differs from the pattern followed by the power-brokers in Swedish society, who are eager to classify the participants as belonging to a particular class which they did not choose and to which they did not belong before they crossed the border into Sweden. Instead, they are met on their own terms and are afforded an opportunity to narrate their lives as individual persons rather than as members of a category.

Bringing this discussion back to recognition theory, sociologist Carl-Göran Heidegren (2023, 104) draws our attention to a category of invisibilization he calls 'seeing without really seeing'. He tells us, 'Seeing without really seeing means visually cognizing someone but, so to speak, only through a lens, thereby transmitting a feeling to the other of not being seen for who he or she really is' (Heidegren 2023, 104). He introduces two forms of this kind of invisibilisation. The first is the *distorted* type, by which a person is seen but only as an ideal type, perhaps as a member of a category. The second is the *prejudiced* type, by which a person is seen but looked down upon. It is the first of these which is particularly pertinent to our discussion here. For much of their lives, the participants in this study have been seen without really being seen. In each of the contexts where they have spent time during their lives they have been treated as members of a category. Often, these interactions have fallen within the prejudiced type—they have been

recognised as belonging to a category which the onlooker considers beneath them, such as Afghan or Hazara. In Sweden, their treatment could most easily be described as the distorted type—they are recognised as unaccompanied refugee minors not initially out of prejudice but rather because of bureaucratic notation. However, belonging to this category means that they are seen without being seen. They are reduced to a single identity marker.

Two problems emerge when the participants are granted legal recognition. The first relates to the grounds on which the assessment of credibility is based. I proposed that because asylum adjudication is based on certain false premises about the nature of religion, the recognition the participants receive when they are granted residency is actually a form of misrecognition. This stems from the migration officers use of a definition of what it means to be a Christian which does not reflect what it means to be a Christian in the context of the church. The second problem has to do with the clash of recognitions which emerges as a result of the destabilising effects of the state's rights-recognition on the love- and solidarity- recognition of the Bible study group. Receiving legal status altered the relationship between the individual participants and the Bible study group as they sought to renegotiate their positionality in relation to their prior precarity. No longer asylum seekers, they experienced shame at receiving the desired legal status when others in the group had not. While they did not stop attending services at the church and did not renounce Christianity, their relationship to the Bible study group became strained by a sense of discontinuity.

This experience of disjuncture suggests that we should reconsider Honneth's model. One of the strengths of Honneth's theory is that it offers a succinct three part overview of what an individual needs to reach full subjectivity. He proposes that love-, solidarity-, and rights-recognition are preconditions of full personhood. He also allows that, for those who do not achieve legal status, belonging to a solidarity group which together struggles for status may provide a substitute for legal recognition. What Honneth's theory does not deal with is that the relationship between these layers of recognition may be complex and unevenly structured. He does not account for the prospect that there might be a struggle between recognitions, as there was in the case of those participants who received legal status when the rest of their cohort did not. This is illustrated by the way in which the relationship between Shaheed and Amin was affected by Shaheed's receiving residency while Amin had not. Initially, Amin was shaken and did not respond positively to Shaheed's good news. He was upset, and this was troubling for Shaheed. For a time, their relationship cooled. In this instance, a love-recognition relationship was undermined by the asymmetrical distribution of legal

recognition. In Honneth's model, legal recognition would seem to complete the set of recognitions and would put Shaheed in a stronger position; however, the reality was more complex than this. If it is the case that one must have these three types of recognition in order to attain full personhood, the data suggest that the three types must also be compatible.[133]

I want to take this analysis a step further and suggest that the participants' processes of formation were dependent on their vulnerability. Drawing on Butler, Stålsett (2023) argues that there is potential to be found in the face of vulnerability. While vulnerability is often portrayed as wholly negative, he believes it to be a site for transformation (Stålsett 2023, 63). This aligns with Butler's (2006) early work on drag, an activity which muddies the lines between binary gender categories, and, she argues, is therefore a site for the challenge and modification of norms.[134] Stålsett (2023, 63) proposes that while it is regularly viewed with contempt in our neoliberal political systems, vulnerability deserves to be reframed as 'an individual virtue'. He goes so far as to suggest that it 'constitutes life' (Stålsett 2023, 64). Indeed, in contrast to the neoliberal aversion to vulnerability, the church, according to Stålsett (2023, 179), engages in a 'sacralization of vulnerability', notably through the doctrine of the incarnation.[135] He tells us, 'Through this paradoxical appraisal of the power in precariousness emerges a possible resurgence of political community and agency' (Stålsett 2023, 180). I see Stålsett's work as an important counterbalance to overly pessimistic accounts of the direction that precarity takes in society, those which tend to overlook the potentiality of vulnerability.

However, there is a fine line between acknowledging the potential inherent in such liminality and foreclosing any recognition of actual suffering.[136] While, indeed, innovation takes place in the borderland, the fact of this innovation

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[133] It is worth noting here that there is a tension here between group level solidarity and individual level legal status. The receipt of residency is also the point at which group members are constituted as individuals in a new sense.

[134] Granted, Butler (2006, xxiii) points out that drag should not be understood precisely as an example of subversion, but rather of the fragile nature of gender categories.

[135] Stålsett (2023, 128) specifically discusses the festivals of Christmas and Easter.

[136] This is a critique raised by Siphiwe Dube (2023) who views Stålsett's work as Eurocentric and tending towards a dangerously imprecise ambiguity vis-à-vis actual suffering in the world. What is needed, argues Dube, is a theology of vulnerability with teeth, one that offers clear tools for unpicking unjust systems where coloniality continues to guide the uneven distribution of vulnerability.

should not diminish the importance of addressing the uneven distribution of precarity. That is not to say that the goal should be the even distribution of injustice, or as Butler (2015b, 210) puts it 'one does not want everyone to have an equally unlivable life', but, rather, that attention must be given to how both precariousness and precarity are understood and mediated by our institutions.[137] It is beyond the scope of this study to offer such a programme for change, but the work on such questions must continue.[138]

Concluding Remarks

Many of those who arrived as unaccompanied refugee minors between 2014 and 2016 have endured long periods of waiting. Abas, Amin, Jeremiah, Haji, Karim, and Shaheed—all members of the research group in this study—waited seven or more years to be granted asylum. Sohrab waited five years. At the time of writing, Aziz and Zohaib were still waiting. Abdullah left Sweden for France after two failed asylum attempts and the last time I heard from him he was still waiting to receive asylum there. This dissertation has explored one way in which asylum seekers engage in 'productive waiting' (Engblom 2023) while their claims are processed.

In his doctoral thesis, *Time Warps*, Engblom (Engblom 2023, 94) describes the 'productive waiting' of those who are stuck in temporal limbo because of asylum policies. Productive waiting can play two opposing roles. It may work in the interest of the state against the asylum seeker: for example, by making unaccompanied refugee minors wait until they become adults before their applications are processed. Alternatively, it may work in the interests of the asylum seeker as a means by which they reclaim time which is otherwise under the control of others. It is this latter understanding of the term that I wish to focus on here. The participants in this study could have spent their time waiting and alone, and succumbed to Bauman's (2006, 148) 'powerful *individualising* force' of contemporary uncertainty. They could have socialised only with those in the same position as they found themselves. Instead, they chose to redefine themselves in

[137] In his work, Dube (2023) refers to precariousness as 'first order vulnerability', and precarity as 'second order vulnerability'.

[138] The authors mentioned in this section offer an excellent starting point for the continuation of this discussion, grounded in the fields of critical social theory and political theology.

light of their relationship to a new community. Furthermore, they did this despite a very real risk of being disowned by family members and other relations. Belonging to the church enabled them to cultivate practices which became productive for them in their lives of waiting. For example, through prayer, Shaheed learned to embrace the very silence which had initially induced anxiety. Through participation in the mass together with other members of their community of practice, Jeremiah and Zohaib found themselves identifying as members of a group which was less vulnerable to the legal precarity to which they were subjected. Shaheed, Amin, and Karim found a role model in the person of Jesus—someone who they could emulate who would not disappoint them like their previous role models had.[139]

It could be argued that the church is unique as a site in which all three forms of recognition coalesce. There is a familial quality in which individuals are able to build close, loving relationships. There is the sense of solidarity, with individual members being recognised for their particular traits and contribution to the community. Finally, while the church has no power to grant legal status, it does position itself alongside the asylum seeker in recognising that they *ought* to have legal status, and in advocating it. In contrast, the state's stock in trade is legal recognition. While it can legally recognise love relationships (marriages or legal next-of-kin), and can grant legal status for individuals and protection for groups, the state does not provide group-level solidarity or love relationships themselves.

In the course of this dissertation I have offered a different way of looking at conversion to Christianity among young migrants in Sweden. The data have offered us insight into the lived experiences of actual converts and has allowed us to understand how they reason about the processes that they have undergone. Such narratives point towards the complex, embodied nature of religious change, which is rooted in belonging and practical belief. In the process of this change, the participants have gone from a state of being made invisible—masked by bureaucratic categories and the experience of precarity—to being visible, recognised for who they are, in a context which promotes participation and does not insist on conformity.

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[139] Talking about discovering the teachings of Jesus, Amin told me: '[I]n those days I was searching after a role model for myself, and I thought 'maybe this person can be my role model' because he knew what to do. He said great things about being humane and brotherly.' (Interview with Amin, 10/11/2021)

List of Interviews

Interviews with Participants

Shaheed: 25th June 2020, 2nd July 2020, 21st April 2023

Abdullah: 8th October 2020

Jeremiah: 15th October 2020, 5th March 2021, 27th March 2023

Sohrab: 10th February 2021

Karim: 12th February 2021, 27th March 2023

Abas: 24th March 2021

Amin: 10th November 2021

Haji: 23rd March 2022

Bilal: 22nd April 2023

Aziz: 1st July 2022

Zohaib: 24th March 2023

Other Interviews

Astrid (priest): 14th January 2021

Harold (deacon): 28th April 2023

Focus Groups

Anne-Kristine and Dawood (diocese staff): 10th March 2021

Shaheed and Abas: 4th February 2021

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Conversion to Christianity among asylum seekers in Europe is a well-documented phenomenon that is often dismissed as a mere strategy to boost asylum chances. This dissertation challenges such views, revealing the intricate reality behind these conversions. Grounded in three years of fieldwork within a Church of Sweden Bible study group, this study contributes to our understanding of the conversion and identity formation processes of unaccompanied refugee minor-background young adults. By exploring their narrative identities and practical formation, it sheds light on the complex processes underpinning religious transformation. The study draws on theories of recognition and situated learning, mapping the participants' trajectories in terms of belonging, behaving, and believing. It highlights how conversion to the Church of Sweden offers these young individuals a newfound visibility and recognition, previously denied in their precarious lives.

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