



An ethnographic investigation of the role of religious faith  
among asylum seekers in an Evangelical Church in Berlin  
Steglitz (Germany):

The power of Christ will change their life.

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## **Abstract**

This study explores discourse practices of asylum seekers in Germany that have converted to Evangelicalism. More specifically it will focus on the community of an Evangelical Church located in Steglitz, Berlin (Germany) and look at the role of religious faith in asylum seekers' lives after conversion. There is an extensive academic interest in migration studies and religion but scholars have mostly taken up the religion issue in terms of adaptation or non-adaptation to the host society or in terms of the role of ethnic religious congregation for their insertion into mainstream society. On the basis of open ended interviews along with a month of ethnographic participant observation within the community at hand, this study aims to shed light on the role of new faith among asylum seekers. The findings of this study offer a valuable insight into the complexity of religion in relation to ethnicity, identity and asylum rights in the midst of globalized migratory flows.

## **Keywords**

Ethnography; migration; refugees; Evangelicalism; religion; identity; ethnicity; institutional discourse practices

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## **Chapter 1**

### **1. Introduction/ Background**

Europe's refugee crisis has received great attention from media all over the world in the past year and it continues to do so. Although this is not the first time, the publication of the arrival of unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers moving across the Mediterranean and through the Western Balkans has not only revealed flaws in national borders and the European asylum system, but it has also started a debate on acceptance and integration processes of refugees in host societies. Within the political sphere, some argue for the closure of borders and oppose the EU quota system; others encourage a compassion based approach towards the refugee crisis. The anti-refugee discourse holds that European identity is threatened by the newcomers. As a group in European society, refugees are often perceived as 'them', and as holding a lower status. As Baban (2013) explains, the EU agency wants all the EU members to integrate into the European culture, which creates an in-group, with those who belong to the European states, and out-group, with non-European countries. Baban (2013) argues that membership in the EU and shared historical events create a bonding among Europeans, which can be seen as a form of identity. Although the emphasis on diversity, and more recently trans-nationality are present in the European Union official discourse, it still remains an open question as to whether this trans-nationality is actually inclusive of immigrant minority groups, and especially refugees.

Globalization, in broad terms, means free movement of goods, information and people. Some of the outcomes of globalization are seen in the increased international migration, including the journey of asylum seekers. Travelling to a safer country has become easier. Europe has become more accessible but immigration policies often rely on national ideologies, creating a paradox where a national frame is addressed to make sense of global processes (Blommaert, 2009; Jacquemet, 2009). Castles (2003) argues that globalization of migration (forced and voluntary) and interacting with transnational social transformations, in fact define the contemporary era. Refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants are moving globally. Globalization enables them to reach far more varied and distant destinations and national boundaries, especially within the European Union, are becoming more blurred (Zetter, 2007). The global movement of people has also brought new ways of understanding and analyzing the concepts of identity and diversity. In an attempt to capture these events, Vertovec (2007) introduced the term 'super-diversity' to grasp the characteristics that come along with the category of migrants. This diversity among migrants

includes a wide variety of countries of origin, ethnicity, multilingualism, transnational relations and religious diversity. Thus, transnational migration not only affects political or economic spheres but it has also a huge impact on religions and their places of worship. Islamic mosques, Christian Churches and Buddhists temples are becoming super-diverse spaces with more inclusive approaches towards new ethnically diverse members (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). In fact, in most migrant receiving countries, Christian worship is taking place in multicultural congregations (Terfassa, 2014). Yang & Ebaugh (2001) argue that these changes within religious communities energize and revitalize religion, contrary to the theory of secularization and a popular belief that religion has lost its position within society nowadays.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Berlin has seen in the last year the arrival of a vast number of refugees, mostly coming from the Middle East. Hand in hand with the intensification of the refugee crisis, the number of new members at the Evangelical Church in Steglitz, Berlin has been rapidly growing. These new members are mostly converted Iranian and Afghani asylum seekers. Alongside, the ongoing war against international terrorism as well as the security of international migration and criminalization of asylum seeking has put the religion issue at the front of political and public discourse. Yet, since the phenomenon of conversion and the role of new faith among migrants and refugees is a recent and unique topic, it has so far received very limited scholarly attention (Akcapar, 2006; Chew, 2010; Yang, 1998). On the basis of her work among converted Iranians to Christianity in Turkey, which is a transit country for those coming to Western countries, Akcapar (2006) stresses out the need to include religion as an institution in international migration theories. Although religion is initially used as a migration strategy for some Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, in time it acquires new meanings and becomes an important element in their lives, mainly due to the positive social capital inside migrants' religious organizations. Akcapar (2006) indicates the need for scholarly research among these asylum seekers once they reach their final destination, which for them is Western Europe.

Consequently, in this research, the aim is to elaborate on the role of new faith among converted asylum seekers within the community of the Evangelical Church in Steglitz, Berlin. The researcher is also interested to find out what impact new faith will have on their ethnicity and cultural identity. The problem in this study develops as a result of the following issues. Regardless of the extensive literature on international migration, the linkage between migration and religion

during the different steps of migration processes has not received enough academic attention (Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003) and if so, religion has been considered in terms of either non-adaptation or adaptation to the host society (Akcapar, 2007; Chong, 1998). Furthermore, studying how refugees, by following a new faith, re-construct their world-view and then use it to orient themselves in a social world, can bring a deeper understanding of the relationship between migration, religion, ethnicity, and identity. Concluding, the objective of this study is to uncover what it means to be an asylum seeker, coming from a Muslim country, and starting new life as a Christian in Germany. This study aims to answer below research question:

*What is the role of new faith among asylum seekers at the Evangelical Church in Steglitz, Berlin, Germany?*

### **1.3 Relevance**

Migration, refugees and religion are words that very often trigger intense debates and discussions within public and political discourse. Asylum seekers are in many cases alienated and perceived as a threat for the national culture. Here, the role of the mass media in influencing public and elite political attitudes towards asylum and migration should be considered (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016). In such an environment, there is a need for stories that project the reality and complexity of being an asylum seeker in Europe. Storytelling gives an opportunity for self-expression and healing but also it attaches meaning to the lives of those who have lost everything. Moreover, documenting an asylum seeker's story holds a strong humanitarian value.

On an academic level, this study contributes to the existing literature on migration and religion. It deals with both macro, meso levels of 'doing' asylum seeker. However, it also shows the micro-level, represented by the single individual and his story. Since asylum seekers have very limited platforms to tell their stories, more scholarly research is needed in order to give a voice to the voiceless.

### **1.4 Outline**

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first one presents the study context, its research focus and its scientific relevance. Chapter two describes the conceptual framework in order to familiarize the readers with concepts that help in understanding the role of religion among asylum seekers in an era of globalization. Chapter three demonstrates the research design, methods of data acquisition and analysis, and it also elaborates on the binding of a relationship between the researcher and the

key informant. Chapter four outlines the legal and institutional discourse, followed by an extensive account of the informant's life, along with key episodes. Chapter five involves conclusion and discussion of this thesis by readdressing the research focus and the research methods.

## **Chapter 2 Conceptual framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, several concepts are introduced in order to outline the conceptual framework of this study. First, the phenomenon of globalization and its implications for migration movements are outlined. Second, the concept of identity and migration, followed by the concept and its facets i.e. ethnicity and religion are presented. Additionally, the role of religion in the context of migration is presented to the reader.

### **2.2 Globalization and migration**

The term globalization has received much interest across different branches of the social sciences and of the humanities. In fact, the definition of this phenomenon is largely dependent on the angle from which it is tackled, which in this study is the management of diversity. Globalization relates to changes in transport and communication as a result of the post-industrial and more precisely the post-Fordist revolution (Richmond, 2002). From a more sociologically inclined perspective globalization is often associated with social transformations, at the macro, meso and micro level of society. Consequently, Castells (2010) argues that we have entered a new technological paradigm, also seen as a technological revolution in the means of transportation and communication. As a result, we are a network society, with the key social structures and activities organized around electronically processed information networks. Hence, the concept of traditional national boundaries is becoming less important in a global age, as the communities in which people live are no longer territorially limited. This has been defined in an overarching term, transnationalism. (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998), which is often used in different ways. Vertovec (1999) points out that transnationalism refers to numerous connections and interactions linking people, and institutions across the borders of nation-states. In immigration studies transnationalism is often understood as a specific form of globalization.

### **2.3 Identity and Migration**

The concept of identity has been tackled by many scholars across various disciplines. The literature on this topic is extensive and it is nearly impossible to present a comprehensive overview of the different contributions in the field of studies on identity (Westin 2010; La Barbera 2015). In more general terms Verkuyten defines identity as “(...) how people place themselves and others in their social environment, and how such positions get personal meaning and value.” (2005, p. 11). In line



with the approach adopted in this study, this section is concerned with how people construct identity and how migration influences identity.

Blommaert & Varis (2011, p.2) argue that contemporary globalized identities are “organized as a patchwork of different specific objects and directions of action.” Identity therefore results in a combination of micro-hegemonized niches. To put it more concretely, the life of an individual is made of identity ‘repertoires’ that make up for a complex bundle of micro-hegemonies and these are together responsible for giving away different shades of identity, where ‘the self’ changes all the time (Blommaert & Varis, 2011). As the author outlines, behaviors that appear contradictory, for example to be a Green party supporter, drive diesel car and send kids to school with low number of migrants, are generally socially acceptable (Blommaert & Varis, 2011). Additionally, Blommaert (2015a) argues that identities occur in a specific space and time configuration. The author avails himself of the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981). Blending of time and space exists in any real world event, and these chronotopes produce a specific type of person (Blommaert, 2015b). Hence, chronotopes produce chronotopic identities “to ensure we do ‘right’” and “(...) changes in time-space arrangements trigger complex and sometimes massive shifts in roles, discourses, modes of interaction, dress, codes of conduct and criteria for judgement of appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, and so forth.” (Blommaert & De Fina, 2016, p. 6-7) In terms of group membership, Blommaert & Varis (2011) introduce a concept of *enoughness* as the point of reference for admission into a group or identity category as an authentic member. Enoughness is broadly defined as ‘having enough’ of the features specified for the particular group or category. Furthermore, Blommaert & Varis (2011, p.12) outline that “one is never a “full” member of any cultural system, because the configurations of features are perpetually changing, and one’s fluency of yesterday need not guarantee fluency tomorrow”. Furthermore, identities are not constructed in a socio-cultural vacuum and in order to be accepted they need to match the expectations and actions of other members in a *community of practice*<sup>1</sup> (Spotti, 2007)

As mentioned above, identity work occurs in time place configurations (Blommaert & De Fina, 2016). Also, Dixon & Durrheim (2000) argue that inquiries regarding our ‘self’ are closely

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of community of practice will be explained in chapter 3

related to the place where we are, as studies concerning identity are inseparably related to notions of place, such as communities and nations. Since migration processes involve movement and change of place, it is crucial to consider identity work in the context of migration. La Barbera (2015) argues that the perception, representation, and definition of identity changes particularly during migration. Plus migration involves, apart from physical movement, moving across various borders of difference (Kleinschmidt, 2003; Frederiks, 2015). Furthermore, La Barbera (2015) states that migrants explicitly observe identity as fluid and multiple. Identity is something that individuals “do” rather than something that they “have”. Identity is considered as a process rather than as a property (Jenkins 2008). It is the result of the negotiation of personal given conditions, social context, and relationships, and institutional frameworks (La Barbera, 2015). Additionally, there is a vast diversity among migrants, which Vertovec (2007) coined in a term *super diversity*. The term aims to stress that within this seemingly clear category of migrants, stories of migration and migration dynamics differ, because the duration of migration and people’s goals, aims, reasons and experiences of migration differ (Vertovec, 2007). This diversity of trajectories and experiences may also be a decisive factor as to what extent people experience sense of multiple belonging and multiple identities (Portes and McLeod 1996; Frederiks, 2015). This may also determine whether or not people continue to identify themselves as, and want to be recognized as migrants. A number of studies have shown that the patterns of identification among migrants vary greatly, ranging from identification with one’s country of origin, religion or mother tongue to receiving country, neither or both (Berry 1997; Roccas and Brewer 2002; Schwartz et al. 2008; Ramelli et al. 2013). Hence, social constructionist approach (Goffman 1959; Berger and Luckmann 1966), which argues that categorizations rely on essential features, is not applicable any longer (Frederiks, 2015).

## **2.2 Religion, Identity and Ethnicity**

The definition of religion depends largely on the approach and the field of a researcher and there is no absolute definition. Within sociology, there are two approaches towards an explanation of religion: functionalist and substantive. The functional theory focuses on what social function religion has. Substantive definitions of religion focus on the content of religious beliefs (Markham & Ruparell, 2001). In fact, explanations of the concept of religion reflect world-views of the researchers and they also include theoretical presuppositions and judgements. Due to the field of this research, the functional theory of religion will be applied here.

Religion often provides an ideologically, sociologically, and spiritually rich context for identity formation (King, 2003). It offers not only a distinctive sacred world-view but also 'eternal' group membership, unmatched by identification with any other social groups (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010). Mitchell (2006) argues that religion delivers social cohesion, sense of belonging and direction for groups of individuals with shared consciousness. Therefore, religion often is used as a tool in cultural defense (Bruce, 1999). Scholars mostly agree that religion can serve as a basis of ethnic identity and the close connection between religion and ethnic identity has been acknowledged by various researchers (Chong, 1998; Mitchell, 2006). Many religious identities are actually ethnic in nature and have little definite religious content (Gans, 1994; Demerath, 2000, 2001, Mitchell, 2006). In fact, recent debates about the relationship between religion and ethnicity involve two focusses. First, how is religion, as a basis of identity, connected to ethnic identity, and second, how religion supports ethnic identity. Religion can interact with ethnicity in one of two ways: either as an ethnic marker or as supplementary to an ethnic identity. In the case of conceptualizing religion as an ethnic marker, religion provides the labels of identity (Mitchell, 2006). Often, this is coupled with political national ideals or attachment to a specific territory. Another stream of the literature stemming from the field of sociology emphasizes the role that religion plays in supporting ethnicity. Here, religion is not just a marker of identity, but rather its symbols, rituals and organizations are used to enhance ethnic identity. Here, ethnicity is still the primary category of analysis, and religion is thought to legitimize, sacralize and otherwise strengthen the primary ethnic category (Mitchell, 2006). Chong (1998) argues that in some cases, religion is also needed to protect, support or reinforce ethnic identity. Hence, religion is closely related to ethnicity, and ethnicity is often formed from it, but still ethnicity remains the primary category.

## **2.5 The role of religion in the context of migration**

The connection between migration and religion during different migration processes has been largely overlooked by academics (Hagan and Ebaugh, 2003; Akcapar 2006). Ramsey & Ledbetter (2001) argue that beliefs create a world-view and a world-view provides a group or an individual with its own specific way of explaining the world. Hence, apart from providing spiritual clarification in regards to the meaning of life through self-reflection, meditation and eschatology, religion serves also as a source of collection of knowledge, which helps to orient individuals in their daily world. For immigrants, who are separated from their homeland and from their relatives,

religious membership can entail various roles. Leman (1999) in his research on migrant based religious communities in Brussels, proposes five different stances of religion among immigrants. Religion can serve as an institutional conveyor of (ethno-) cultural bridging, where faith community “formulates a specific supply via elements like language, music, and some texts as vehicles of culture—for a specific group of migrants, without socio-ethnic stratification playing a role”(Leman, 1999, p. 222-223). Secondly, religion can be a medium of socio-cultural integration of migrants. Here, “Language, texts as vehicles of culture, and sensorial elements like music and celebrations gradually adapt themselves to indigenous faith communities” (Leman, 1999, p. 224). Following, religion is assumed to function as a medium for affirming original culture. Next, the author suggests that religion in some cases, involves a celebration of cultural and religious syncretism. Lastly, religion plays a role as an engine of (non) adaptation (Leman, 1999).

Foner & Alba (2008) also recognize the functionality of religion among migrants, yet the research focuses both on the United States and Western Europe. The authors suggest that in the U.S.A religious faith has a more positive and integrative role as opposed to Western Europe. This is mainly due to the fact that religion is “generally more accepted in the United States than Western Europe” (Foner & Alba, 2008, p. 376). The reason behind is that Western Europe (with some exceptions) has more secular approach. Furthermore, societal institutions and national identities are still substantially bonded with Christianity, which certainly leaves no space for other religious beliefs. Hence, diverse religious beliefs bring conflict and exclusion, especially in regards to Islam (Foner & Alba, 2008). In terms of role of religion in the U.S.A, the authors mention *refuge*, *respectability*, *resource*, *upward mobility* and *civic skills* (Foner & Alba, 2008). In the sense of *refuge*, it is indicated that religious communities give a sense of belonging, support and shelter, which for migrants are especially vital in their new circumstances. In other words, religion can offer a protection in the sense that it creates a sense of belonging and participation in the face of loss and the strains of adjustment (Hirschman, 2004; Scott and Hall, 2005; Foner & Alba, 2008) and as claimed by Tajfel & Turner (1986), the desire for belongingness is one of the fundamental human needs. Hence, religion provides a social group with unity and social solidarity (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010). Furthermore, Foner & Alba (2008) claim that religion can bring *respectability* within *society*, which is related to social prestige that comes along with being a committed and religious person in the USA. Lastly, *resources* associated with membership of a religious community are defined as information, job referrals, counselling, etc. Akcapar (2006;

2007) in her research on the role of religion among Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, refers to these resources coming from religious institutions as *spiritual capital* or *positive social capital*, for example receiving protection, support, or getting to know co-believers, who often speak the same language. Akcapar (2006, p. 819) suggests that “these institutions, along with friends and acquaintances therein, assume the role of “fictive kin” in the context of transit migration by creating alternative social networks and by giving meaning to migrants’ lives”. Yet, the role of religion as an institution is often omitted in the studies on international migration (Akcapar, 2007). Foner & Alba (2008) argue that the strongest role of religion in the USA is integration, so-called ‘becoming American’ and the process of Americanization among immigrants. The authors suggest that for all of the above reasons many Asian and Taiwanese immigrants choose to convert<sup>2</sup> to Christianity upon arrival in America, as this particular religion has a high status. In case of Taiwanese migrants, “Christianity mediated their acculturation to American society by repackaging some Taiwanese values in Christian trappings” (Foner & Alba, 2008, p. 366).

Correspondingly, Weyers & Saayman (2013) argue that in the contemporary (post-modern), post-Christendom age, Church is formed in the linear form of *belonging – behaving – believing*, oppose to the process known earlier as *believing before belonging*. This is since “no longer is it religious values or evangelical beliefs which attract today’s post-modern people to put their faith in Christ, but rather unconditional acceptance into spiritual and faith communities” (Weyers & Saayman, 2013, p.3). Likewise, Yang (1998) in an ethnographic research among Chinese converts to Christianity in the U.S.A, implies the importance of belonging among immigrants. Chinese immigrants, who experience pre-migration traumas and also post-migration uncertainties in modern American society, reinforce their longing for absoluteness and certainty at the Evangelical Church. Weyers & Saayman (2013) and Murray (2004) argue that in order to attract more people to Christianity, Churches should focus more on the model of a *center-set* Church, where belonging comes before believing, and those who belong are supported in moving closer to the center, which is rooted in the story of Jesus Christ.

One of the more indirect roles of religion as an institution is an act known as a church asylum. This happens when an asylum seeker fearing deportation seeks shelter in a church. The Church may decide to temporarily host this person in church rooms. In this way, he/she has extra

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<sup>2</sup> In this study religious conversion is considered as a process, implying many different experiences, oppose to once-off event. (see Rambo, 1993; Weyers & Saayman, 2013; Saayman, 2005)

time to press the authorities to reconsider the refugee's situation. Church asylum is often considered as an act outside the boundaries of legally accepted behavior (Koop, 2005). Yet, many of Christian communities in Germany have been involved in this tradition of protecting asylum-seekers. The police have the constitutional obligation to remove refugees from these churches, but this rarely happens due to possible counteractions and protests from powerful Christian communities. In many cases, church asylum results in a revision of decisions on the refugees' status or even preventing deportation (Koop, 2005).

## **Chapter 3 Research methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter elaborates on the design of this study. It describes the rationale behind the choice of the research methodology, including the instruments and sources used for data gathering and the methods through which these data have been analyzed and interpreted. Additionally, a short overview of the socio-cultural space, and key informant is outlined.

The researcher applied an interpretive ethnographic approach with a goal to tell a social story (Murthy, 2008). This is to gain an understanding of the socio-cultural space at hand, the Evangelic Church in Berlin -Steglitz. The focus of the research question is to discover, describe and critically analyze the role of new faith among refugees, who are members of this particular Church. The qualitative research strategy has been applied and the study adopts a cross-sectional design, gathering and investigating data which happened at approximately the same point in time. The researcher applied an ethnographic approach in order to extract the principles that are behind the actions and define meaning from the actor's point of view. This study does not strive for empirical generalizability, but aims to provide a theoretical and conceptual contribution toward understanding what role does the religion hold for converted asylum seekers in Berlin in an age of globalization. Ethnographic fieldwork-based research involved three sequential stages: (1) prior to fieldwork, which includes preparation and documentation; (2) during fieldwork with fieldwork procedures; and (3) after fieldwork, which consists of post fieldwork analysis and writing (Blommaert & Dong, 2010).

Preparation and gathering the information about the context, in which the object of the study is situated, had started already in December, 2015. The first visit was made on the 22nd of December. On this day permission was granted by Pastor Martens to conduct this research. Following field visits took place in March and April 2016 and the method of triangulation in data collection has been applied. (See Table 1). This included participant observation, along with field notes and recordings, open ended interviews (formal and informal) and internal documents. It is "through repeated observations, conversations, and more structured interviewing that the ethnographer gets an emically valid understanding of the socio-cultural contexts, processes, and meaning systems that are of significance to the study participants" (Whitehead, 2005, p. 6). I followed the asylum seekers 'patterns of activity within the Church, which allowed me to observe them in a non-invasive manner. Furthermore, I have acted as a regular Christian member of the

Church<sup>3</sup>, which included attending mass, taking part in public confession and communion. In this way, I gained trust among the members of the community. I also gained introduction to the discourses surrounding asylum seekers circulating in Berlin. Additionally, I used Facebook (FB) and WhatsApp (WA) as means of communication with the asylum seekers, including the key informant. Facebook is a very important communication tool among members of the Church's community. On the very first day in the field, I was asked by many asylum seekers to exchange Facebook accounts and phone numbers. Varis (2014) argues that with the growing influence and presence of internet in people's life, the ways stories are told have changed significantly.<sup>4</sup> These informal WhatsApp and Facebook chats happened on the initiative of the key informant, since he wanted to stay in touch with me on a regular basis. Hence, the Internet was used here to aid in preserving a personal bond with the key informant when face to-face contact was impossible or restricted. As Sade-Beck (2004, p. 3) outlines: "Online interaction through the Internet exists mostly as a written medium, operating within a communications framework that takes place either in "real time" or as delayed interaction; in either form, however, the Internet transforms the act of writing into "speech."'" Fieldwork was conducted in the English and German language.

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<sup>3</sup> Pastor Martens granted the researcher a permission to take part in public confession and Holy Communion.

<sup>4</sup> The researcher deliberately decided not to include analysis of key informant's Facebook profile due to privacy issues and lack of agreement between the researcher and the key informant.



**Table 1 Overview of observations <sup>5</sup>**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Time</i>
22.12.2015	15:00- Open office: Consultation with Pastor Martens	15:00-19:30
06.03.2016	16:00- Open office: Consultation with Pastor Martens	16:00-19:00
15.03.2016	14:00- Dari <sup>6</sup> - discussion group 14:00- Baptismal catch-up class 15:30- Persian baptismal preparation class	14:00- 19:00
16.03.2016	18:30- Evening mass	18:00- 19:30
25.03.2016	15:00- Good Friday. Penitential Celebrations with Holy Absolution	15:00-19:00
26.03.2016	21:30– Holy Saturday. Easter Vigil with Holy Baptism	21:30-23:30
27.03.2016	11:00 – General Confession 11.30- Sunday mass including Children - mass <sup>7</sup> Afterwards: Community Lunch, Persian praying, Persian Choir, Consultation hour.	11:00-15:00
28.03.2016	Easter Monday 10.00- General Confession 10.30- Regular mass and Children mass Afterwards: Community lunch followed by departure of the pastor and children for first communion preparation trip.	10:00- 14:00
02.04.2016	No event at the Church- Pastor Martens is away.	10:00- 14:00
03.04.2016	Quasimodo Sunday-Low Sunday 10.00 Confession 10.30 Mass with first communion 10.30 mass for children	10:00- 14:00
06.04.2016	14:00- Conversion course 18:30- Regular mass	14:00-19:00
<b>Total</b>		36 hours

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix C for field notes.

<sup>6</sup> Dari language- variety of Persian language spoken in Afghanistan

<sup>7</sup> Children mass is based in the common room of the church. Children learn about Jesus Christ and his life through games and stories.

**Table 2 Overview of interviews (interview transcriptions-Appendix A, B)**

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Duration (in hours)</i>
Pastor Martens	04.07.2016	0.45
Liam	17.03.2016	3

**Table 3 Overview of collected documents (Appendix C)**

Congregational newsletter January 2016
Congregational newsletter March 2016
Congregational newsletter April 2016

### 3.2 Trinity Lutheran Church

The socio cultural space under research here is the Trinity Lutheran Church located in Berlin-Steglitz in Germany. In order to fully understand the context in which the Church is located, it is significant to explain the relationship between religion and the state in Germany. In Germany, according to the 1949 constitution, the state must be neutral in matters of religion (Albert, 2014). Yet, the Catholics and Protestants, two main dominations, have special privileges, for example they are entitled to collect church taxes and the right to run state-subsidized religious social services and hospitals (Klausen, 2005).

The Church under research is a congregation of the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church (SELK) and the Pastor is Dr. Gottfried Martens. The Church is a very internationally orientated congregation with members from many different countries. It specializes in mission work mainly among refugees from Iran and Afghanistan. German, Farsi, Dari and English are present in the linguistic landscape of this socio-cultural space. At the beginning of 2016, the Church had 1,037 members and the numbers have been growing every month (congregational newsletter, April 2015, p.4). The congregation is considered as the fastest growing congregation of the Lutheran Church in Germany. This is due to the high numbers of refugees from Iran and Afghanistan, who have converted from Islam to Christian faith<sup>8</sup>. This phenomenon has been widely covered by the media. Just by researching the Church online, one can find many articles about the controversy around the topic of religious conversion by refugees. Sunday is the day of

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<sup>8</sup> Pastor Martens informed me that almost all of the asylum seekers are previously practicing Muslim. Yet, no further details in regards to which branches of Islam or statistics were provided.

the week, when most of the members are present in the Church. The Sunday mass starts at 10 a.m. with free Persian or Afghan lunch afterwards. There is also an English service available on the first and third Saturday of each month.

The concept of *community of practice* has been around for very long time and they exist everywhere around us. Yet, the name for this phenomenon has come into use around in recent years. In fact, we are all members of many communities of practice, in some cases very active or just as peripheral members. As Wenger (1998) argues “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” The main characteristics that constitute community of practice are membership and commitment to the domain, interacting and learning among members and shared practice. In terms of the Trinity Lutheran Church, asylum seekers operate within a community of practice, where the theme of learning is Christianity, their new faith, which happens both in real life and on-line through Facebook. Members, who are Christian for a longer time, pass on the knowledge to new-comers. Bible readings, and information meetings are organized along with informal conversations, for example about how to overcome the linguistic obstacles of their native languages and Christian terminology. Asylum seekers learn and practice together at the Church, they help each other as much as they can, and there is a family like feeling among them. As I have spent a considerable amount of time at the Church, I have noticed a visible hierarchy within the community. The hierarchies tend to be ethnicity-based. During Sunday lunches, is observable that the German members of the community and guests occupy front tables, behind them Iranians, and lastly Afghan members. There were of course some exceptions of individual Afghans seating at the front, but that was mostly because this person was either helping with the meals or currently residing at the Church (Church asylum). Pastor Martens claims to be aware of this ethnic division between Iranian and Afghan people within the community. He argues that this is based on the history of the two countries and the assumed lower level of education among Afghanistan people.

### **3.4 Selecting ethnographic informant**

The sample is built up through networking within the community. During my time in the field many asylum seekers approached me and inquired about my research. Some, after talking to me, were very skeptical and decided to avoid me, others showed huge interest. In the process of selection, I was well aware that the value of a key informant interview rests largely on choosing the right informant, who possesses an intimate knowledge of the subject on which he or she will

be interviewed. Due to Liam's interest in the topic, his will to help and tell his personal story, I have decided to appoint him as a key informant.

Liam<sup>9</sup> is a young Iranian man. We have met in December 2015 during my first field visit at the Church. He approached me first and offered his help in my research. At that time, he lived in the Church due to possible deportation to Hungary. On my return to Berlin in March 2016, his situation had improved. He had moved out from the Church to a house, which he shares with a German woman. During the course of this study, I have become very close friends with Liam. We conversed by WhatsApp on a daily basis and regularly saw each other face-to face. I also conducted participant-observation with the key informant outside of the Church, which helped in my fieldwork progress. I met Liam in cafes and parks, gaining an in-depth understanding of his life as an asylum seeker and converted Christian, providing me with the information needed in this study. Hence, an extensive account of his story will be presented in the analysis, as the source of data used in the process of analytical induction.

### **3.4 Interviews**

In this study, interviews are considered as a source of witness accounts about settings and events in the social world (Hammersley, 2008). Through the account obtained via the interviews, I gained access to the respondents' particular experiences from which meaning was derived and also a description of 'how things are done' within the community of practice.

The researcher conducted one main interview with the key informant and institutional figure alongside with follow-up, informal dialogs. The interviews were natural, conversational, ethnographic interviews (Whitehead, 2005) with an open-ended format. The interview with the key informant took place after few days into the research. The interview with Pastor Martens happened after the period of observations. This was to avoid any pre-conceived ideas on the observation process and the writing of field notes (Spotti, 2007). These two interviews dealt with biographical information about the respondents. They were asked to give information about their life including upbringing, education, professional careers, religious belief etc. I minimized my personal contribution during the interviews, letting the respondents take the intuitive. The second round of more informal dialogs focused on issues that, after the one-month field observation, were perceived as relevant for the investigated topic and it happened mainly in an unplanned, 'small

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<sup>9</sup> Liam is a pseudonym used to protect his identity.

talk' manner. Additionally, the researcher communicated with the key informant Liam, through FB messenger and WhatsApp.

### **3.5 The key incident approach**

During the time spent in the socio cultural space at hand, I have gathered data by the means of observations, field notes and interviews. Yet, not every piece of information is relevant to this particular research. The method of analysis of field notes, interviews and on-line conversations is by means of the key incident approach (Spotti, 2007). The term 'key event' (or incident) can be understood as a repeated event. However, key incident may not necessarily appear significant for the participants but it attracts the attention of a researcher. Key events in this research have been chosen intuitively, following a feeling that something relevant is happening within the data which can explain theoretical 'loading' (Kroon & Sturm, 2000). Green & Bloome (1997) highlight the fact that key incident analysis explores connections to other incidents, events, phenomena, or theoretical constructs. It places the events in relation to other events, to wider social contexts, or to a theoretical framework. The functionality of identifying a key event lies in bringing alertness towards patterns in the data for critical assessment or interpretation and/or as an instrument of controlled data reduction. Chosen key incidents will be accompanied by interpretive commentary, in order to make a connection between the presented details and the key assertions made in this study.

### **3.6 Limitations**

There are limitations of this ethnographic research that can be found. Doing research among refugees, who belong to a vulnerable population, raises many ethical problems. Asylum seekers are often vulnerable to manipulation, exploitation or are often afraid to take part in research (Kelly, 2005). I tried to avoid prioritizing my needs over the needs of the asylum seekers. This was a great challenge, since the asylum seekers asked for help every day. Additionally, I had no previous experience with working among asylum seekers and 'doing' ethnography. I aimed at interacting with the participants in natural manner, yet some errors have been made. The stories of refugees are inherently emotional and listening to such stories requires strong character. My first few days at the Trinity Church in Berlin classifieds as traumatic experience. I had heard stories including death, abuse and fear. On many occasions, I could not maintain a professional attitude and I have often reacted with tears. Moreover, personal characteristics of the researcher "may limit the negotiation of identities in the field" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 73). Gender, age and

ethnic identification had influenced my relationships with Pastor Martens, the key informant and general perception of the community members. The most influential characteristic was my gender. I was often approached by male asylum seekers in a way that I considered inappropriate.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, it was difficult for me to have a conversation with female asylum seekers, since many of them showed hostility towards me. On the other hand, being a female also helped me in some cases. For example, as the key informant informed me in a WhatsApp conversation, he agreed on taking part in the research mainly because of my gender and personal physical attributes. Furthermore, in my first days of the fieldwork, I have approached only individuals with English or German language competence, which has the disadvantage of excluding from the research those, who are the most marginalized and lack a voice in this society. It certainly imposed a limit on my data. Indeed, capturing the asylum seekers' accounts in their native tongues could have delivered a more comprehensive ethnographic picture and a more nuanced analysis. However, in order to develop trust, I have chosen not to use an interpreter.

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<sup>10</sup> The definition of inappropriate behavior is of course subjective.

## **Chapter 4 The role of the new faith**

This chapter presents an analysis of the data collected during the ethnographic fieldwork at the Berlin parish community. It starts with an outline of the macro level, which represents the policies and political discourse on asylum seekers in Germany. Next, an examination of the meso level, which is institutional discourse, authored by Pastor Martens, who is a key figure in the lives of asylum seekers and head of this church community. The chapter then moves on to the micro level, which presents Liam, an asylum seeker from Iran and a member of the Evangelical Church located in Steglitz-Berlin, and his discourse practices. The chapter then describes the role of religion in two important journeys of Liam's life, namely the journey of the body and the journey of the self. The journey of the body illustrates his constant search for safety and imposed struggles of the asylum procedure. The journey of the self is an analysis of Liam's identity work, and his spiritual voyage, which includes internal issues with religion. Throughout this chapter, key episodes will be presented and analyzed, illustrating the concept of chronotopic identities at play at certain moments in space and time and the role of a new faith in his life.

### **4.1 Asylum seeking in Germany and its legal discourse**

In order to conduct adequate analysis of the role of religion in asylum seekers' lives, it is important to consider the macro level dimension, in which these asylum seekers are operating. The macro level is understood here as that body of written official discursive material that deals with asylum seeking in Germany. Legal discourse has a huge impact on opportunities, choices and possibilities for asylum seekers. In Germany, unlike in many other countries, the right of asylum is not only secured by the Geneva Convention on Refugees (1951) but it is also enclosed in the Article 16a of the *Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany*, as a fundamental right (Deutscher Bundestag, 2012). Article 1 of the Geneva Convention (UNHCR, n.d) defines a refugee as:

any person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his or her habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

To clarify the difference between asylum seekers and refugee, an asylum seeker is an individual, whose request for refuge has yet to be processed.<sup>11</sup> In terms of religion, religious persecution is

understood when the public authorities of the country of origin restrict religious practice of an individual in private spheres. An example of religious persecution according to the Federal Constitution Court in Germany are sanctions related to change of denomination (“[Entry. Asylum seekers]”, 2012). The process of applying for asylum starts with a personal application at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). Fingerprints are usually taken from the asylum seekers on the day that the application is registered. In the cases where fingerprints were taken in a different country, the Dublin Regulation applies. The Dublin Regulation is not explicitly referred to in German law, but there is a general reference to EU law in the Asylum Procedure Act: “An application for asylum shall be inadmissible if another country is responsible for processing an asylum application based on European Community law or an international treaty.” (Germany: Asylum Procedure Act (AsylVfG); Section 27a). The Dublin Regulation generally states that each asylum application is only examined by one Member State of the European Union, including the EEA nations of Norway, Iceland, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, which is the state of entry (Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 - Dublin Regulation (recast)). Hence, the Dublin Regulation determines which Member State is responsible for implementing the asylum procedure and processes the actual asylum application. In Germany, the Federal Office (BAMF) is obliged to inform the applicant that the Dublin procedure is being reviewed, and ask him to provide reasons why he should not be transferred to the responsible Member State (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2014). Greece and Hungary are two of the states for which the so-called ‘Dublin transfers’<sup>12</sup> apply a lot, mostly because of its location at the external border of the Schengen area. The next step in the asylum procedure is a personal interview with a member of the Federal Office. Following an increase in applications for asylum, Germany incorporated prioritization of certain caseloads, this which has taken place since the second half of 2012. Currently, also Syrian cases are dealt with in a sped up manner (Informationsverbund Asyl und Migration, n.d.). For other nationalities, the waiting time for an interview might be up to more than one year. After an interview, on the basis of an overall assessment of relevant findings, the Federal Office decides whether to grant the applicant asylum, refugee status, or subsidiary protection, or to deny the application. In cases when the asylum is rejected, deportation of the applicant must be conducted.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Dublin transfers’ refer to transfers of asylum seekers from one Member State to another due to Dublin Regulations



Asylum seekers have also a right to appeal the decision. In cases of applications which have been rejected as unsupported, a deportation order is effective, unless a court grants temporary measure suspending such a deportation. Detention of asylum seekers happens frequently in cases of asylum seekers whose application has been rejected on the grounds that another European state is responsible for the procedure (Informationsverbund Asyl und Migration, n.d.).

In terms of asylum seekers, who converted to Christianity and apply for asylum based on the possible religious prosecution in their country of origin, the legal process differentiate from political cases<sup>13</sup>. Berlitz, Doerig & Storey (2015, p. 654-655) outline the details:

An applicant who has converted to Christianity has to convince the court or tribunal that a religious practice or activity, which is suppressed in his home country, is fundamental to him in order to preserve his religious identity. (...) Taking into account the impression obtained from both administrative and judicial proceedings the court or tribunal has to be satisfied that the applicant's detachment from his previous religion and his turn to the other faith relies on a full inner conviction. If the applicant has accepted a Christian religion, it is generally not sufficient that the protection seeker has only formally converted to Christianity by being baptized. With regard to an adult, it can generally be expected that the applicant be able to demonstrate his familiarity with the basic elements of his new religion. (...) Moreover, it will ordinarily be assumed that the convert is likely to have practiced his Christian religion in his home country seriously if he is able to show that he has adjusted his way of life in the country of refuge to align with the basic precepts of the newly adopted conversion. (...) In some member states (for example, Germany) national administrative procedural law does not provide for comprehensive lists of questions that have to be processed in order to clarify a particular matter by administrative courts, either by way of mandatory questionnaires or guidelines/recommendations. Nevertheless, questions asked by courts or tribunals in judicial practice may be derived from case law or decisions in similar cases. It has, of course, to be kept in mind that these questions may have been tailored to the specific case or may reflect an evaluation of the answers given and may not be easily adapted to apply to other cases.

As shown above, the classifications for the religious asylum based on conversion is ambiguous. The validation of conversion is based on impression and satisfaction of the court or tribunal that an individual is honest about his new faith. This imposes a risk of subjective judgment of what constitutes an honest convert. In this case, institutional figures define the features that represent the notion of 'having enough' to be considered as a Christian. The concept of enoughness is the point of reference for admission into a group as an authentic member (Blommaert & Varis, 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> These regulations apply to converts to any religious faith, not only Christianity.

However, the background of the people, who are responsible for making the decision in regards to granting asylum is not considered. The interview with the converted asylum seeker is based on the theological and cultural knowledge of Christianity in the German context, which could be different from the perspective of a person with an Iranian or Afghan background.

#### **4.2 Institutional discourse**

This section deals with institutional discourse at the meso level, in which refugees are inserted. The analysis is authored by Pastor Dr. Gottfried Martens in the context of the socio-cultural space of Trinity Church, based in Berlin (Germany). To do so, I gather field notes, internal documents received from the Church and interviewed Pastor Martens. Internal documents are based on congregational newsletters, which are addressed to the members of the Church with bilingual (German, Farsi) text<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, the website of the Church serves as a source of information. Apart from the official interview, I had many casual dialogs with Pastor Martens, which contributed to the analysis. The institutional discourse demonstrates how the Church contributes to the life of asylum seekers.

The topic of the refugee crisis in Europe is often addressed by Pastor Martens during Sunday homilies. All German members of the Trinity Church, as the Pastor mentioned on many occasions, have a very welcoming attitude towards asylum seekers into their country. The reason behind such a supportive community is based on the history of this particular congregation. This project started due to the huge demand coming from the increased number of new members, mostly asylum seekers from Iran and Afghanistan, at the previous location in Zehlendorf. Therefore, those who followed Pastor Martens to the new location were clearly informed about the missionary work among refugees. Pastor Martens often reminds all the members of the Church about the importance of helping those in need of safety and shelter. In this way, the asylum seekers feel safe and acknowledged within the Church. Yet, parallel to this, there is a strong anti-immigration discourse in German society (Lehr, 2015). The debate on how to deal with the refugee crisis is polarizing not only politicians but also citizens in Germany. This is also an issue that Pastor Martens tries to tackle during his mass homilies.

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix D

#### 4.2.1 The key institutional figure: Pastor Martens

Pastor Martens is originally from Hanover, Germany. He is a former student of the Concordia Theological Seminary of in Fort Wayne, Indiana in the United States. From December 1991 until May 2015 he was a pastor of St. Mary's parish in Zehlendorf-Berlin. Since the 10th of May 2015, he has been based at the Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church in Steglitz-Berlin. Apart from the German language, he speaks fluent English and also basic Farsi, which he learned through every day contact with the refugees from Iran and Afghanistan. His work with the asylum seekers started about eight years ago, when two converted individuals were transferred from the congregation in Leipzig to Zehlendorf-Berlin.<sup>17</sup> Over time the number of asylum seekers in Zehlendorf grew but it was always a very small number of people. In July 2011, Pastor Martens performed his first baptism of an Iranian man. In 2012, the situation has completely changed. Already converted asylum seekers began to invite others to the Church. The capacity of the congregation in Zehlendorf was limited, therefore, at the beginning of 2013, higher authorities of the SELK made the decision to start a special project for the asylum seekers in Steglitz-Berlin with Dr. Gottfried Martens as a pastor. The work with asylum seekers comes with many challenges. Pastor Martens works very long hours and is committed fully to his job. Especially just before Easter, his agenda was full of trips, meetings and interviews with journalists. This is mainly due to his role as a source of information in regards to religiously motivated abuse and violent attacks on asylum seekers who are Christians in refugee camps. He also co-operates with the non-profit Christian organization *Open Doors*<sup>18</sup>, which supports persecuted and oppressed Christians in different countries.

Apart from the formal interview, the researcher also had some informal, casual dialogs with Pastor Martens, not only about the asylum seekers but also about Christianity in general. He was always very kind and helpful, yet he remained reserved. As I found out from the discussion with the asylum seekers, he does not trust everyone. Pastor Martens deals with a lot of journalists on a weekly basis and not all of them are in favor of his work. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is a controversial topic, hence it attracts media attention. There is a lot of articles and videos on-line reporting the work of Pastor Martens but in some cases the journalists argue that asylum seekers are using religious conversion as a migration tool to stay in Germany. In one of

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<sup>17</sup> The reason why they were transferred was based on their change of address.

<sup>18</sup> More information about the organization can be found here: <https://www.opendoors.org/>

the radio interviews, Pastor Martens commented on American journalists, who was looking for a story that is controversial and therefore, she claimed that these converted asylum seekers are not real Christians (Issues, Etc., 2015). In one of the casual dialogs, Pastor Martens told me that even if certain people feel unsure about their new faith, the power of Christ will change their life. It is visible that Pastor Martens applies a strategy based on belonging-behaving- believing with a character of a center-set Church (Weyers & Saayman, 2013).

When I asked him about people sleeping at the Church to avoid deportation, he answered the following:

*Pastor:* Of course we take them so they cannot be deported to other countries from where they would be deported to their own countries. For example, in Norway, the conversion from Islam to Christian faith is not regarded as a reason for asylum. So very faithful Christians flee from Norway to Germany to have a chance not to be deported to Iran.

*Beata:* So as I understand if they stay here in the Church they cannot be deported?

*Pastor:* Ja ja...and Germany has to deport them to this European Union country within six months. If they do not succeed in doing that then after six months Germany has to take them.

*Beata:* But they cannot take people from here?

*Pastor:* They can but they don't. Because, well, it's not official law but they know exactly if they came with police to a Church building this would make big, big trouble in the newspapers and so on... so that's something that we use here...yeah...that's kind of unwritten law in Germany, that police do not enter church buildings.

*Beata:* Oh yeah?

*Pastor:* Ja... that's what we use here ja... this Church asylum thing... and ja of course that is something the Federal Agency does not like it at all... and the conservative political groups... what we are doing... but on the other hand it is just a matter of human rights...

(Interview 1, p. 7-8)

Through the act of church asylum, asylum seekers gain time to press the authorities to reconsider their situation. At the time of my research, there were around ten asylum seekers sleeping at the Church, including one minor. Pastor Martens acknowledges the fact that he might be breaking the law by letting the asylum seekers stay at the Church. In his understanding, it is simply about helping other people. Furthermore, Pastor Martens has denied on several occasions the fact that some refugees might be using religion in order to receive asylum in Germany. His reasoning is that their need for asylum is based on religious oppression in their countries and nobody would go that far to change a religion just for the economic benefits. He is convinced about honesty of the religious conversion among the members of his parish. He claims that all asylum seekers are not

happy with their previous religion. Pastor Martens also mentioned to me, many times, that becoming Christian is a lifelong learning process for everybody. He argues that there is never an end moment when one is fulfilled as a Christian. Therefore, the interviews with the German Federal Agency to assess whether one is honest about conversion to Christianity, in his opinion, are not accurate. As he argues, being Christian is not about memorizing facts but about believing. His way of validating the honesty of religious conversion is by analyzing their behavior and whether the individual admits to tell his or her family about the new faith.

*Pastor:* Ja...ja... if somebody does not tell the family then that is a hint that he doesn't take his faith seriously.

*Beata:* Oh ok.

*Pastor:* So they always have to say... that's the truth... in almost all cases: yes, we have told our families. They know about it.

(Interview 1, p. 5)

On one occasion, he had to ask one of the asylum seekers to leave the Church because this person had lied to him. Pastor Martens told the young man to pack his stuff and go (Field notes, date, and page number). I watched along with the other members of the community as the young man packed and left the Church. When I brought up the event later on with the Pastor, he explained to me that this person had put his reputation at risk because of a false story he had presented to the media. Pastor Martens again explained to me that he puts additional pressure on the asylum seekers to tell him the true story. Occasionally, Pastor Martens serves as a witness in court cases to confirm that a specific person has indeed converted to Christianity.

Pastor Martens also indicated during the interview that the asylum seekers are fed up with Islam. Their new religion gives them an opportunity to start a new life. During the baptism, converts also receive new Christian first names, which marks their new beginning.

*Pastor:* For example, just yesterday we had preparation for the baptisms tomorrow. And we had several Mohammed's. And of course they want to have a new name in this case.

*Beata:* Do you think it's a contradiction then? It is better to use a new name?

*Pastor:* They don't like their name any more. They really hate this name Muhammed. And...So they are glad when they are called differently. I have not met anyone who was proud being called Muhammed.

*Beata:* yeah...yeah...So do you think they still have negative feelings, connotations with Islam and that's why they want to leave everything behind, also their names?

*Pastor:* Of course...well...there is always a reason when you become a Christian it is of course because you don't like the religion you had before. If you totally happy in Islam why should you join Christian faith. But... So we have this one group that has already

became Christian in Iran and another group which is simply fed up with Islam when they arrive here. Well, they are refugees. So... they suffered something bad in their country in which religion and politics is one! So, when they say something against politics they have to say something against religion as well. Because you cannot tear these two things apart.

(Interview 1, p.3)

As Pastor Martens claims, the asylum seekers do not want to be identified or recognized as Muslims anymore. Hence, change of a first name is a part of their 'cutting cords' with Islam.

Pastor Martens appears to apply a parental strategy when working with the asylum seekers. He cares for them and offers them support. This more parental bond that the Pastor has with the asylum seekers could be also seen as a method of evoking a sense of guilt, i.e. for not attending a mass (Kim, 2012).

On a few occasions, I observed Pastor Martens providing medicine to some of the asylum seekers or bringing them to a hospital. Hence, the members of the community have huge respect for him and some even call them 'dad' in their native language. Pastor always encourages everyone to take part in Sunday mass and the majority of people do show up. Furthermore, Pastor dedicates a few hours every week to answer any questions in regards to asylum procedures, or conversion to Christian faith. More specifically, he provides information on what the interview for religious asylum looks like and gives advice on the 'dos and don'ts' of the interview process. In some cases, he also delivers information on housing, schooling or he just listens to their horrific stories with empathy. As a part of the conversion process, Pastor Marten also gives courses on Christian faith, so called conversion courses. The courses last around three months, with meeting two or three times a week and attendance is being checked regularly. In these courses, there is always an interpreter working along with the Pastor. In most cases, this person is an Iranian Christian, who speaks fluent German and want to help. Pastor Martens also attempts to integrate the asylum seekers to the European and German customs and traditions by talking about family life, gender equality, relations with people, abortion, euthanasia, etc. He offers new models of parenting and family life, which are based on more democratic relationships between parents and children. Chen (2006) also shows how Evangelical Christianity in the United States implies similar strategy with the converted Chinese immigrants, where acculturation to the American society happens through an ethnic and evangelical Christian guidance.

Pastor Martens often compares Islam with Christianity, makes comments or jokes about the former. Frequently, learners record what the Pastor says, take notes and raise hands when they have questions. The settings of these courses resembles that of a classroom. During my ethnographic research, *Nowruz*, which is a Persian New Year celebration, was held at the church. Pastor gave a permission for people to gather together in at the common room, set up Haft-Seen spread. There was Persian music involved, dancing and unofficially some wine (see Appendix B). Since the Persian New Year has no connection with Islam, the event was permitted by the Pastor. As he explained during the interview, he aims to establish connection between Persian pre-Islam traditions and Christian faith. This helps, according to the Pastor, with the transition from Muslim-self to Christian-self. During the interview, when asked about these events, Pastor answered:

(...) it is very important for their identity to see that their roots are much deeper than just back to the seventh VII century when Islam came. As you know, in Iran, history just starts in VII century, the official one. So that's something that is very important to our Iranians that they detect their roots. (...) It is very important to them to show that they have different roots from Islam. And that's something we support. (...) New Year, Nowruz...well...awakes the same feelings that are awakened here in Germany at Christmas Eve. So that's the family festival of the year. So we have to do this otherwise they will be so alone so that's why we offer this

(Interview 1, p.2)

As Pastor indicated, he aims at reaching to and connecting pre-Islamic Persian traditions with Christianity. He tries to influence their cultural identity and make a bond with their new faith. As in the case of Nowruz, which has its roots in ancient religions such as Mithraism and Zoroastrianism, Pastor Martens' goal is to frame those family events and feelings in the Christian context. Furthermore, Pastor Martens has an extensive knowledge about not only Persian culture and specific needs and behaviors of his members. For example, every Sunday after a mass, there is an organized lunch meeting, either with Persian or Afghan food. Everybody is welcome to join and it is free of charge. Pastor indicated that this tradition has started "before the Persians" came, however, the interest from refugees is much higher than in other congregations. Pastor believes that this is due to their living situation and a more collectivistic approach to community relations. Most of the refugees live in Heim<sup>23</sup>. Hence, as Pastor articulated, coming to

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<sup>23</sup> EN: Refugee camps

the church is significant for the asylum seekers since they can be together in different surroundings from what they experience in Heim. It appears that Pastor Martens is very well aware of the needs of asylum seekers and tries to fulfill them at the Church. When approached directly about his views on the different roles of the new faith, Pastor answered:

*Pastor:* They basically get this new identity in general. That they are no longer ...not being Muslim as it was before...that's very important for them. But of course then this is a meeting point for many of their basic needs... from questions of asylum until just being together in a social context. All these things come together that they meet this basic needs here.

(Interview 1, p. 3)

### **4.3 Liam**

In the course of data collection in Berlin, Liam became a key informant due to his openness and willingness to help me with this research. Therefore, his life story will serve as the main material for analysis. As mentioned above, Liam comes from Iran and he was born to a Muslim family. Both of his parents are highly educated people. He speaks Persian as his mother tongue, Arabic, English and basic German.<sup>24</sup>In order to fully understand Liam's situation, it is also important to describe the socio-political situation in Iran, where the key informant was born and spent fourteen years of his life. This is relevant, since the time-space configurations affects understanding of Liam's identity (Blommaert 2005b).

The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979 after the secular regime of the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-79) which was characterized by the ideology of modernization and Westernization. Under the new regime, the state and religion were merged together and led to governmental, political and social changes across the country. Shi'i Islam became the official religion recognized by the constitution. Under the Islamic State of Iran's constitution there is a distinction between heritage and older religious minorities, so called *people of the book*, Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenian Christians, and Chaldean-Assyrian Christians, which receive recognition and constitutional protection oppose to Baha'is, Catholic Christians or Protestant Christians (Choksy, 2012). In fact, the case of converted Christians is considered as an apostasy, therefore unacceptable and may be subject to death. (Foltz, 2004). Yet, the number of converted Christians has gone up in recent years, which is mostly the outcome of the missionary work among

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<sup>24</sup> Due to protection of Liam's identity, no more personal information can be revealed. (Liam request)



Western Protestants. It is claimed that between 10,000 and 15,000 Iranians adhere to the Protestant churches in Iran (Afshari, 2001). Since the Islamic Revolution, many Iranians decided to flee the country and seek asylum in the West, for various reasons, for example religious fundamentalism of the state, political and economic factors. Turkey, due to its geographical location, has become the chief transit country for those seeking to get to the west (Akcapar, 2006).

#### **4.3.1 The journey of the body**

Liam's journey to freedom began around 10 years ago, when he left Iran with his family. The reason why they had to flee was due to the political activities of Liam's father, who was against Iranian regime. Liam's family received a tag of Munāfiq (fake Muslim). This made their life unbearable. Liam, as his dream was to play in Iran's national badminton team, was not allowed to continue his passion and his sister had difficulties to receive a place in a university. In the course of time, Liam's father became interested in the left wing organization in exile, The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK). The organization was founded in 1965 with aspiration to remove Iran's government and instead create a "modern, pluralist, secular, democratic government" (peoplesmojahedin.com). After his father decided to leave Iran<sup>26</sup>, he asked the PMOI for help. Eventually, Liam and his family moved to Iraq and lived in the camp Ashraf camp, which belong to the PMOI organization. After a few years, the situation within the camp started to be unbearable for Liam. As he claims, the PMOI is in fact a cult with fanatic associations. Additionally, as the political situation changed in Iraq, and PMOI became a target of military attacks, in which many people died. In 2012, Liam together with his father escaped the camp to Albania. Unfortunately, his mother, two brothers and a sister are still living within the PMOI camp, which is still in Iraq but in a different location. In one of our on-line conversations Liam wrote that PMOI is one of the worst and saddest story of Iran history.

After eight years in Iraq, Liam spent two years in Albania, however, without acknowledged refugee status, which had a direct influence on his mental state.

*Liam:* And I told my dad that I am young and I really want to have a new challenge and a new adventure. You know. My dad told me everything is safe for you here everything is good for you here. You have a house, car and your girlfriend. But it was not enough for me. Because everything was like the same. Every...Yeah...Everyday was and also...

*Beata:* What do you mean by the same? Do you mean routine?

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<sup>26</sup> Liam did not want to tell me the exact reason why his father decided to leave and when it happened.

*Liam:* Yeah it was routine. You know, because you could not go out of Albania. You know and you were in a big prison, you know, big jail. Because you have no status. You know. It's the bad...really worst scene that you have no status. You cannot say that who I am.

(Interview 2, p. 5)

Liam decided to change his life and to try to get to Germany. He crossed the borders illegally with the help of human smugglers. His fingerprints were taken in Hungary, where he was first approached by the police. He arrived in Berlin, in July 2015. Upon arrival, Liam applied for an asylum in Germany. Due to the Dublin regulation, the German government intended to send him back to Hungary, where his finger prints had been taken. After consultations with his friend, he was introduced to Pastor Martens. He was told by his friend that there is a way that Pastor could help with his possible deportation to Hungary. Eventually, Liam decided to convert to Christianity. Pastor allowed him to stay at the premises of the Church to avoid deportation to Hungary. The only condition Liam had to meet was not to go outside of the Church. Liam spent 3 months living in the Church. In contrary with what Pastor Martens believes, Liam claims that most of Iranians use Christianity as a tool to stay in Germany.

*Liam:* So after this sanctions against Iran. It was getting really bad, the situation in Iran....but I mean...the western countries do not want to name Iran as a dictatorship. You know and the problem is...

*Beata:* That is why is hard to get asylum for an Iranian?

*Liam:* Yes. That's why people must change [Beata: religion]...and must have an excuse to stay here...you know

*Beata:* Yeah so they?

*Liam:* So they convert and it's a good reason to stay. You know what I mean? The problem is that this is really forbidden, freedom in Iran. And they don't want you...

*Beata:* So for example if you are a Christian in Iran...

*Liam:* No if you convert...if you born as a Christian then it is OK.

(Interview 2, p. 8)

Yet, at the same time he denies to be using Christianity as a pass to Europe. He emphasized on many occasions that he is a political refugee and he does not need an additional excuse. After 3 three months of living in the church, German officials failed to deport Liam back to Hungary, which meant that he had the right to apply for asylum in Germany. Just recently Liam had an interview in regards to his asylum. During the interview, a judge was set to assess whether Liam's presented story is valid or not. As I was informed by other asylum seekers, an example question

asked by the judge in regards to religious conversion is what the ten commandments of the Christian faith are. Liam is convinced that his interview went well. He is now waiting for the final decision. As he informed me, his asylum will be based on safety concerns due to Liam's political and religious status.

In the discourse on Liam's life, his identity, while living in different countries, was chronotopically organized depending on time and space configurations. In Iran, Liam found himself in a complex situation, growing up in an unstable environment with his father strongly opposing to the official discourse of the state. Liam lived between a front stage of public space, where he had to obey to code of conduct imposed by the state, and a back stage of his home, where his father expressed his revolutionary thoughts. Leaving Iran, Iraq and then Albania had an impact on Liam, which as Blommaert (2015a) argues, causes a change in the role, mode of interaction, and code of conduct. Liam has been living without an official status for almost 10 years of his life. While waiting on his refugee status, he felt trapped in the legal asylum procedures. The time-space configuration changed as soon as Liam decided to convert to Christianity, which allowed him to stay in Germany and avoid deportation.

#### **4.3.2 The journey of the self- spirituality and identity**

Liam's physical journey is not the only journey in his life. The parallel voyage that he is undergoing is the journey of the self and becoming. Religion seems to have had a central role in Liam's life since he was born. His family is Muslim and he also had practiced this religion before. As a young boy he saw only his mother praying, not his father. Liam is very well educated in Islam. He even read the Quran twice in the Arabic language and he still considers the book as very magical and impressive. He mentioned during the interview that before joining the PMOI camp in Iraq, he was even ready to sacrifice his live for God. Yet, the traumatic experience in the camp triggered a major turning point in his religiosity. Liam's view on Islam had dramatically changed. He did not want to speak much about it with me. In one of our casual conversations, he told me that the PMOI organization is the saddest part of the history of Iran. His experience in the camp made him question not only Islam but God as well. When approached about it, he answered:

*Liam:* And I thought a lot and I changed my personality. I changed my idea and I swear not to be a follower. You know what I mean. I don't want to follow

*Beata:* A religion? Any religion?

*Liam:* Everything.

*Beata:* Anything?

*Liam:* I don't believe in media I don't believe in people I don't believe in religion. I don't trust, you know what I mean. At all. I must see and I must...

(...)

*Liam:* Everything...you know...that's why I don't believe in heaven I don't believe in other world...

*Beata:* But do you believe in God?

*Liam:* I don't...I believe God is energy

*Beata:* Oh...

*Liam:* I'm not afraid of God... I mean I'm not pretending to be good...because...you know...

*Beata:* Yeah?

*Liam:* I always tell myself. We are you know...every animal or every trees or you know we are not special because people think humans are special things and we have to get...because we are humans and we did a lot of good things but I say I don't believe in it because I think if I help someone I just want to help I don't want to get something I am not a businessman in goodness. You know.

(Interview, 2, p. 10-11)

As La Barbera (2015) claims migrants observe identity as fluid and multiple. It is the result of the negotiation of personal given conditions, social context, and relationships, and institutional frameworks (La Barbera, 2015). Hence, Liam can deny to be a follower and still go to the Church and receive Holy Communion. In one of our causal conversations, Liam indicated to me that the moment of his formal conversion was a central point in his spiritual struggle. After many years of anger and disappointment with religion, in this case Islam, he felt relieved. Liam believes that religion is a source of motivation.

*Beata:* But you said that it felt good during baptism? When you were in the Church it felt good?

*Liam:* Because I hated God and these things, you know, no one could talk to me about God.

*Beata:* Before?

*Liam:* Before.

*Beata:* Yeah?

*Liam:* It was two years that I just hate...It was not easy...I swear this things...But my friend talked to me and you know. He had his reasons to believe in God. You know?

(...)

*Liam:* And I knew from before that it is really good and great source of energy. You know. I knew that.

*Beata:* What?

*Liam:* God. You know, motivate you ...in this 2 years I felt very empty, alone.

(Interview 2, p. 11)

At the time, when Liam entered the process of becoming Christian, his chronotopic identity changed. He is adapting his behavior and practices accordingly, as the chronotope produces a different kind of Liam, in this context of a Christian Liam. Statements that appear as a contradiction are together representing different shades of identity, where ‘the self’ changes all the time (Blommaert & Varis, 2011). One can be oneself while expressing different directions in diverse domains of life (Blommaert and Varis, 2011). It is the result of the negotiation of personal given conditions, social context, and relationships, and institutional frameworks (La Barbera, 2015). Likewise, during our talks, Liam would often express his interest in religion from a theological point of view but yet he would also mention that he is ‘done with religion’. On one occasion Liam asked me if I wanted to join him for a Sunday mass. We sat next to each other. Just before the communion, Liam made a comment about the other people in the Church, calling them followers of Jesus and that they should be proud of themselves. The comment appeared to me sarcastic, yet Liam did not want to explain his intentions. After few minutes, we walked towards the Pastor, just as others, knelt down, bowed our heads and received communion. In the presented key incident, it is evident that Liam shifts in mode of social interaction and adjusts his behavior, depending on time space arrangements (Blommaert & De Fina, 2016). Liam who is now in Germany, and as a Christian, is forced to reorder the normative codes of conduct. In the course of his life, religion has been playing an important role, yet it is his ethnicity that serves as a primary category.

*Beata:* Oh my question actually was, because the European culture is affected by Christianity, for example the calendar we use here, Christmas traditions, and other stuff. Do you feel like because you are Christian now, you are also more European?

*Liam:* I think it’s automatically...

*Beata:* it helps?

*Liam:* It helps but not too much...But... I’m still not interested to eat pig’s meat. You know pig? (...) For some guys it’s a really good thing that I’m Christian and I’m European you know they think European are better. But I don’t like this because I’m Persian and I’m proud of this and I don’t feel that European or American are better than me...because of...

*Beata:* But do you think being Persian goes with being Muslim?

*Liam:* No!

*Beata:* No?

*Liam:* No because Persian hate it, because they think if there was no Islam then European must come there and get asylum...really.

(Interview 2, p. 12)

In our last conversation, Liam said he is happy and he feels he is on the right path in his life. Yet, the spiritual journey comes with ups and downs. At times, Liam's hesitation about his new faith is remarkable. He mentioned to me once that he regrets converting because now he cannot come back to Iran at all. This is mainly due to risks of imprisonment or even death on the basis of apostasy. In Iran, religious converts face discrimination, prison, abuse or even death. Concluding, for Liam, just as claimed by King (2003), religion offers ideological, social, and spiritual context in which his identity operates.

#### **4.4 The power of community**

As mentioned before, the members of the Trinity Church in Steglitz-Berlin are part of community of practice. They create a platform that provides a strong sense of friendship and knowledge sharing. Those, who are residing the longest in Germany, help as translators, interpreters and organizers of events. This work is always volunteer. Liam also indicated that in the future he would like to become a German-Persian interpreter at the Church in order to help others. His bond with the community is very strong. He also agree that being part of the community helps in socializing and not getting depressed.

*Beata:* Coming back a little bit to the Church topic. For example, on Saturday, there is this New Year event. Pastor is trying to combine...you have these Persian cultural events, so let's have them at the Church to bring people? What do you think?

*Liam:* Yeah...I think it's good. It's good to see friends...

*Beata:* Yeah...go to the Church and say hello to everyone.

*Liam:* Because many people are really alone...They don't have many friends...they don't speak German...They must come and visit people so they don't get depressed...You know, it's good...

(Interview 2, p. 12)

While living in the Church, Liam has have met a lot of Iranians, with whom he is still very close. Liam has mentioned to me on several occasions that people from the Church help each other a lot. As Liam described, the Church is not only a space to practice religion but it is a space also for socializing, networking and even finding a partner. Many of the asylum seekers use Pastor's Face book friend list to 'check out girls'. For the asylum seekers, religion gives them an opportunity to gain alternative social networks, which is referred by Akcapar (2006) as positive social capital inside religious organizations. This includes gathering information, receiving assistance, meeting fellow countrymen, or talking about problems.

Additionally, during conversion courses, Pastor Martens teaches asylum seekers about Germany and European, culture, habits and customs. This knowledge has an impact on their integration into their new society. Furthermore, almost all liturgical services are held in German and religious texts, such as books with prayers and songs are also in German language. Celebrations of Christian traditions, such as Easter and Christmas in the German context, gradually serve as an adaptation tool to the host culture. Also, the German members of the community support the asylum seekers with learning German language. Hence, the functionality of religion among the asylum seekers can be viewed as a medium of socio-cultural integration (Leman, 1999) and an instrument to overcome social isolation. On the other side, during the worship some prayers are also in Farsi. Furthermore, there is a Persian choir every Sunday during the mass. Here, religion can be considered as an institutional conveyor of ethno-cultural bridging. Elements like Farsi prayers, Persian choir and celebration of traditional Persian events serve as vehicles of culture, for Iranian and Afghan migrants (Leman, 1999). Furthermore, in the Trinity Church, ethnic variation and national differences become less problematic through shared worship and sense of belonging. Hence, religion provides this social group with unity and social solidarity (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010).

## **Chapter 5 Conclusion and discussion**

In this ethnographic research, I have dealt with religion and migration. More specifically, I have dealt with the functionality of the new faith among asylum seekers, who are members of the Trinity Church in Berlin. Macro, meso and micro levels of discursive practices have been considered in order to analyze the environment of the asylum seekers. At the macro level, it was indicated how important are the institutionalized legal decisions in terms of asylum seeking procedure in Germany, especially in terms of religious asylum. As Levitas argues (2000), in many cases, asylum seekers are deprived of basic rights citizens have, placing them outside of a society. Many of the legal regulations push the asylum seekers to look for the alternative ways in order to stay in Europe. In the case of seeking an asylum based on religious conversion to Christianity, an individual needs to convince the court or tribunal that his change of faith is honest. The decision is based on the impression obtained from administrative and judicial proceedings and later from the court or tribunal. In this case, there is a danger that the verdict is based on a subjective understanding of what religiosity entails.

Previous studies on Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, who converted to Christianity, indicate that Christianity serves as a tool in migration. Western countries (Akcapar, 2006; 2007). Hence, the new religious faith serves as a tool in migration. On the meso level, the institutional figure, Pastor Martens, denies any of these assumptions, claiming that many of the asylum seekers come back to the Church after they receive their permits to stay. Though there is an indication that the new religion is used as a migration strategy for many of the asylum seekers, in time, it acquires new meaning and becomes an important element in their lives. This is mainly due to the psychological, financial, institutional, social and spiritual support that immigrants receive from the community of practice of the Trinity Church in Berlin (Wenger, 1998). Members of the Church build relationships that enable them to interact and learn from each other in a matter of a shared practice. Pastor Martens provides the asylum seekers not only with protection and safety, but also with a moral code, self-esteem, and a positive self-image in a new environment. His parental and welcoming strategy, with a goal to keep the community together, has definitely been successful, as most of the members attend mass every Sunday. At the Trinity Church in Berlin, the new religious faith of the asylum seekers functions both as an institutional conveyor of ethno-cultural bridging and medium of socio-cultural integration of the asylum seekers in their new society (Leman, 1999). Furthermore, Christianity for asylum seekers defines liberation not only from



oppressive Islam but also from oppressive political systems in their countries of origin. Their ‘thirst’ for religion comes from the existential anxieties, living in uncertainties and ambiguities.

In this study, on the micro level, the life of the young Iranian man Liam has been investigated; a life that is regarded within a continuously changing time-space configuration and it was demonstrated by applying a notion Bakhtin introduced as chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981). Chronotopes produce different ‘kinds’ of Liam, each with a particular set of ideologies, practices, and behavior, conditioned by that particular space-time configuration. Two journeys of Liam’s life were presented and analyzed in this study: the physical and the spiritual one. In the course of the physical journey, his new religious faith contributes to the end goal, which for Liam is freedom and safety, whereas the spiritual journey comprises of existential change and becoming in an effort to establish his identity. His contradictory comments about religion, do not stop him from belonging to the community of the Church in Berlin. As Liam indicated, he does not consider himself as a follower of the Jesus Christ’s teachings, yet he believes in ‘something’. Liam’s story reflects the linear form of belonging – behaving – believing. It is not the evangelical beliefs which attract Liam, but rather unconditional acceptance by faith community (Weyers & Saayman, 2013).

This study has aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the role of religious faith during migration processes. I have argued that religion is not only a helping tool to stay in Germany but it entails a wide range of other functions, such as psychological and social support. Yet, considering all the limitations imposed on this study, there is a need for more scholarly inquiries in regards to this topic.

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