Tales of transformation

Conversion narratives of unaccompanied refugee minors in the Church of Sweden

Morgan, Jonathan

Published in:
Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Europe

2024

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

7

Tales of transformation: Conversion narratives of unaccompanied refugee minors in the Church of Sweden

Jonathan J. Morgan

Introduction

Between June 2020 and April 2023, I conducted fieldwork at a Bible study group in the Swedish county of Scania in southern Sweden.[1] The group was made up of asylum seekers who came to Sweden as unaccompanied refugee minors (URM). All but one of the group members converted from Shi'a Islam to Christianity since arriving in Sweden from Iran and Afghanistan and had been baptized in the Church of Sweden (CofS), Sweden's former state church.

While there is an abundance of literature on URM in Europe, little attention has been given to the phenomenon of religious conversion, or even the role of religion, among this group.[2] Where religion is mentioned in literature on this group, it is either identified as a psychological coping strategy,[3] dismissed as an attempt to accrue asylum capital[4] or used to attain a sense of solidarity.[5] 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 Leman contends, viewing conversion through the lens of the acquisition of asylum capital or mobility is problematic since conversion processes are 'too complex to reduce its totality to such functional logic'.[6] Thankfully, some recent ethnographic work on asylum and conversion has sought to offer more nuanced perspectives 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.[7] Within conversion theory, Jindra has offered a model which seeks to complicate our understanding of the causal mechanisms behind

conversion processes. Instead of dismissing traditional deprivation or social network theories she combines them with other factors such as religious content and convert histories.[8] In the everyday discourse on asylum and conversion, the asylum capital explanation is regarded as the obvious explanation of the conversion of Muslim-background asylum seekers to Christianity. While I do not contest the validity of this analysis for describing some converts' motivations for conversion, one of my motivations for conducting long-term fieldwork with a group of converts to Swedish Lutheran Christianity is that it allows me to complicate our understanding of this phenomenon.

In this chapter, I draw on material collected through participant observation and narrative interviews with members of this group in order to describe a generalized process of conversion which is most common to all members of this group.[9] After describing and discussing this process, I examine the theme of authenticity which emerged from interviews and during the course of the fieldwork. Drawing on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor and learning theorists Lave and Wenger, I suggest that through experiences of belonging and legitimate peripheral participation[10] participants predispose themselves to experience a sense of authenticity when confronted with the possibility of embracing the truth claims of the church.

Between 2014 and 2016, 44,617 URM arrived and sought asylum in Sweden.[11] Since their arrival, the CofS has received hundreds of these young people seeking to join the church and be baptized as Christians. Although there are no official figures, it has been estimated that some 1,000–3,000 of these young people have converted to Christianity in a variety of churches in Sweden.[12] Since only 10 per cent of the URM that came 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.[13] The young men, due to the less personal institutional care which they receive, experience a greater sense of independence and more opportunity to explore for themselves what life in Sweden has to offer.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden (*Svenska kyrkan*) is the largest religious denomination in Sweden.[14] It has an official membership of some 5.6 million, or 53.9 per cent of the population.[15] However, since it became disestablished in 2000, 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. Sociologist of religion Grace Davie has characterized the Swedish approach to religion as 'belonging without believing' because, in spite of large membership numbers, active participation remains low.[16] It has been estimated that only around 80,000 (less than 1.3 per cent of the population) regularly

attend Sunday services.[17] The CofS is not known for emphasizing evangelistic outreach, which makes conversion within its walls a particularly striking phenomenon.

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.[18] Sweden's relationship with pluralism is relatively recent. It was not until the 1970s that the country began receiving non-European asylum seekers. However, it rapidly became the Nordic country with the biggest immigrant population, with today more than 20 per cent of the population boasting a history of migration.[19] The country maintained a warm approach to asylum seekers until the so-called 'crisis' of 2014–16 and its accompanying shift toward a more populist and nationalistic politics.[20] Acceptance rates of asylum applications dropped significantly between 2014 and 2017, including among URM.[21] Along with this, the majority of those who are granted asylum in Sweden no longer receive permanent residence, but are instead granted temporary protection.[22] This puts URM-background asylum seekers in a 'condition of social and civic limbo', not knowing if they will be permitted to remain in Sweden or face deportation to Afghanistan, along with the sense of precarity that this entails.[23]

Statist individualism and authenticity

Trägårdh uses the term 'statist individualism' to describe the combination of strong state and individual liberty which is emphasized in Swedish state policy.[24] According to this approach, as is common in classic Liberalism, the individual is the basic unit of society, and the social system is organized so as to minimize 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 spouse, children, ageing parents or significant others, the greater their potential to be who they wish to be.[25] Underpinning this statist individualism is what Taylor 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.'[26] 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.[27] It is, he argues, the destabilization caused by modern society which creates the need for 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.[28]

In other words, the very processes of centralization, industrialization and workforce mobility that have shaped the modern nation state had a destabilizing effect on individual identity. 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. In a recent article looking at Iranian converts to Pentecostalism in Stockholm, Ebru Öztürk describes the ontological insecurity experienced by refugees who become estranged from their primary institutions.[29] Such institutions, she argues, provide a sense of continuity and stability of identity, and the loss of such connection represents an inward crisis. What she calls 'secondary institutions' like the church provide an opportunity for these migrants to establish a firm grounding, a 'sense of home' in the face of change.[30]

Method

I met these young men, all of whom arrived in Sweden in 2014 and 2015, in late 2019 when I began attending a Bible study group at the CofS congregation in which they participate. While three members of the group recently received residence permits, others are still awaiting a decision or going through the process of appealing a negative decision. All are Afghan, although only one – Amin – was actually born in Afghanistan. The others were born in Iran. All identify as members of the Hazara people group.[31] Before I began talking to these young men, I sought and was granted ethical approval for the project by Sweden's Ethical Approval Authority.[32] Although they arrived as minors, by the time I encountered them most were over the age of eighteen.

The study's participants were all part of the same Bible study group, recruited in-person. The priests and deacons (henceforth pastors) who led the group acted as gatekeepers, facilitating introductions and giving me the chance to explain my

presence during the early gatherings which I attended. Since there is an uneven distribution of power between pastors and participants,[33] it was important for me to also take time to develop rapport and to establish my identity as distinct from the CofS, and to emphasize the voluntary nature of their involvement in this study. As a white male in my late thirties, I was already an outsider to their group and I reasoned that being understood to be representing the institution of the church could have its drawbacks, especially when conducting interviews. I sought to mediate this effect in a number of ways, including genuine participation in the group, choosing physical proximity to the participants rather than to the pastors, and by emphasizing my own status as an outsider in Swedish society.[34] I chose to capture data from this particular Bible study group in order to follow them over a longer period of time than I would if I had chosen multiple sites, or carried out interviews without participant observation.

The original research design took a standard ethnographic approach, with semi-structured interviews and participant observation, but with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic I was forced to add certain digital methods for gathering data during the long months when I was unable to meet the participants face-to-face. During the pandemic, the church closed its doors for several months at a time. When it opened its doors again, the Mass was served in single-serving cups and the communion wafers provided in hermetically sealed packaging.[35] During the Mass, instead of greeting one another with a handshake, hands were placed over hearts as people nodded at each other from a distance. 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 which all members were familiar with, and this led to a more consistent turnout.

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, when their language schools were closed, the everyday activities which had been structuring their lives were no longer there, which only added to this spontaneity. Because of this, I realized 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 building rapport with these young men would be more difficult online. I instead found that they were even more prepared to discuss the intimate details of their lives and conversion processes online than they had been in person. This may have been due to the amount of time they had known me, but I am inclined to believe that it had something to do with the levelling effect of social media. I think that, somehow, using Messenger and talking using just voices, reduced the power of distance between us and therefore made it easier to confide. Added to this, I was essentially interviewing them in their homes, since that is where they sat while speaking to me. The familiarity and privacy of this environment no doubt contributed to their candour. Of course, conducting interviews in this way also involved certain drawbacks. For example, I could not make eye contact or read their body language as I could in person.

I took a narrative interview approach[36] in which I asked the interviewees to tell me about their lives, beginning with family and where they grew up, and then followed up with questions hoping to refine the narrative. While the participants were aware that I was studying them because they represent the intersection of migration and religious transformation, focussing on their biographies more broadly gave them the opportunity to cover the ground that they wanted to cover, rather than limiting them just to their conversion stories.

There is a difference between interviewing URM in the CofS and those in more evangelical churches where the practice of giving testimony or 'witnessing', as Susan Harding calls it, is more established.[37] The liturgy of the CofS does not generally allocate space for the sharing of 'personal testimonies' or accounts of how one has been changed or transformed by a relationship with God. There is no particular tradition of encouraging church members to tell their personal stories to each other or to those outside the church.[38] However, just because the church does not make witnessing a key practice does not mean that the participants are unschooled in telling their stories. Indeed, their asylum processes necessitate it. Migration officials ask URM not only how they came into contact with the church, but also detailed questions about their theologies. This requires not only that the individual asylum seeker demonstrate the plausibility of their faith, but also a level of discursive competence.[39] A similar trend can be seen in Halonen's study of asylum decisions by the Finnish board of migration. Regarding the questions that are asked of applicants, she notes that 'More than the sincerity of a claimant's faith, these questions end up measuring their eloquence and capacity for abstract self-reflection.'[40] While priests and pastors do not train these new converts to witness, they do help them to prepare for meetings with the office

for migration. They help them to think about the credibility of their stories, and to answer theological questions that may arise. And sometimes the shape of the Bible studies is adjusted to include questions that the state will ask these young men about their faith.[41] Although all of the participants in this study were clear that they were not involved with the Farsi-speaking congregations in the city, images and videos posted on their Facebook profiles that they were exposed to 'Persian-language Christian discourse' described by Römer.[42]

Findings and discussion

In the next section I draw on fieldwork data to look at the process by which Hazara unaccompanied refugee minors leave Islam and become baptized members of the CofS.

A process of transformation

Figure 1 offers a generalized overview of the conversion processes which the participants in this study have followed.[43] 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.

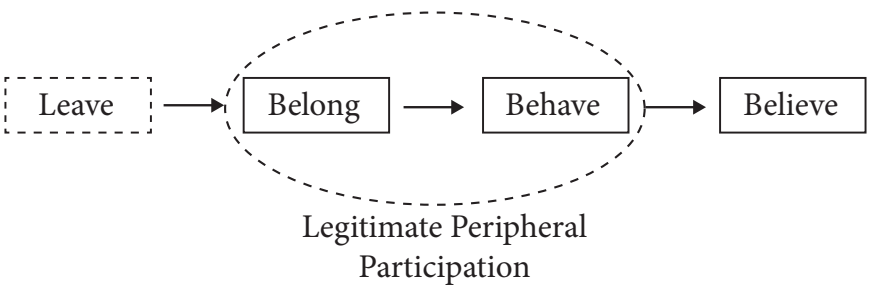

Figure 1 The general process of conversion that the participants in this study followed.

1 Leave

Beginning on the left, with the dotted border, we have the word *Leave*. I include this because, as Kraft has pointed out, converts to a new religion usually go through a process of leaving Islam and enter a period of avoiding religious engagement before they begin any other religious practice.[44] 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 Muslims, were somewhat ambivalent towards the faith of their parents. In his later chapter, Benedikt Römer seeks 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 also reflective of 'an ongoing religious transformation of Iran'.[45] 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 their precarious social status and marginalization that Hazaras are subject to in Iran.[46]

For most of the participants, early contact with the church occurred because of curiosity, either their own or that of their friends and, according to the interview data, was preceded by a season of disillusionment with the religion of their birth. Islam is routinely described in negative terms, for example, Amin compared the church with his religious experience in Iran:

> we had lots of pictures at home: of Imams, and prophets, lines from the Quran. 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.[47]

While the presence of Shia 'saints' was ubiquitous in his home, the overarching impact was to create a sense of social control and surveillance. A similar sense of being surveilled was described by Shaheed in relation to the permissability 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."'[48]

According to these participants, in this context, religious conversation was carefully regulated by specific knowledgeable figures. 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 Muslim important celebrations, we would always pray good things for Islam and Muslims and bad for Jews, Buddhists, Christians[49]

This 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, they discovered that their 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 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?'[50]

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 story which they had been told was the beginning of a loss of trust in their preconceived notions about the world and an accompanying openness toward those who they had previously been taught to judge. 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 destabilizing effect on their identities.[51]

It is important to contextualize the criticism of Islam above. 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 that they were socialized to in the home. While some describe being treated harshly by imams, the majority of commentary on the subject of Islam is localized around the home setting. Added to this, it is to be expected that converts portray their past experiences in negative terms and juxtapose these negative experiences with their new positive experiences of transformed faith.[52]

2 Belong

This stage in the process is described by the next box in Figure 1: *Belong*. The participants in this study came into contact with the church usually after being

invited by a friend or, less commonly, independently seeking it out following a period of intense curiosity about Christianity. They began attending services there long before they decided to become Christian and get baptized.[53] Indeed, participants reported 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 that emerged from the data was that, according to the participants, the church views everyone as equal. This is communicated in words, but also in the welcome that participants reported receiving when they 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 and being welcomed but not asked questions about his background. After finding a seat at the back of the sanctuary, he was invited by the pastor to come and sit closer to the front, again without any sign of concern about his background or status. He described this experience:

> 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. And 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.[54]

Rather than being categorized by social status or nationality, Jeremiah was included as any other person in the Mass. 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 criticizing 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 someone finds out that I go to Church' but I continued going to church because I was interested in how they lived.[55]

3 Behave

After this, they *Behave*. They participate in the Mass, sing hymns, read a scripture passage out loud during a service, light candles in prayer, and volunteer serving coffee and tea after these gatherings. This is what Halonen identifies in Finnish asylum decisions as the notion of *active religion*: 'a discourse of religion as something a claimant is expected to actively practice, often in particular conventional ways such as praying, studying the Bible, or attending church'.[56] In this stage, the participants are able to rehearse membership without the commitment of calling themselves Christian. In their work on communities of practice, Lave and Wenger introduce the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*.[57] The involvement of URM in the life of the church is peripheral in the sense that it is a somewhat lessened form of full involvement, while still allowing them to build competence and progress towards full participation.[58] This can be seen in the exclusion of participants from certain rites available to full members, such as full participation in the communion meal.[59] But it should be noted that as a folk church the CofS has a tradition of offering close to full participation to anyone who wants to. Full membership is indicated by baptism, a ritual by which water is poured over the head of the person being baptized and that individual is welcomed into the family of the church. According to Wenger, 'legitimacy can take many forms: being useful, being sponsored, being feared, being the right kind of person … '[60] For the participants in this study, legitimacy is offered by the pastors who engage them in activities such as Bible readings, joining the entry procession, or serving food. This kind of participation embraces the 'relational character of knowledge and learning', which implies 'emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than "receiving" a body of factual knowledge about the world'.[61] Viewing the context of the church as a site of situated learning, and the Bible study as a community of practice allows us to consider learning as it relates to practice rather than simply the communication of facts or ideas.

These two stages, belonging and behaving, have less to do with cognitive understanding than they do with precognitive learning. They are not about

thinking about ideology and creating an argument for why they should or should not believe but are instead more focussed on experiencing or embodying the 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.[62]

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' 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 emphasizing 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.[63] Kraft paraphrases their theory this way, 'when attachments to members become stronger than attachments to nonmembers, it becomes more socially expedient to join the group'.[64] Such a theory offers insight into the importance of embodiment to conversion; that even though most conversions also involve ideological change, there is usually a strong social aspect to the process.[65] As Stark and Finke put it, 'social networks make religious beliefs plausible'.[66] Jeremiah said it like this:

> 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 come from Church for a while, I see that there's injustice, evil, wrong, together 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.[67]

While this description of the church is somewhat rosy, it serves to illustrate the importance with which Jeremiah regards 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 looks 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.

4 Believe

The final stage in this figure, *Believe*, is what is often, in the post-Enlightenment West, understood primarily as a rational decision; it is a decision in which all the facts have been weighed using one's cognitive faculties, and the outcome is a mental assent to particular ideological claims. This model of belief is affirmed by migration officials who ask their interviewees to, for example, explain the trinity. Halonen characterizes 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.'[68] She points out that this take on religion is at odds with the way in which religiosity is embodied in Finnish society. Leaning on Charles Taylor and James K.A. Smith, and in agreement with Halonen, I would offer some resistance to this reductionistic account of belief vis-a-vis practice. There is certainly consideration involved in making the decision to be baptized, however I would suggest that this stage also involves what philosopher Charles Taylor calls one's 'social imaginary':

> 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.[69]

Smith adds to this explanation: 'To call this an "imaginary" is already to shift the center of gravity from the cognitive region of ideas to the more affective region, which is "closer" to the body, as it were – since the imagination runs off the fuel of the body.'[70] During the stages of belonging and behaving, the participants learn through legitimate peripheral participation what it means to be a Christian in the CofS. In this process, I would argue, their imaginaries – the ways they pre-cognitively understand their social setting are being shaped through practice, as

well as through embodying the social imaginary which is carried by the liturgy. Although the welcoming nature of the church 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[71] or authenticity[72] when they encounter the truth claims of the church.

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.'

As we saw earlier, perhaps 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?'[73] 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:

> I started at the Islamic school and 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, 8 years old, it was too early for me to start with this. [At] that age, kids play, they are totally free, 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 Qu'ran.[74]

Amin is clear that, after this point, 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.'[75]

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.[76]

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'.[77] 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 emphasized 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.'[78] 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. This is highlighted as he contrasts his own relationship with God with Shaheed's. 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

Unaccompanied refugee minor converts to Christianity are an understudied group. Little is know of how their conversion processes affect their identity processes and value acquisition in Sweden. As mentioned earlier, too often their processes are explained away using theories which tend to portray them one dimensionally, and their conversions as having overly simplistic explanations.

In this chapter, I have sought to complicate our understanding of the phenomenon of conversion among this group. By framing the process of URM conversion in the CofS 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 toward formation, that is, how these young people are formed through their legitimate peripheral participation (and eventually full participation) in the life of the church.

More work is needed to understand the long-term impact of conversion on this group, to understand if they remain engaged in the activities of the CofS over an extended period after receiving a permit to reside in Sweden. There are also those who are deported to Afghanistan: do they continue to self-identify as Christians outside of the Swedish context and in spite of the threat of persecution? As mentioned earlier, URM girls have been largely absent from much of the public discourse and academic research surrounding URM.[79] Further work is needed to illuminate the experience of female URMs and to understand their post-migration relationship with religion.

Notes

1 As part of my doctoral research project.
2 One exception is Elin Ekström, whose Licentiate dissertation described the innovative religious practices of URM girls. Cf. Ekström 2019.
3 Raghallaigh 2011: 539–56; Völkl-Kernstock et al. 2014: 6–11.
4 Cf. Skodo 2018.
5 Herz and Lalander 2021: 110.
6 Leman 2007: 101–14, 3.
7 Ringgaard Lorensen and Buch-Hansen 2018: 29–41; Öztürk 2022: 224–39.
8 Jindra 2014.

9 I carried out two or three in-depth interviews with ten participants in the study. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.
10 Lave and Wenger 1991: 1.
11 Morgan 2020.
12 Miller and Johnstone note that, due to underreporting and over-reporting of conversion figures by various parties, it is notoriously difficult to establish accurate figures on Muslim-to-Christian conversion (Miller and Johnstone 2015: 3–19). However, from conversations within the CofS, free churches and members of the group behind the 2019 report on decision making on cases where conversion to Christianity was a factor (Bergström et al. 2019), I synthesized this figure as a best estimate. It should be noted that the figures suggested by some were higher than this.
13 Ekström, Bülow and Wilinska 2019: 9.
14 Berntson 2022: 94.
15 Kyrkan 2023.
16 Davie 2007: 6.
17 Ekenberg 2016: 23–45, 31. This contrasts 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 2014: 1–12, 6; Ekenberg 2016: 31.
18 Gustafsson Lundberg 2018: 123–43.
19 Gustafsson Lundberg 2018: 125.
20 Gustafsson Lundberg 2018: 125. Today in Sweden, questions of migration continue to dominate the public debate, and the loss of dominance of the left-of-centre *Socialdemokraterna* (Social Democrats) to the right-of-centre *Moderaterna* (the Moderates) and *Kristdemokraterna* (Christian Democrats) and the anti-immigration *Sverigedemokraterna* (the Sweden Democrats) has been largely attributed to those parties commitments to reduce immigration. Gustafsson Lundberg 2018: 33.
21 Garvik and Valenta 2021: 15, 11–13.
22 Granting of residence is the means by which the Swedish state grants asylum.
23 Garvik and Valenta 2021: 14.
24 Trägårdh 2014: 13–38, 22.
25 He 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'. Trägårdh 2014: 22.
26 Taylor 1992: 28–9.
27 Lindholm 2008.
28 Lindholm 2008: 144–5.
29 Öztürk 2022.

30 Öztürk 2022.
31 As Shi'a Muslims in predominantly Sunni Afghanistan, Hazaras have long faced religious persecution. Cf. Crews 2015: 82–3.
32 Application number 2019-04246, approval date 10 December 2019.
33 Particularly because of the asylum assistance and help with sustenance grant applications which pastors offer participants outside of the Bible studies.
34 Since I was born and grew up in Wales.
35 Usually, wafers are handed out by the priest ('Body of Christ Broken for You') and then dipped into a communal cup of wine ('Blood of Christ Shed for You').
36 What Wengraf calls the 'Semi-Structured Depth Interview', Wengraf 2001: xxv.
37 Harding 2001: 37.
38 Indeed, my fieldwork data suggests that there is some ambivalence about the very idea of personal spiritual formation among priests, apparently somewhat influenced by a particular interpretation of Luther's *Simul Justus et Peccator* and its implications for the sinner's relation to sin.
39 As can perhaps be expected, those participants who received residency during the course of this study were those most competent in speaking Swedish.
40 Halonen, this volume.
41 This was particularly common until the release of the *Konvertitutredningen* report in 2019, along with Micael Grenholm's viral quiz *'Klarar du Migrationsverkets kristendomsfrågor?'* ('Can you answer the Migration Office's questions on Christianity?') (Grenholm 2019).
42 Römer, this volume.
43 Although the word 'Behave' has some unfortunate connotations, I use the 'Three Bs' of belonging, believing, and behaving for this model since they are such a common (and, I think, useful) trope for describing Christian social identity in both missiological and sociological literature, cf. Weyers 2012; Friesen and Wagner 2012: 224–52.
44 Kraft 2013: 6–7.
45 Römer, this volume.
46 Monsutti 2007: 167–85, 171; Glazebrook and Abbasi-Shavazi 2007: 187–201, 191–2.
47 Interview with Amin 10 November 2021.
48 Interview with Shaheed 25 June 2020.
49 Interview with Jeremiah 5 March 2021.
50 Interview with Jeremiah 15 October 2020.
51 Öztürk 2022: 227–8.
52 Stene 2020: 210–19, 212.
53 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 baptized.

54 Interview with Jeremiah 5 March 2021.
55 Interview with Jeremiah 5 March 2021.
56 Halonen, this volume.
57 Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999.
58 Wenger 1999: 100.
59 Those who are not yet baptized 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.
60 Wenger 1999: 101.
61 Lave and Wenger 1991: 33.
62 Extract of author's field note 17 September 2020.
63 Stark and Finke 2000: 117.
64 Kraft 2013: 7.
65 Kraft 2013: 9.
66 Stark and Finke 2000: 117.
67 Interview with Jeremiah 5 March 2021.
68 Halonen, this volume.
69 Taylor 2004: 23.
70 Smith 2009: 65.
71 Rosa 2019.
72 Taylor 2004.
73 Interview with Amin 10 November 2021.
74 Interview with Amin 10 November 2021.
75 Interview with Amin 10 November 2021.
76 In writing this, I am drawing on Peter Stromberg, who argues that conversion narratives are performative acts which resolve psychological conflicts by converting the unspeakable into a socially acceptable codified language. See Stromberg 2008.
77 Taylor 1992: 28–9.
78 Interview with Amin 10 November 2021.
79 Ekström 2019.

Bibliography

Bergström, Maria Gustin, Ulrik Josefsson, Maria Lindqvist, Ruth Nordström, Rebecca Ahlstrand and Jakob Svensson (2019). 'Konvertitutredningen: Rapport Om Migrationsverkets Hantering Av Konvertiters Asylprocess'. https://www.pingst.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/konvertitutredningen.pdf.

Berntson, M. (2022). *Kyrko – Och Samfundskunskap: En Introduktion*. Stockholm: Verbum.

Crews, Robert D. (2015). *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Davie, Grace (2007). 'Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge'. *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.), 21–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.001.0001.

Ekenberg, Anders (2016). 'The Church in Sweden. Secularisation and Ecumenism as Challenges'. *Polonia Sacra*, 20 (2): 23–45. https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.1686.

Ekström, Elin (2019). *From a Place without Speech: Negotiations of Othering among Unaccompanied Female Minors in Sweden*. Jönköping: Jönköping University, School of Health and Welfare.

Ekström, Elin, Pia H. Bülow and Monika Wilinska (2019). '"I Don't Think You Will Understand Me Because Really, I Believe" Unaccompanied Female Minors Re-Negotiating Religion'. *Qualitative Social Work*, 19 (4): 719–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325019848481.

Friesen, Amanda and Michael W. Wagner (2012). 'Beyond the "Three Bs": How American Christians Approach Faith and Politics'. *Politics and Religion*, 5 (2): 224–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048312000028.

Garvik, Marianne and Marko Valenta (2021). 'Seeking Asylum in Scandinavia: A Comparative Analysis of Recent Restrictive Policy Responses towards Unaccompanied Afghan Minors in Denmark, Sweden and Norway'. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9 (1): 15. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00221-1.

Glazebrook, Diana and Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi (2007). 'Being Neighbors to Imam Reza: Pilgrimage Practices and Return Intentions of Hazara Afghans Living in Mashhad, Iran'. *Iranian Studies*, 40 (2): 187–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701269535.

Grenholm, Micael (2019). 'Klarar Du Migrationsverkets Kristendomsfrågor?' https://www.arjagkristen.nu/.

Gustafsson Lundberg, Johanna (2018). 'Christianity in a Post-Christian Context: Immigration, Church Identity, and the Role of Religion in Public Debates'. *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith (eds.), 123–43. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67961-7_7.

Halldorf, Joel and Fredrik Wenell (2014). 'Introduction'. *Between the State and the Eucharist: Free Church Theology in Conversation with William T. Cavanaugh*, Joel Halldorf and Fredrik Wenell (eds.), 1–12. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.

Harding, Susan Friend (2001). *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Herz, Marcus and Philip Lalander (2021). *Social Work, Young Migrants and the Act of Listening: Becoming an Unaccompanied Child*. Routledge Advances in Social Work. 1st ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003088837.

Jindra, Ines W. (2014). *A New Model of Religious Conversion*. Leiden: Brill.

Kraft, Kathryn (2013). *Searching for Heaven in the Real World*. Eugene, OR: Regnum.

Kyrkan, Svenska (January 2023). 'Svenska kyrkan i siffror'. https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik.

Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leman, Johan (2007). 'A "Lucan Effect" in the Commitment of Iranian Converts in Transit. The Case of the Pentecostal Iranian Enclave in Istanbul'. *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans Et de La Méditerranée*, 119–20: 101–14. https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.4323.

Lindholm, Charles (2008). *Culture and Authenticity*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell.

Miller, Duane Alexander and Patrick Johnstone (2015). 'Believers in Christ from a Muslim Background: A Global Census'. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 11 (10): 3–19.

Monsutti, Alessandro (2007). 'Migration as a Rite of Passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran'. *Iranian Studies*, 40 (2): 167–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701276183.

Morgan, Jonathan (2020). 'Finding Belonging, Finding Agency: Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Converting to Christianity in the Church of Sweden'. *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 18 (3): 40–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2020.1795410.

Östman, Caroline (2019). *Unaccompanied Refugee Minors and Political Responses in Sweden: Challenges for Social Work*. Sundsvall: Mid Sweden University.

Öztürk, Ebru (2022). 'Finding a New Home through Conversion: The Ontological Security of Iranians Converting to Christianity in Sweden'. *Religion, State and Society*, 50 (2): 224–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2022.2061828.

Raghallaigh, Muireann Ni. (2011). 'Religion in the Lives of Unaccompanied Minors: An Available and Compelling Coping Resource'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41 (3): 539–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq136.

Ringgaard Lorensen, Marlene and Gitte Buch-Hansen (2018). 'Listening to the Voices: Refugees as Co-Authors of Practical Theology'. *Practical Theology*, 11 (1): 29–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2017.1415577.

Rosa, Hartmut (2019). *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Skodo, Admir (2018). 'Migrant Smuggling, Reasons for Fleeing, and Uses of Asylum Capital among Afghan Asylum Seekers in Sweden'. *Nidaba*, 3 (1): 1–11.

Smith, James K. A. (2009). *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke (2000). *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stene, Nora (2020). 'Leaving Islam for Christianity: Aylum Seeker Converts'. *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson and Teemu T. Mantsinen (eds.), 210–19. Leiden: Brill.

Stromberg, Peter G. (2008). *Language and Self-Transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Charles (2004). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Taylor, Charles (1992). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Trägårdh, Lars (2014). 'Statist Individualism'. *Between the State and the Eucharist: Free Church Theology in Conversation with William T. Cavanaugh*, Joel Halldorf and Fredrik Wenell (eds.), 13–38. Eugene Oregon: Pickwick Publications.

Völkl-Kernstock, Sabine, Niranjan Karnik, Michaela Mitterer-Asadi, Elisabeth Granditsch, Hans Steiner, Max H. Friedrich and Julia Huemer (2014). 'Responses to Conflict, Family Loss and Flight: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among Unaccompanied Refugee Minors from Africa'. *Neuropsychiatrie*, 28 (1): 6–11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40211-013-0094-2.

Wenger, Etienne (1999). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wengraf, Tom (2001). *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Weyers, Mario (2012). 'The Nature of the Church in Some Post-Christendom Models and According to Some Authors in the New Testament'. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of South Africa.