

Recognition of Religious Conversion in Asylum Procedure

TALVIKKI AHONEN*

Political turmoil, war, and conflict in the Middle East and North Africa have challenged the system of international protection in Europe in both the quantity and diversity of asylum claims. An increasingly common ground for asylum is religious conversion and disaffiliation. In such cases national immigration authorities conduct a credibility assessment which may include questionnaires on doctrine, testimonies from a religious community, and/or questions about personal experience and the meaning of conversion. This article analyses the Finnish Immigration Service's asylum decisions in which religious conversion has been the basis of the asylum claim, and it discusses the frameworks for assessing authenticity and how they function in international protection decision making.

Keywords: *Conversion, Asylum, Asylum Seeking, Credibility Assessment, Freedom of Religion and Belief*

Introduction

Religious conversion has become an increasingly topical question in Europe since the refugee crisis in 2015. Christian congregations in particular have attracted new members, many of whom are asylum seekers or refugees. Conversion can involve sudden, gradual, or multiple changes in one's spiritual life. In several European countries the most common ground for a new asylum procedure in appeals against negative asylum decisions has been conversion to Christianity.¹ In such cases conversion can create grounds for international protection based on religious persecution.

However, the immigration authorities do not always recognize the authenticity of such conversions; instead, they interpret them as an attempt to fabricate asylum claims, especially if the religion-based refugee claim is based on post-departure (i.e. *sur place*) conversion.² Converts who fail

* Talvikki Ahonen, Dr, Postdoctoral Researcher and Research Coordinator, Åbo Akademi University, The Polin Institute, Theologicum, Biskopsgatan 16, FI-20500 Åbo, Finland, talvikki.ahonen@abo.fi.

¹ Kéri Szabolcs and Christina Sleiman, "Religious Conversion to Christianity in Muslim Refugees in Europe," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 39/3 (2017): 283–94.

² UNHCR, *Guidelines on International Protection: Religion-Based Refugee-Claims under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2004).

to provide credible testimony in support of their asylum application may therefore be at risk of religious persecution.³ As part of the asylum process, immigration authorities conduct a credibility assessment, which may include questionnaires on Christian doctrine, testimonies from a congregation, and/or questions about personal experience and the meaning of conversion. However, one can be persecuted for religious reasons even without actual conversion or any affiliation with a persecuted religious group. Hence, the question is not whether belief or conversion is genuine, but how possible persecutors (the state, armed militias, the religious community one is denouncing, etc.) assess a person's religious stance.⁴ This is also emphasized in the UNHCR guidelines⁵ for religion-based asylum claims, a document that is applied in receiving countries, and that is often referred to in the asylum decisions used as the data for this article.

People not only convert from one religion to another; they also disaffiliate from all kinds of religious communities and change denominations within their religion. The categories of conversion and disaffiliation are hence connected with broader issues of ecumenical, interdenominational, and interreligious relations, as well as with the question of freedom of faith and belief.⁶ The vast majority of previous research on the issue focuses on religious conversion as a personal and spiritual⁷ or theological⁸ process. Conversion has similarly been a traditional research topic in the psychology of religion. This article focuses on religious conversion from a sociopolitical perspective. It seeks to examine how conversion and disaffiliation overlap with the migration regime's political processes, and how societal authorities comprehend the characteristics of "authentic" conversion.

³ Sarah Gibson, "Testimony in a Culture of Disbelief: Asylum Hearings and the Impossibility of Bearing Witness," *Journal for Cultural Research* 17 no. 1 (2013): 1–20; Alisha Mathers, "Questioning Representation: Testimonials, Witness Accounts and Literary Migrant Narratives," *Studies in Arts and Humanities Journal* 4, no. 2 (2018): 70–78.

⁴ Michael Kagan, "Refugee Credibility Assessment and the «Religious Imposter» Problem," *Scholarly Works* 629 (2010), <https://shorturl.at/n25CG>, accessed June 22, 2026.

⁵ UNHCR, Guidelines.

⁶ Shanta Premawardhana, *Religious Conversion: Religion Scholars Thinking Together* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

⁷ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁸ Dorottya Nagy and Gé Speelman, "Conversion Controlled: Missiological Reflections on Assessing Conversions to Christianity Among Asylum Seekers in the European Union," *Theology* 120, no. 5 (2017): 355–63.

Previous studies have addressed other, similar settings in which the personal identity of an asylum seeker and the “authenticity” of that identity is questioned.⁹ The Finnish context has previously been researched in the works of the anthropologist Elina Hartikainen, who has analysed the media coverage of religion-based asylum claims;¹⁰ the theologian Ilona Blumgrund and colleagues in their reconstruction of Migri’s theology;¹¹ and the scholar of the study of religions Helmi Halonen, whose doctoral dissertation analyses the conceptualizations of religion as a mechanism of border control.¹² The situation of religious converts can be compared with the situation of sexual minorities,¹³ whose sexual orientation may result in persecution, and who likewise face the threat of not being recognized as “genuine refugees” by immigration authorities.

Previous studies of religious conversion point out that conversion usually occurs after a cultural conflict.¹⁴ The likelihood of conversion is even higher when one of the interacting cultures is viewed as inferior, and when the religious group to which one converts is seen as representing the dominant culture in society. Conversion’s social function is to alleviate tensions between the individual’s personal worldviews and the social norms of a socially relevant group. Cultural imbalances and power

⁹ For juridical perspectives from the US context see Tuan Samahoan, “The Religion Clauses and Political Asylum: Religious Persecution Claims and the Religious Membership – Conversion Imposter Problem,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 88, no. 7 (2000): 2211–38.

¹⁰ Elina Hartikainen, “Evaluating faith after conversion: Arguments in religious media on the place of religious expertise in asylum appeals in Finland,” *Approaching Religion* 9, no. 1–2 (2019): 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.80355>.

¹¹ Ilona Blumgrund, “Credibility assessment of religious conversion in the asylum process. A theological analysis,” *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, no. 77 (2023): 125–52. <https://doi-org.libproxy.helsinki.fi/10.1080/0039338X.2022.2157479>; Ilona Blumgrund, Hilkka Lydén and Alina Leminen, “Migriin teologia turvapaikkapäätösten valossa,” *Diakonian tutkimus* 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.37448/dt.112493>. The researchers have analysed the same dataset used in this article, which I purchased from Migri and submitted to Ilona Blumgrund in 2019.

¹² Helmi Halonen, “Uskonnon määrittely käsitteellisenä rajavalvontana Suomen turvapaikkamenettelyssä” (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2024), urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-84-0447-7.

¹³ Uwe Berlit, Harald Doerig and Hugo Storey, “Credibility Assessment in Claims based on Persecution for Reasons of Religious Conversion and Homosexuality: A Practitioners Approach,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 27, no. 4 (2015): 649–66; Derek McGhee, “Assessing Homosexuality: Truth, Evidence and the Legal Practices for Determining Refugee Status – The Case of Ioan Vraciu,” *Body & Society* 6, no. 1 (2000): 29–50.

¹⁴ Rambo, *Understanding*.

relations also need to be acknowledged when studying religious conversion in the context of immigration policies and practices.

This article explores the acknowledged manifestations of conversion and disaffiliation within the system of international protection in Finland. We can assume that the rights of asylum seekers who change their religion are implemented rather arbitrarily, and that the principle of non-refoulement is occasionally violated – that is, refugees or asylum seekers are forced to return to a country in which they are liable to be subject to persecution. Persecution can also take place in Finland, as previous studies suggest.¹⁵ According to statistics published by the Police of Finland concerning religion-related hate crime, Muslims are overrepresented in religiously motivated violence, both as assaulters and victims. Among these cases the victim's conversion to Christianity or affiliation to a Christian congregation is a major motive for violence. Atheism coupled with conversion is also mentioned as a motive of assaulters in two instances.¹⁶ In some research reports,¹⁷ as well as partly in public debate, the acknowledgement of post-conversion harassment and persecution of ex-Muslims has been portrayed as islamophobia.¹⁸ It is therefore disputable whether violence against ex-Muslims is recognized in Finnish society, and whether it is properly acknowledged within the asylum procedure.

Data and methods

The study's data consist of 50 asylum decisions given by the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri), in which religious conversion or disaffiliation has been the basis of an asylum claim.¹⁹ The decisions were made in 2017 and 2018. The selected time frame is notable in two respects.²⁰ First, the

¹⁵ Ministry of Justice, "Turvallisuuden kokemukset vastaanottokeskuksissa," *Selvityksiä ja ohjeita 1* (2017), <https://tinyurl.com/muz5ys6f>.

¹⁶ Esko Kähkönen, *Islamtaustaista ääriajattelua kohtaamassa: Dialogi ja uskonnollinen motivaatio* (Helsinki: Diakonia-ammattikorkeakoulu, 2019), 87–8, 91, <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-493-343-8>.

¹⁷ Linda Hyökki and Karin Creutz, "Islamophobia in Finland," in *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, eds. Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez (Istanbul: SETA, 2017), 165–181.

¹⁸ Kähkönen, *Islamtaustaista*.

¹⁹ Personally, I did not encounter any obstacles when obtaining the data, and the asylum applications seemed to be easily fetchable according to various asylum claims (such as religious conversion). Other researchers with similar data requests have had challenges in obtaining access to data: cf. Iris Nikanne, "Refuge in Jesus Christ: Experiences of Asylum Migrants in Finland Who Have Converted from Islam to Christianity" (MA thesis, University of Helsinki, 2018), helda.helsinki.fi/items/e78a687c-f807-40e1-98b7-c47f20f35355, accessed June 22, 2026.

²⁰ Cf. time frame in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden: Anna Hogenhaug, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Asta Jarlner, *Nordic Asylum Practice in relation to Religious*

so-called refugee crisis in 2015 affected Migri, with a sharp increase in applications for international protection. However, as conversion-based asylum claims often address post-departure conversion, conversions only became a more significant basis for asylum in 2017. Second, the increase in conversion-based asylum claims placed Migri in a new situation: immigration officials were asked to assess converts' conviction in circumstances with heavy political pressure and an extensive workload. This societal and political context underlines the pertinence of the data's selected time frame. The analysis therefore presents a historically important case which also allows potential future comparisons. I received asylum decisions from Migri in anonymized form, so neither direct nor indirect identifiers of the research subjects can be traced from the data. The conduct of data collection was approved by the legal department of the Finnish Immigration Service in February 2019.

While the negative asylum decisions consist of many pages and lengthy descriptions of asylum hearing minutes, the positive decisions are concise and only one or two pages long. The latter therefore do not include excerpts from the asylum hearing or authenticity assessment. Because of this qualitative difference in negative and positive decisions my analysis in this article focuses on negative decisions.

Of 50 decisions 21 were negative, and 29 positive.²¹ The percentage of positive decisions (58%) of the 50 decisions corresponds to the ratio of positive and negative decisions on international protection in 2018 (i.e. 58%).²² However, this does not yet prove that the decisions have been randomly assembled. A qualitative bias is possible, which needs to be highlighted in the analysis of results. Six of the original negative decisions were overturned in the administrative court after the applicant had appealed. An additional 12 decisions were returned from the administrative court for handling by Migri, mostly because of new evidence for the asylum claim. Notably, Migri submitted several decisions to me that had been circulated through the legal system (indicating initial errors in an asylum decision); this may be viewed as a sign of Migri's transparency, public accountability, and unbiased selection of data.

The data do not enable actual statistical analysis; however, the fact that several positive asylum decisions were circulated through the court

Conversion: Insights from Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Geneva: UNHCR, 2023).

²¹ The terms "positive" and "negative" in this article respectively refer to "accepted" and "rejected" asylum decisions. They are not therefore normative identifiers.

²² The ratio of positive and negative decisions does not refer to the general reception rate, which also includes dismissed and expired applications.

implies that Migri fails to recognize conversion-based asylum claims per se, or is at least highly suspicious of them. Yet more than one in five decisions addressed a conversion that had taken place after an initial (negative) asylum decision, indicating that conversion may indeed often be linked to the process of migration. However, this does not mean that a conversion is necessarily “fabricated” but underlines that it is not always possible for social and practical reasons in countries of origin.

Migri has utilized different methods to evaluate the authenticity of asylum seekers’ religious conviction, including questionnaires about Christian doctrine, sets of open questions, and testimonies. The new situation has also challenged religious communities, whose authorities have occasionally come into conflict with the immigration authorities. The Finnish Ecumenical Council (FEC) has provided its member churches with written recommendations and guidelines²³ on religious conversion and what should be considered before, during, and after the process. In several European countries the state authorities have provided written guidelines on the assessment of conversion in relation to asylum applications.²⁴

Unlike some other European states’ immigration authorities, Migri has not published official guidelines for assessing religious conversion.²⁵ However, when I contacted the immigration service, I received general information about the assessment. According to Migri their guidelines are constantly updated, and they are not therefore publicly available.²⁶

²³ Similar guidelines have been published in other European countries: see e.g. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland und Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen, *Zum Umgang mit Taufbegehren von Asylsuchenden* (Hannover: EKD und VEF, 2013); Sveriges Kristna Råd, “Konvertit – att förbereda sig för intervju hos Migrationsverket eller Migrationsdomstolen,” <https://www.skr.org>, accessed July 6, 2026.

²⁴ Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, “Werkinstructie SUA: WI 2018/10 Bekeerlingen,” <https://ind.nl/nl>, accessed July 6, 2026; Swedish authorities’ guidelines: Migrationsverket, “Rättsligt ställningstagande, religion som asylsäl inklusive konvertering,” www.migrationsverket.se, accessed July 6, 2026.

²⁵ Legal scholar Lidia Rieder stresses that the public availability of such guidelines would serve accountability and transparency; Lidia Rieder, “Assessing Credibility in Conversion-Based Asylum Claims: Towards a Better Approach.” *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 15, no. 1/2 (2022): 152. Theologian Tomi Karttunen has evaluated Migri’s assessment principles against the UNHCR’s guidelines and suggested several possible improvements to the process; Tomi Karttunen, “Kristinuskoon kääntymisen arviointiperiaatteet Suomen maahanmuuttoviraston (Migri) linjauksissa vuosina 2015–19,” *Diakonian Tutkimus* 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.37448/dt.94817..>

²⁶ Email exchange between the author and the Finnish Immigration Service. It can be argued that the lack of openness may be because Migri does not wish asylum applicants to prepare for their interview. Migri has, however, published some general information about their conduct of credibility assessment: Maahanmuuttovirasto, “Migri vastaa:

However, Migri’s set of questions, while officially undisclosed, are nevertheless traceable from the data. In this article I therefore briefly present Migri’s principles for the assessment of conversion. I then investigate how the guidelines are implemented in actual asylum decisions. The article’s structure follows the categories of Migri’s questionnaires.

Asylum hearing and credibility assessment

Although Migri does not publish their guidelines and asylum interview questions, the latter can be partly reconstructed from the data. Table 1 below presents the questions asked in the asylum hearings that could be retrieved from the asylum decision. I have clustered the reconstructed questions in four categories: 1) baptism, baptismal teaching, and the process of conversion; 2) the Bible and Christian dogma; 3) religious practices and Christian customs; and 4) personal meanings given to Christianity.²⁷ As the positive decisions do not include the details of the asylum hearing, the frequency of each question should be compared with the total number of negative decisions (N=21). However, the frequencies do not enable a quantitative analysis. Instead, they provide some direction concerning the aspects of religious experience and practice that are stressed in asylum hearings. Questions are presented in frequencies instead of case numbers to prevent the possibility of an individual case being reconstructed if case numbers in the table are combined with the other case information in this article.

Baptism, baptismal teaching, and the process of conversion
What does baptism mean to you personally? (6)
What convinced you to convert to Christianity? (5)
Why did you start learning about Christianity? (1)
What was appealing to you in Christianity? (1)
Describe your baptism and the events leading to it (4)
What is required for baptism? (1)

Miten kristinuskoon kääntyminen vaikuttaa turvapaikkapäätökseen?,” <https://migri.fi>, accessed July 6, 2026.

²⁷ Cf. Anne K. Schlüter, “Credibility assessment in asylum claims based on religious conversion in Germany: A qualitative sociological analysis,” in *Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Lena Rose, & Ebru Öztürk (London: Bloomsbury, 2024): 39–60.

Describe the confirmation class you attended, and the teaching you received there (1)
Why have you renounced Islam? (2)
When did you understand that you wished to convert to Christianity? (1)
Bible and Christian dogma
What are the 10 commandments and the Christian creed? (6)
Speak about the Holy Trinity (1)
Speak about the life of Jesus (1)
What are the central teachings and doctrines of Christianity?
Recite a prayer (1)
What different Christian denominations are there, and how do they differ from one another? (6)
How does Christianity differ from Islam (or another applicant's former religion)? (11)
What aspects of Christianity or passages in the Bible are important to you? (6)
What are the most central biblical stories? (2)
Is everything in the Bible comprehensible? (1)
Which parts of the Bible are especially interesting or challenging to you? (1)
Which parts of the Bible speak to you? (3)
Have you questioned any part of the Bible? (1)
Religious practices and Christian customs
What are important values for you in your new religion? (6)
What does praying mean to you? (1)
How do you practise religion? (7)
Describe some Christian holidays and their meanings (3)
Are there rules and norms in Christianity that you must follow? (1)
How has becoming a Christian changed you and your life? (5)
Personal meanings given to Christianity
What role has religion played in your life since your conversion? (7)
What things in Christianity do you consider important? (1)

What things in divine services have impressed you? (1)
How has conversion changed you as a person? (6)
How does your life as a Christian differ from your past life? (1)
How is Christianity visible in your daily life? (6)

Table 1. Asylum interview questions and their frequencies

In conclusion, Migri assesses applicants' motives, background, knowledge, practices, and experiences through different types of questions, which are often open-ended and primarily seek to grasp applicant's personal experiences. In the following four chapters I analyse how the applicants' replies are assessed in the international protection decision-making process.

Baptism, baptismal teaching, and the process of conversion

Migri's questions on baptism and the process of conversion cover a wide range of topics, from the baptismal teaching of the receiving community to the timespan of the conversion. Negative decisions concerning international protection in particular include long excerpts that recur from one decision to the next, indicating the use of text templates in decision making. One recurring fragment highlights the key attributes of the conversion process:

Conversion to another religion can in general be considered a major change in a person's life, and conversion can therefore be interpreted as a carefully premeditated decision, especially for a person in whose country of origin the renouncing of Islam may cause major problems. It is therefore reasonable to assume that finding, internalizing, and absorbing a new conviction usually takes time. Conversion is an act that significantly affects a person's everyday life.²⁸

The statement is not, however, merely a sociological analysis of religious conversion but a normative statement on what a plausible conversion should look like. The template reveals some characteristics that indicate an "authentic" conversion to Migri: it is 1.) contemplated; 2.) gradual; and 3.) manifested in the convert's daily life.

Conversion to Christianity is officially manifested in many denominational traditions through baptism. However, denominations have differing baptismal theologies and teachings.²⁹ In Migri's judgement,

²⁸ Decision 14.

²⁹ See Karttunen, "Kristinuskoon," 41-44.

however, “a formal baptism is not itself sufficient proof of conversion to Christianity”.³⁰ The term “formal baptism” is repeated in several decisions, suggesting the existence of another informal and imperceptible proof of conversion. Most applicants support their claims by attaching a baptismal certificate and testimony of participation from the leaders of their religious communities. Nevertheless, Migri places more emphasis on the claimant’s personal story:³¹ “Baptismal and member certificates, which as such support the applicant’s conversion story, are, however, on their own insufficient in proving a newly adopted religious conviction; the applicant’s whole account needs to be assessed as part of an evaluation of the authenticity of conviction.”³² The term “formal baptism” is a conceptual parallel to “devotional conversion”, which is similarly repeated in Migri’s decisions stating that “(Migri) does not accept as a fact the claimant’s devotional conversion to Christianity”. Both terms suggest qualitative differences in baptisms and conversions.

The process of conversion was a central aspect in the assessment of its authenticity; more precisely, the timing of the conversion (while gradual) should be correct. In some decisions in the data Migri assesses whether the conversion seems self-serving – that is, if it is likely that the applicant has converted for the purposes of international protection. The conversion is often assessed as self-serving if there is a temporal proximity between the applicant’s baptism and the submission of their asylum application.³³ The data suggest that self-serving conversion is also seen as a phenomenon within immigrant communities: “You stopped going to church after those four times when people in the reception centre started to say that you were only going there to receive asylum ... You have said that many people in Iraq are circulating the rumour that you converted to Christianity to receive asylum...”³⁴ The excerpts indicate that conversion to a majority religion occurs in a social reality where other people living at immigration facilities interpret converts’ religious activities within the framework of religion-based asylum claims.³⁵ However, conversion as a

³⁰ Decision 6.

³¹ For similar findings from Norway see Høgenhaug, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Jarlner, *Nordic*, 29.

³² Decision 50.

³³ Decisions 6, 12, 38.

³⁴ Decision 26.

³⁵ There is also some evidence that human trafficking networks educate asylum seekers in how to fabricate conversion-based asylum claims and to prepare for the asylum hearing; see Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen and Gitte Buch-Hansen, “Listening to the voices: refugees as co-authors of practical theology,” *Practical Theology* 11, no. 1 (2018), 29–41.

cause of persecution is equally prevalent in the data: “You have said that you do not wish to be baptized as a Christian because you fear the possible consequences of your conversion if you are deported to your home country.”³⁶ Fundamentalist Islam and the risks it poses for religious freedom should therefore be noted in both the contexts of immigrant communities and countries of deportation.³⁷ Experiences of and risks for male and female converts may also vary.³⁸

The concept of self-serving conversion can also be viewed in the light of rational choice theory, according to which conversion takes place when it entails a greater benefit than the retention of one’s previous conviction.³⁹ As is the case with seeking converts, possible benefits include asylum in a target country. However, the risks of conversion are at least as crucial as the possible benefits: conversion to a persecuted religious group in the country of origin, coupled with a failed asylum decision, can result in the persecution or even death of the applicant. Somewhat paradoxically, the mentioned risk can sometimes be viewed as a benefit in the context of Christianity: martyrdom and willingness to die for one’s religious conviction can be glorified and even promoted in Christian historical narratives and self-understandings.

The Bible and Christian dogma

Questions on doctrinal issues and the Bible can be clustered into two subsections: on one hand they cover matters related to the convert’s new religion (usually Christianity) and measure how much the applicant knows about the Christian holy scriptures and dogma; on the other hand applicants were asked to provide a rational explanation for their wish to renounce their former religion (usually Islam). One of the recurring questions in the decisions concerns how the applicant sees the differences between Islam (or another religious group they have renounced) and Christianity. Applicants are expected to draw clear lines between the religion they are leaving and the one to which they are converting.

In one of the cases the applicant described how he used to pray, give alms, fast, and make pilgrimages, and how they now went to church

³⁶ Decision 45.

³⁷ For religiously motivated hate crimes in Finland see Kähkönen, *Islamtaustaista*.

³⁸ Ravehe Mozafarian and Fuat Güllüpinar, “The Religious Conversion of Iranian Seeking Women in the Process of Searching for Identity: The Case of Eskişehir,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 38, no. 1 (2025): 1–24, doi.org/10.1558/jasr.30211.

³⁹ Detlef Pollack, “Religious Conversion,” in *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, eds. Mark Jürgensmeyer and Helmut Anheier (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2012).

on Sundays, prayed, and followed Christ. Migri responded, “How you practise your Christian faith is similar to how you used to practise your faith as a Muslim”, ruling that their conversion had been fabricated.⁴⁰ However, applicants were required to renounce their previous religion or worldview, whether Islam or another. Migri thus presents a normative statement on which religious practices are appropriate, and which are not.⁴¹ An Afghan asylum seeker, who during their first asylum application had defined their worldview as rational and scientific and had later converted to Christianity, was questioned in the second interview about how they had been able to combine their Christian faith with scientific views. The applicant could not provide a satisfactory explanation, and their conversion was assessed as fabricated.⁴² This case shows the juxtaposition of a scientific worldview with a Christian conviction, with the assumption that the two cannot be combined.

The decisions in the data therefore imply a normative sentiment that authentic conversion is preceded by a sufficient account of the renouncing of a former religious identity, as the following excerpt suggests: “Your story about your renouncing of Islam is narrow, and you have only said that Islam endorses killing and has no mercy. You have been unable to describe your renouncing of Islam subjectively, and your answers do not reflect experiences of personal conviction or the thought process behind your renouncement.”⁴³ However, the interplay of religious conversion and disaffiliation is in reality much more complex, and there is no single orthodox pattern for an authentic “conversion career”.⁴⁴

Another applicant was a member of the Yarsan religion⁴⁵ and had converted to Christianity in Finland.⁴⁶ In the asylum interview the applicant was asked how Yarsanism and Christianity differed, and they answered that to them it was the same religion, with very few differences. Yarsanism is a syncretic religion with elements of several religious traditions, which may explain why the applicant did not experience the contradiction the interviewer wished to hear. Because the applicant had not renounced their

⁴⁰ Decision 12.

⁴¹ Hedayat Selim, Julia Korkman, Peter Nynäs, Elina Pirjatanniemi and Jan Antfolk, “A Review of Psycho-Legal Issues in Credibility Assessments of Asylum Claims Based on Religion,” *Psychiatry, Psychology, and Law* 30, no. 6 (2023): 760–88, doi:10.1080/13218719.2022.2116611.

⁴² Decision 18.

⁴³ Decision 38.

⁴⁴ Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴⁵ Yarsanis are a religious and ethnic minority in Iran.

⁴⁶ Decision 28.

Yarsan faith, their Christian conviction was assessed not to be genuine. The Immigration Service therefore rejected the idea of multiple religious identities, as well as the possibility that the process of conversion might include a phase in which two religious traditions overlapped in a person's life. Applicants were therefore expected to define their identities in single conventional categories.

Migri's question about whether the applicant has questioned any parts of the Bible and whether they understand everything in it prompts a question about the kind of answers they are seeking. "In addition, your view of Christianity is almost completely uncritical, even though you consider Islam to be illogical, and you have previously decided not to believe in any religion."⁴⁷ The decision explains the applicant's uncritical stance by noting that "you have accepted the explanations you have received about incest appearing in the Bible". Moreover, it should be noted that the decision is critical of the applicant's renouncing of their former atheistic worldview, and thus rejects the idea of multiple conversions, or conversion as a fluid or "messy" phenomenon.

Religious practices and Christian customs

Applicants were often asked which values they found typical of Christianity. Even if the applicant could describe such values, Migri sometimes stated that "the values such as love and forgiveness you credit to Christianity are not exclusive to Christianity; they are universal values".⁴⁸ In another instance, when an applicant defined honesty and pure-heartedness as central values in Christianity, Migri responded: "These are matters that are not exclusively typical of Christianity but are by nature abstract expressions that are related to daily life."⁴⁹ Although applicants were required to give a personal and individual testimony about their experiences and thoughts in relation to Christianity, Migri seemed to expect certain correct answers that remained unknown. Applicants therefore faced an impossible situation in which they were required to define values that were central and exclusive to Christianity, and which were not abstract and yet unrelated to daily life.

According to Migri both the process of conversion and the applicant's religious practices needed to be manifested in a certain relationship with the applicant's former religious affiliation, as the following Migri

⁴⁷ Decision 18.

⁴⁸ Decision 9.

⁴⁹ Decision 22.

statement demonstrates: “When you were a Muslim, you practised the rites of your religion, such as praying, giving alms, fasting, and pilgrimages, and you were like other Muslims who fulfil their responsibilities without a genuine connection to the right God. How you practise your Christianity resembles how you previously practised Islam.”⁵⁰ It remains unclear whether Migri assessed the applicant’s faith to be pharisaical because of visible manifestations of faith, or if Migri only – correctly – recognized that both Islamic and Christian traditions observe similar rituals. The decision in any case seems to underline that the applicant’s new conviction differed insufficiently from their previous one. It also suggests that visible religious manifestations⁵¹ somehow indicate a lack of a “genuine connection to the right God”.

Exclusivity was also a central criterion in the assessment of applicants’ sexual orientation.⁵² In one of the cases⁵³ the applicant talks about his former relationship with another man, and how he had faced death threats after his relatives found out about the affair. Migri, however, denies the applicant’s claim: “You have yourself said that you are not a homosexual, and that you wish to start a family with a woman. Because you are not a member of a sexual minority, you are therefore not in danger in your home country either.” As with its assessment of religious identity, Migri ignores the possibility of multiple or overlapping identities (i.e. a person identifying with several religious traditions/groups or as a bisexual), and possible changes in one’s religious or sexual identity. Again, the assessment focuses on whether the identity is authentic, not on any risks the person might encounter if they were viewed as a convert or someone practising deviant sexual behaviour in their country of origin.

⁵⁰ Decision 12.

⁵¹ Rituals and other religious manifestations are also related to material aspects of religion and conversion. Olav Børreson Fossdal suggests that immigration authorities should ask applicants about their relationship with religious objects, arguing that this material aspect would broaden the understanding of religious conviction. See Olav Børreson Fossdal, “Material Conversions: Exploring the Materiality of Asylum Seekers’ Conversion Narratives and Processes in Norway,” in *Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Lena Rose and Ebru Öztürk (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 81–102.

⁵² Concerning Finnish asylum interviews focusing on sexual orientation in asylum cases, see Hedayat Selim, Mia Helenelund, Johanna Vanto, Jenny Skrifvars, Anne Alvesalo-Kuusi, Elina Pirjatanniemi, Julia Korkman and Jan Antfolk, “‘How Would You Define Your Sexuality?’ Analyzing the Questions Asked in Official Asylum Interviews with Sexual Minorities,” *Psychology, Crime & Law* (September 2025): 1–18, doi:10.1080/1068316X.2025.2557965.

⁵³ Decision 28.

A recurring phenomenon in the data was healing experiences and miracles applicants had experienced.⁵⁴ This points to the activity of Pentecostal congregations among asylum seekers, and to the fact that manifestations of conversion are primarily narrated within the respective religious community. Unlike applicants' inner experiences, Migri did not assess these experiences or their authenticity in these cases. Ruling out the experiences of miracles may originate from Finnish culture, where such religious narratives, if not completely absent, are at least quite uncommon.

Personal meanings given to Christianity

Migri frequently required vocal manifestations of personal faith from seeking converts. This was evident in several negative decisions in which Migri claimed that the applicant had not expressed a personal, individual conviction, and that their spiritual seeking was rooted in the need for community. This prompts the question of whether the communal aspects of religious life in general are assessed as false. Religious conversion entails a socialization in which a person adopts a new role as a believer and creates a narrative of their conversion. However, the socialization and internalization of a new role as a believer does not imply that the narrative of religious experience is produced only collectively. Instead, believers utilize collective narratives to create their own conversion story.⁵⁵ For example, the role of religious communities and volunteers⁵⁶ assisting asylum seekers can be crucial for how converts understand and discuss their conversion.

Requesting manifestations of "personal faith" and the rejection of communal manifestations can also be analysed as secularized predispositions concerning religion. One of the definitions of secularization is the anti-institutionalization of religion. This sees institutional religion as imitated and retained by habit, in contrast with pure and mystical self-generated manifestations. The narrative of a rejected asylum seeker's quest for a religious community purely as a quest for an activity like any other reveals the underlying assumption that religious groups are ontologically empty social clubs. Asylum seekers' definitions of the church as a "family"⁵⁷ are

⁵⁴ Decisions 9, 11, 15.

⁵⁵ Tuija Hovi, "Uskon performatiivit kokemuskerronnassa," *Elore* 12 (2006).

⁵⁶ See Valtteri Vähä-Savo and Venla Koivuluhta, "Building belief: Navigating moral tensions through category work while assisting converted asylum seekers in Finland," in *Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Lena Rose and Ebru Öztürk (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024), 103–23.

⁵⁷ Decision 14.

also interpreted as a social rather than theological category, despite the fact that the eucharistic community and the idea of the congregation as a family, with Christ as its head and believers as his children, are prevalent in Christian thought.

While some applicants were rejected due to the social functions of their newly adopted religious conviction, others were rejected due to the lack of such functions. In one decision Migri argued concerning an ex-Muslim's case: "You have said you are an atheist nowadays. ... However, you have not discussed your worldview with other people, nor have you attended atheist events."⁵⁸ Migri eventually assessed the applicant's atheist worldview as authentic yet questioned the basis of its individual and personal nature. Decisions entailing an assessment of the authenticity of an atheist worldview denote an important imperative for the assessment of authenticity: it is a questionable practice to assess all worldviews and religious devotion through the same framework and set of questions.⁵⁹ Similarly, narrow categories for any worldview or religion bypass the diversities in conceptualizing and practising atheism, for example.⁶⁰

A required social aspect in conversion testimonies was irreproachable conduct as a member of Finnish society. Some applicants who had converted to Christianity and hence had religion-based refugee claims were suspected of a crime. In these cases Migri claimed that their conversion did not seem feasible because their claimed Christian conviction conflicted with any crimes they had committed:

You have said that important values in Christianity for you are love, peace, forgiveness, and helping others. However, you are suspected of committing serious crimes during your short stay in Finland. Your suspected behaviour therefore conflicts with the values that you have said have changed your behaviour for the better and according to which you claim to live nowadays.⁶¹

It should be highlighted that these applicants had not been convicted of any crime, yet the immigration authorities understood charges as proof of guilt. Similarly, other decisions elaborated the view of Christianity as a moral stance and lifestyle: "There is no proof that you have adopted Christian conviction as a matter of conscience and way of life."⁶² Cultural

⁵⁸ Decision 4.

⁵⁹ Selim et al., "A Review", 773.

⁶⁰ Michael Ruse, *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶¹ Decision 6, also decision 44.

⁶² Decision 11.

and religious factors and immigration officials' assumptions also played a role in which accounts and descriptions of faith and belief were assessed as convincing.⁶³

Applicants attempted to verify their conversion and activity in their religious community with reports from receiving Christian communities. In one decision Migri stated: "The congregation reports that you used to be anxious and frightened, but now you are emancipated and joyful. According to the report your new faith has brought happiness and harmony to your family life." Migri noted that these changes were "not necessarily a result of your faith but a result of your active social life".⁶⁴ Applicants were therefore asked again to demonstrate their conversion by providing information about what personal changes they had experienced because of their conversion, yet Migri contested the cause of these changes. Further research is required to clarify whether the reports of different churches or other religious communities are treated consistently, or whether there is discrimination against some communities or their manifestation of their faith or belief.

Discussion

The assessment of one's religious conviction and identity, and their authenticity as part of an assessment of refugee claims in the asylum process, is an investigation that is both political and religious in nature. As asylum seekers' legal protection has weakened in Finland since 2015,⁶⁵ the process may be lacking in terms of the individual's rights. This article has to some extent revealed prejudice against asylum seekers on the part of the immigration authorities: in many cases Migri does not assess religious conversion as authentic unless the application is circulated through the legal system. Conversion to Christianity is the most common cause of appeals after negative asylum decisions. However, this does not straightforwardly suggest the cause is fabricated.⁶⁶

The asylum decisions this study analyses reveal multiple paradoxes and inconsistencies in Migri's decision making. Asylum applicants are

⁶³ Lena Rose and Zoey Given-Wilson, "What Is Truth? Negotiating Christian Convert Asylum Seekers' Credibility," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 697, no. 1 (2021): 221–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211059454>; Høgenhaug, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Jarlner, *Nordic*, 31.

⁶⁴ Decision 15.

⁶⁵ Talvikki Ahonen and Annastiina Kallius, "Paperittomuuden tuotanto ja hallinta Suomessa 2015–17," in *Turvapaikanhaku ja pakolaisuus Suomessa*, ed. Eveliina Lyytinen (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2019), 89–112.

⁶⁶ Rieder, "Assessing," 142.

often asked to define certain dogmas and values of Christian faith. Yet they are also requested to demonstrate personal and individual faith in unique wording. Answers that are too dogmatic and “correct” were sometimes assessed to be superficial, while accounts that were too personal were assessed to be “incorrect” in terms of dogma. While Migri required visible manifestations as proof of authentic faith, in several decisions it acknowledged an applicant’s conviction as authentic but stated the applicant could practise their faith in secret or stop practising it if returned to their country of origin. In appeals to the administrative court Migri’s assessment was rejected as a potential violation of the applicant’s freedom of religion.⁶⁷

As asylum decisions are produced to express the legal basis and justification for the result of asylum procedures, they are also produced within a certain juridical frame. Asylum decisions therefore do not necessarily reflect an actual experiential phenomenon, but legally valid conceptions. This leads to a situation in which converts’ experiences and emotions become subordinate to juridical manifestations of religion and conviction. Legal scholar Tuan Samahon goes so far as to write that “... fraudulent converts might appear more credible than their legitimate counterparts. A well-practiced imposter will impersonate the perfectly orthodox, straight-arrow religionist whereas actual converts may still be learning the formalities of their newly chosen faith.”⁶⁸ In a “successful” asylum hearing the convert is therefore capable of following certain narrative forms and styles.⁶⁹ Applicants with better verbal and cognitive capabilities and the opportunity to learn how to narrate their conversion story correctly may succeed in the asylum process better than other applicants, regardless of their worldview, and more importantly, of whether that worldview will place them at risk.

Religious conversion can create risks to a convert’s safety if they are persecuted for religious reasons, and both religious communities and state authorities must acknowledge and address these risks. In sociological understanding the question of conversion paired with the asylum procedure reveals new and alarming challenges. How can and do European churches take responsibility for their new members who may be persecuted because

⁶⁷ Decision 8.

⁶⁸ Tuan Samahon, “The Religion Clauses and Political Asylum: Religious Persecution Claims and the Religious Membership – Conversion Imposter Problem,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 88, no. 7 (2000): 2211–38.

⁶⁹ Anthea Vogl, “The Genres and Politics of Refugee Testimony,” *Law & Literature* 30, no. 1. (2018): 81–104.

of their new religious conviction and affiliation? How can state authorities, who are obliged by law to respect and advance asylum seekers' human rights, achieve this objective consistently? These political and urgent needs highlight the importance of future interdisciplinary research of the phenomenon, as well as ongoing discussions among ecumenical partners, academics, immigration authorities, and immigrant communities.