

NATIONAL SCHOOL OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

DOCTORAL SCHOOL SPECIALIZATION: SOCIOLOGY

**EXPLORING RELIGIOSITY IN MIGRATION**

The Story of Migration and Conversion of Afghan and Iranian Refugees in Greece

Ph.D. Thesis Summary

Ph.D. SUPERVISOR:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Anghel Remus Gabriel

Ph.D. STUDENT:

Găvruş (Căruntu) Ioana Georgiana

BUCHAREST

2023

## Research Objectives and Theoretical Premises

This thesis examines the lived experiences of refugees originating from Iran and Afghanistan who underwent a religious conversion while residing in a transient place, namely Athens, Greece, during the years 2016 and 2018. According to IOM (2016)<sup>1</sup>, between 2015 and 2016 there were over 550.000 newcomers that crossed from one transit country, specifically Turkey into another transit country, Greece. They were undergoing this trip at a great personal cost, undertaking a very risky sea crossing trip organized by smugglers. The larger groups of newcomers were from conflict zones like Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Besides the Turkey-Greece route, the refugees were coming through the central Mediterranean route as well as through the Western Balkans. Many, people, especially in Germany have welcomed these refugees while many voted for anti-immigrant parties in Europe. Far from being a crisis (van der Veer, 2019)<sup>2</sup> was a mere moment in the long history of forced movement of people in Europe and the rest of the world. Being forcibly replaced is not entirely different than other forms of migration, refugees are not only looking for safety but also a future for themselves and their children in an unequal world.

Legally, the distinction between migrants and refugees is very important for the asylum process, but the boundaries between these categories are arbitrary and dynamic, while it is clear that refugee politics relates to the formation of nation-states, the connection between refugees and religion is often overlooked (van der Veer, 2019). This thesis looks at the relationship between conversion and identity formation and community building among refugees coming from two countries, Afghanistan and Iran. Religion is fundamentally concerned with matters like death, suffering, and exile, it is simply a crucial element of the refugees' situations. It both forces people to leave and it welcomes people who arrive (van der Veer, 2019).

According to Kraft (2017)<sup>3</sup>, the notion of religious conversion, involving a rupture from one's previous beliefs and a shift in identity and sense of belonging, becomes precarious when examined within the context of displacement. The religious practices of individuals who are

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<sup>1</sup> IOM. (2016). Migration in Greece: 2015–2016. Retrieved from [https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/reports/IOM\\_Greece\\_2015-2016.pdf](https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/reports/IOM_Greece_2015-2016.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Meyer, B., & van der Veer, P. (Eds.). (2019). *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*. University of California Press.

<sup>3</sup> Kraft, K. (2017). Religious exploration and conversion in forced displacement: a case study of Syrian Muslim refugees in Lebanon receiving assistance from Evangelical Christians. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30(2), 221-235. doi: 10.1080/13537903.2017.1298904

forcibly uprooted face challenges, as their sense of identity often becomes unstable due to social and political pressures that compel them to sever ties with various aspects of their past lives. Amidst a period of displacement, refugees and forced migrants may find themselves gravitating towards religious gatherings associated with a tradition different from their own families, or they may even abstain from engaging in religious activities altogether. This thesis examines the lived experiences of refugees originating from Iran and Afghanistan who underwent a religious conversion while residing in a transient place, namely Athens, Greece, during the years 2016 and 2018. While residing in Greece, many Afghan and Iranian refugees chose to attend church services and explore Evangelical Christianity, which had a significant effect on their spiritual inclinations. However, it's important to acknowledge that only a small number of individuals considered a deeper transformation of their overall identity.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the process of conversion and the emergence of a migrant-led church in the context of a transient European city by looking at individual conversion narratives as well as the other factors that shaped its formation. Therefore, I argue that understanding the conditions through which Afghans and Iranian refugees embrace Christian beliefs and practices in Greece calls us to pay closer attention to their lives while in transit. In-depth analysis of migrants' experiences while in transient countries was often underemphasized in migration studies. The particularity of the researched population's experiences in Greece, like the rupture from the familial, entering a new form of transnational relations shaped by new loyalties, aspirations, and belongings, is contributing to the classic understanding of both transnational migrations and religious conversion (Kraft, 2017). The conversion is manifested throughout their experiences as marginalized groups and their interactions with the support structure and actors present in the transient context (Ibid, 2017). While many of them are experiencing the religious shift as a well-defined moment in their life, others are describing it as an ongoing process rooted in daily life; both paths bear evident outcomes of the conversion process. Their daily life, post-conversion, is perceived as a necessary component for maturing, learning, and growing in their new faith. The adoption of the new faith it is often characterized by a certain level of examination and rejection of assumptions linked with the Islamic faith. The new converts see in the transient space – refugee centers, church - a chance to create new networks, belongings, and possibilities that transcend the pre-existing familial and ethnic memberships. Thus, it appears that the conversion moment sets them on a new path towards

transforming their loyalties, and belonging and reconfigures and replaces their pre-migration ties to their families and communities of origin. The conversion experience underlines how transnational relations are marked and reconfigured by religion, social capital, aspirations, and ethnicity (Nagel, 1994)<sup>4</sup>.

According to Transparency International, in 2015 alone, one out of every thirty people around the world were living away from home, migration being a global phenomenon affecting more than 232 million people. The same report states that in 2015 approximately sixty million people were forced to leave their homeland to find a better life either in their home country (IDPs) or somewhere else around the world as refugees (Wheatland, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Regarding the situation on Greece's shores, in the year 2015 alone, over half a million migrants entered Greece, while the country was facing an unprecedented economic crisis. It is important to remember that behind these numbers there are real people, who have stories about dear ones left behind, about expensive, and risky journeys, and dreams and aspirations regarding the future in the host country. Most individuals do not leave their home country thinking that they will spend significant amounts of time while being stranded in transit. The multitude of challenges encountered throughout the migratory journey shape and change individuals. Losing family members, properties, statuses, a sense of belonging, stability, and a sense of well-being are just a few of the losses that mark the migrants who search for new meanings and connections in new contexts. These are the places where some start a process of self-inquiry and begin to doubt many of their old assumptions, including religious ones but also related to the Western culture and way of life.

The thesis draws upon the qualitative data derived from seventy-four semi-structured interviews conducted with a wide range of participants, including refugees, and NGOs. actors, volunteers, church leaders, and individuals associated with refugee centers, churches, and faith-based organizations. Utilizing thematic analysis, it explores the genesis of a Persian-Afghan faith community located in Athens by examining individual conversion accounts and other significant variables that contributed to its formation.

In my research pursuit, I was guided by the following questions:

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<sup>4</sup> Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems*, 41(1), 152-176. Oxford University Press

<sup>5</sup> Wheatland, B. (2015, December 22). Literature review: corruption as a driver of migration. Transparency International. Retrieved from [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)

1. What are the factors that shape the process of conversion for a Muslim refugee in Greece?
2. What are the manners in which these new converts are negotiating their new identities?
3. How do the new converts manage to build a new community like the Agape Church?

The conversion takes place while the individuals are in this space of “stuckness”, adding to the prolonged waiting period a disruptive dimension. The overlapping processes of conversion and migration underline how transient spaces can become spaces of junction between ethnicity, community belonging, and religious transformation at the edge of Europe. Transit hubs appear to be crucial to religious conversion amongst Farsi/Dari-speaking migrants (see Akcapar, 2006; 2007; 2019<sup>6</sup>; Kraft, 2017). The poor state of human rights in the countries of origin provides part of the explanation why these individuals can only explore new religious ideas when they are safe from any negative repercussions, in a country where the right to choose one's religion is respected. Greece is one of their first longer stops before their destination, it is also the place where they can begin to critique some of their religious assumptions.

In the literature about religious conversion, some arguments suggest that people are more inclined to switch to a different faith, or explore new practices and beliefs of different religions, in the situation when they have already renounced their old religious identity, or when they are disappointed with their previous situation (Innaccone, 1995; Bourque, 2006)<sup>7</sup>. For the population studied in this thesis, the situation in the two countries of origin - the political instability and religious extremism - had created significant disillusionment with the state and its institutions, with their religious leaders, and with their communities, which were central to their lives. Therefore, refugees are much more inclined to consider the possibility of religious conversion or to actively engage in the exploration of different faith groups, compared with populations that were

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<sup>6</sup> Akcapar, S. (2006). Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey. *International Migration Review*, 40(4), 817–853. <https://doi.org/>

Akcapar, S. (2007). What's God got to do with it? The role of religion in the internal dynamics of migrants' networks in Turkey. *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, 27(3), 81-100. <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.41>

Akcapar, S. K. (2019). Comparative cases of Afghans in India and Iranians in Turkey. *The Muslim World*, 109(3), 220-238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12278>

<sup>7</sup> Innaccone, L. R. (1995). Risk, rationality, and religious portfolios. *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE)/Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, 151(2), 286-303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7295.1995.tb01863.x>

Bourque, N. (2006). How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity. In K. van Nieuwkerk (Ed.), *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (pp. 233-249). Austin: University of Texas Press.

not forced to leave their home countries. People that are describing themselves as *converts* could have various reasons behind this bold action. However, the process of religious conversion is gradual and encompasses its own set of dynamics (Rambo & Farhadin, 2014)<sup>8</sup>.

Religious conversion was studied more in the second part of the 20th century. The phenomenon's exploration has been influenced by globalization and its impact, which has further broadened the scope of this field. Amongst the main scholars that researched religious conversion, we can name Stark and Finke (1992; 2000)<sup>9</sup> who proposed the rational choice theory in understanding the phenomenon. This theory's main presumption is that individuals convert due to certain religious demands, and in this process, they seek to obtain a more desirable religious product tailored to meet their demands (Stark & Finke, 1996; Iannaccone, 1995; Stark & Bainbridge, 1987)<sup>10</sup>. In this process, the authors presume that the main determinants are divided into people's desires (on the demand side) and available products (on the supply side). When this mechanism is positioned in a social context, scholars find that institutional affiliation is shaping people's rationality. For example, factors such as gender, profession, education, etc. tend to shape religious demands. Religious entities might try to engage different certain groups and shape their niches based on these characteristics to meet the demand of the group that they try to reach out to (Stark & Finke, 1992). Despite the fact that rational choice assumption is an important addition to the literature explaining religious conversion, it also bears evident limitations. The assumption that people convert because they will obtain greater benefits implies at least two things: the significance of conversion decreases after the process ends (1), and the convert will leave behind his previous religious community by immersing himself in the new one (2).

At the beginning of the 21st century other processes were included in the analysis, such as the rise of the New Religious Movement, the reinvigoration of Islam, and the emergence of new forms of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Charismatic-Pentecostalism. All these changes disbanded the "earlier expectation of the inevitable secularization of the world". The current

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<sup>8</sup> Rambo, L. R., & Farhadian, C. E. (Eds.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of religious conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Stark, R., & Finke, R. (1992). *The churched of America 1776–1990: Winners and losers in our religious economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000). *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. New York, NY: University of California Press.

<sup>10</sup> Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1986). *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

research on religious conversion looks at the phenomena as a non-linear fluid process that can have “starts, stops, diversions and even reversals” (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014, p. 6).

In more recent research about religious conversion, in the early 21st century, several important themes were linked to the phenomena. The first one is the theme of “continuity” (Bruner & Hurlbut, 2020)<sup>11</sup> and it refers to the connection between the old and the new spiritual orientation. The second theme has to do with the convert’s agency in the transformation process; it points to the fact that the convert plays an active role in its transformation (Kirman & Khan, 2008<sup>12</sup>; Palmer, 2011<sup>13</sup>; Hirschman, 2004<sup>14</sup>). Thirdly, recent studies agree that the motivations behind the decision to convert are complex and very diverse ranging from the need to belong to a new community to finding a new meaning in one's life (Rambo, 2000)<sup>15</sup>. The fourth aspect brought up in the literature is linked to the importance of narratives in the study of religious conversion. This suggests that the way the phenomena is studied needs to be centered on the subjects’ description of their own experiences, by looking at the converts’ life trajectory (Ibid, 2000). The fifth theme in the study of religious conversion is related to the importance of rituals and behaviors in the conversion experience (so-called significance of the human body) (Ibid, 2000). Richardson (1978)<sup>16</sup> and Gooren (2010)<sup>17</sup> conceptualized the idea of conversion careers, which is the sixth theme in the study of religious conversion. The two authors noticed that individuals do not become stuck in the faith paradigm but according to the constantly changing personal situation, people might change again, and abandon the new religious community. And lastly, another theme that emerged from the research on the conversion phenomena underlined the importance of engaging the conversion analysis with the wider historical context, thus, looking at the conversion process through the lenses of the historical conversion context (as seen in Rambo and Farhadian, 2014, p. 7).

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<sup>11</sup> Bruner, J., & Hurlbut, D. D. (2020). Moving beyond Discontinuity in Religious Conversion in Africa: A Preface to the Special Issue. *Religions*, 11(8), 395. MDPI AG. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11080395>.

<sup>12</sup> Kirman, N., & Khan, A. A. (2008). Does faith matter? An examination of Islamic Relief's work with refugees and internally displaced persons. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27(2), 41-50.

<sup>13</sup>Palmer, V. (2011). Analyzing 'Cultural Proximity': Islamic Relief Worldwide and Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh. *Development in Practice*, 21(1), 96-108.

<sup>14</sup>Hirschman, C. (2004). The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 1206-1233. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00233.x

<sup>15</sup> Rambo, L. (2000, November 10). Conversion, Part 1. *Religion & Ethics News Weekly*.

<sup>16</sup> Richardson, J. T. (Ed.). (1978). *Conversion Careers: In and Out of the New Religions*. Sage Publications. Beverly Hills, CA.

<sup>17</sup> Gooren, H. (2010). The Conversion Career. In: *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230113039\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230113039_3).

Another important aspect related to the study of religion and forced migration is linked to the role of faith in coping strategies with trauma as seen in research amongst Khmer refugees and Latin American people movements (Martin, 1990; Welaratna, 1993; Smith-Hefner, 1994)<sup>18</sup>.

To better understand this transformative process, one must try to go beyond the motivator mechanism and understand what happened with the converts' identities concerning the context to which they need to adapt to. Thus, the question remains about how the identities of the converts are re-constructed. In the literature about conversion, it is clear that for refugees and migrants in general, religion is central to their identity, contributing to the formation of communities, which are offering emotional and moral support. Additionally, religion acts as a driver for agency and empowerment (Kirman & Khan, 2008; Palmer, 2011, Hirschman, 2004).

### **Research Methods and Design**

This study is using an ethnographic-specific approach by adopting a qualitative research design. Drawing upon my prior experience in Central Asia and employing a multi-stage research design proved significant in gaining access and insight into the complexity of the study's phenomenon. Having lived and traveled in Afghanistan and the region for an extended period, as well as having regular interactions with Iranians and Afghans, I developed a deep familiarity with their customs and cultural intricacies. This background knowledge allowed for an easier integration and meaningful engagement with the participants in Greece, enabling me to navigate their social and cultural contexts more effectively. Data collection started from participant observation in Sunday morning services, Sunday school activities, and women's Bible study. From the first Sunday that I attended the church meeting, I asked the church leader (Afghan refugee convert) to introduce me at the end of the program to people that could become part of the study. Thus, participant observation enabled me to become acquainted with many of the churchgoers, build relationships with the church leaders, and identify potential participants.

The first stage of the field work was conducted during the summer of 2017 at the Agape Church in Athens, and it involved conducting sixteen in-depth interviews with a diverse group of male and female participants from Iran and Afghanistan along with multiple informal

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<sup>18</sup> Welaratna, U. (1993). *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Smith-Hefner, N. J. (1994). Ethnicity and the force of faith: Christian conversion among Khmer refugees. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 67(2), 77-87.



conversations. These interviews provided valuable insights into their perspectives and lived experiences, laying the groundwork for the subsequent stage of data collection, which occurred in the summer of 2018 within the framework of a summer camp organized by the Agape Church and collaborating organizations. This immersive summer camp setting provided a rich environment for capturing the dynamics of the participants' daily lives and their experiences within a recreational and religious context. Throughout this stage, seventeen additional interviews were conducted, building on the data collected in the first stage. Furthermore, the inclusion of individuals who had been previously interviewed at the Agape Church within the summer camp setting allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of their evolving narratives. By actively participating in the participants' daily activities, sharing living arrangements, and meals, and engaging in various physical and recreational activities, I moved from the role of an external observer and became an integrated member of the group. Despite the one-year temporal gap between the two stages, this interval proved advantageous for the reflection and analysis of the data collected during the initial stage.

The choice of using a semi-structured interview protocol allowed for unexpected themes or topics to arise during the conversation as well as for a more natural flow of the dialogue rather than a strict list of questions that had to be covered (Zinn, 2001; Marshall & Rossman 2006)<sup>19</sup>. In the fieldwork and throughout my research I was seeking to understand the transformative experiences that these individuals lived, and to look at the lives they have built and were aspiring to continue to build post-conversion. My approach was to start a conversation with each interviewee, to ask about their lives back in Iran or Afghanistan, to ask about their journey and how their life was once they arrived in Greece. The aim behind the interview protocol was to (1) document the individual's situation in the home country; (2) to describe the journey from the country of origin and their living situation in Greece; (3) to document the emergence of the Agape church through their eyes; (4) to identify the role of faith and conversion in all these processes.

Most of the interviews were arranged by referral, following a snowball sampling approach, in close cooperation with the FBOs that were helping the congregation. All the participants in this

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<sup>19</sup> Zinn, M. B. (2001). Insider Field Research in Minority Communities. In *Contemporary Field Research* (pp. 159-166). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

study were self-identified first-generation Afghan and Iranian refugees who converted to Christianity before or after the migratory journey from Afghanistan or Iran to Greece. Since religious identity is expressed only after being internalized at the individual level, and because the new identity is formed through the interaction between other individuals (Wald and Owen, 1990) I have identified religious converts based on their self-identification and in some cases based on other churchgoer's recommendations. Besides the interviews with the refugees and the personal accounts from Afghanistan, I included the data collected through the semi-structured interviews with several Christian humanitarian workers (17 participants). Through these conversations, I tried to capture their understanding of the refugee's conversion experience. They described the context and the *modus operandi* of the Faith-Based Organizations that are surrounding this community of newly formed Muslim Background Believers (MBB). Besides these semi-structured interviews, there were many conversations with the foreign volunteers (Westerners) that were involved among refugees.

In addition to the data collected in Greece, I include in this project life stories and accounts of other Afghans and Iranians that I have encountered while traveling and living in Central Asia between 2007 and 2014 (24 participants).

Furthermore, alongside participant observation and interviews, I incorporated field notes into my analysis, capturing non-verbal interactions, helping refine interview questions, and providing valuable insights into practices. I avoided taking notes during interviews to maintain focus. Instead, I documented observations during events, such as church services, noting expectations, song choices, leaders' roles, and seating arrangements. The participative observation allowed me to recalibrate my questions and gain insights into future initiatives and church life. Triangulation, which involved collecting data from multiple sources and perspectives, was employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. By combining participant observation, interviews, and field notes, I was able to gather rich and diverse data that provided a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, a satisfactory level of data saturation was reached.

Through the iterative and inductive thematic analysis, key themes were identified which were closely tied to the main interview questions and structured according to the temporal sequence of the participants' life stories. This approach provided the opportunity to uncover the

underlying processes, motivations, and challenges associated with the conversion experience and the subsequent formation of a church community led by migrants.

### **Research Results and Discussion**

The theoretical framework and research methodology presented in the previous part are included in the **first three chapters** of the thesis. The following six chapters are discussing the situation in Iran and Afghanistan, offering an account of the recent history of migration from the two countries as well as a comprehensive depiction of the main social aspects linked with community life. Starting from a deep understanding of the context in the countries of origin we lay the background story for the events that are taking place in Greece between 2016 and 2018. By building upon the historical and political context, the aim is to discuss the factors that influence the decision to leave the religious environment and examines the migratory patterns from a historical perspective.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape the process of conversion for Muslim refugees from Afghanistan and Iran in Greece (first research question), it is important to take a step back and look at the context present in their home countries. Thus, the main argument of the current study asserts that the refugees' physical mobility from their home country is mirrored as mobility out of Islam for many migrants. This mobility not only influences their view on personal choice but also encourages the adoption of more individualistic approaches to their own lives. By examining the contextual elements in their home countries alongside the theoretical fundamentals, a comprehensive understanding of these transformations is achieved. Therefore, **Chapters 4, 5, and 6** examine the recent trends of migration to Greece as part of a broader mobility quest for a host country amongst Afghans. **Chapter 4** provides a broader perspective on the recent exodus by taking into consideration the history of mobility to and from Afghanistan, rather than portraying it as a large-scale refugee crisis. **Chapter 5** brings into discussion the societal representation of the Afghan landscape, articulating the interplay between culture, gender, and honor/shame moral code. It aims to shed more light on the implications that stem from the nexus of religion and otherness. Modern-day Afghan cultural landscape is predominantly tied to Islam in all aspects of life, including politics, social customs, and individual identity. The political instability, economic challenges and with religious extremism on the rise coupled with the adverse reception conditions in the two main neighboring countries - Pakistan

and Iran - were the main push factor for many Afghans to further migrate to Greece and Europe. The increase in violence and bombings carried out in the name of religion has led to disillusionment with Islam among some Afghans. Due to the poor state of human rights, Christian activities in Afghanistan were limited, and many NGOs have left the country due to reduced security. Afghans who convert to Christianity did so outside of Afghanistan and was often motivated by a desire to escape social pressures, government oppression, and the discrimination they face from their religious community and the Iranian government (for those that come from Iran). **Chapter 6** explores the profound connection between the migration phenomenon from Afghanistan and the enduring history of instability. Because of persistent conflicts, persecution, political insecurity, and economic hardships, the country has seen numerous waves of migration, both voluntarily and forced mainly in neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan. These migration surges have had far-reaching consequences for the area and the world, including population shifts, societal tensions, and humanitarian challenges. Already in place, transnational, and migration networks from the region, played a major role in the survival of the population. Migration became a very well-organized way of life for Afghans and remains an embedded characteristic of their social, cultural, and economic makeup (Monsutti, 2008)<sup>20</sup>. The migration process present in the Afghan context is an example of how the border between voluntary and forced migration is overlapping. It also emphasized the fact that the strategies and reasons to migrate of the “economic migrants” and “refugees” are not so different. It also underlines that the migration process is not something permanent but is neither temporary. After three and a half decades of war, no segment of Afghan society was spared the unpleasant experience of displacement. Men, women, children, rich, poor, city dwellers, rural people, Shia, Sunni, Hazara, Uzbek, Tajik, and Pashtuns, had to leave their homes and find refuge somewhere else. In the 1980s and 1990s, many of the Afghans’ exile in Iran and Pakistan was perceived as a recurrent multidirectional movement. A significant factor contributing to the influx of Afghan refugees into Europe was the deteriorating conditions in Iran and Pakistan, which led to a substantial increase in the number of individuals returning to Afghanistan in 2015.

In the broader context of these political and social events, the three chapters (4, 5 and 6) not only analyze the historical and socio-political facts but also present the life stories of refugees

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<sup>20</sup> Monsutti, A. (2008). Afghan migratory strategies and the three solutions to the refugee problem. Refugee survey quarterly.

coming from that area. These personal narratives offer a distinct perspective, providing valuable insights into the dynamics at play during this period in the region. By intertwining historical and socio-political facts with firsthand accounts from the study's informants, our understanding of the factors that could have contributed to the conversion process while the refugees are in Greece expands.

Overall, the profile of the Afghan asylum seeker that manages to reach Greece has been changing<sup>21</sup>, becoming more diversified across socio-economic lines, some noteworthy new categories being Hazara unaccompanied minors coming from Iran, young Pashtu men running away from the rural southern parts of the country and urban families that feel unsafe since the foreign troops were pulled out (Donini et al., 2016)<sup>22</sup>. The situation with Afghan families is very diverse, some were refugees in Pakistan or Iran, but according to different informants, more and more middle-class families were selling what they had and decided to leave after the troops withdrew in 2014.

An example of a family that fits the profile of middle-class individuals with ties with foreign forces or international presence was Jaweed's family. I met Jaweed and his family in Athens, back in Afghanistan he was a translator for the U.S. Army. After he received threats for his life, they decided to sell everything they have and leave first to Europe and from there onwards to Canada. He had some clear advantages compared with other categories of migrants, such as financial resources and higher level of understanding of the Western cultural space.

Many cases of Afghans that migrated to Iran and Pakistan and returned to their home country to leave again were documented. According to other authors (Monsutti, etc.), Afghan migration blurs the line between forced and voluntary migration. Ongoing or circular migration was for many years a coping strategy for many Afghans with the multiple challenges faced in their home country. In the group of people that I've interacted with while in Athens my encounters were mostly with Afghans that emigrated from Iran. Amir's story illustrates this pattern of migration, migrating to Iran as a teenager, and leaving Iran for Greece as a married man.

The Afghan migration to Greece is part of an ample mobility quest for a host country, with migrants turning to new countries of destination as they become increasingly aware of the changes

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<sup>21</sup> During the time when this study was conducted

<sup>22</sup> Donini, A., Monsutti, A., & Scalettaris, G. (2016). Afghans on the Move: Seeking Protection and Refuge in Europe "In this journey I died several times; In Afghanistan you only die once". Global Migration Research Paper, 17.

that are occurring in the reception policies in the preferred countries of destination. The out-flows are mixed in nature, both in terms of motivation and the country of origin.

Similarly, **Chapters 7, 8, and 9** are providing insights into the Iranian context. To fully comprehend the conversion of Farsi-speaking individuals to Christianity, it is imperative to look into the specific circumstances and background of Iran. **Chapter 7** offers a perspective on the historical events that contributed to the departure of so many Iranians towards the West. The section includes an overview of the pre-revolution context, followed by the relevant events that led to the revolution in 1979 and the post-revolution developments.

This phenomenon of conversion in the Iranian context can be attributed to two main factors: the socio-religious and political situation of the country and the influence of globalization and modernity. In contemporary Iran, the complex interplay between religion, society, and politics has created tensions, controversies, and conflicts, ultimately shaping a new understanding of religiosity characterized by individualism and inclusivism. These dynamics are further intensified by the authorities' perception of religious pluralism as a security threat (Khalaji, 2013)<sup>23</sup>.

**Chapter 8** presents the ways in which individuals and families have been coping with the challenges associated with the political regime change that occurred in 1979. Disillusionment with the Iranian regime, combined with limited personal freedoms, particularly for women, has fostered disappointment and frustration not only with the government but also with Islam itself. Therefore, a notable number of individuals have sought alternatives, distancing themselves from Islam and embracing secularism (or becoming nominal Muslims) or exploring other religions such as Christianity and Bahaism. The house church movement is considered in a way an effect of the regime's strong approach to religious diversity and choice. Most Muslims that converted to Christianity in Iran in the past decades were introduced to the new faith by a family member or by a friend while the rest are finding out about the new faith through the Satellite TV programs in Persian (Elam Report, Ladinfo Report). Additionally, the Islamic regime was felt by many women as oppressive, incentivizing them to migrate to protect the rights of their daughters and of their own. The "boundaries of Islamic communities" were shaped to a large extent by the new gender policies (Spellman, 2004)<sup>24</sup>. In Greece, the informants I interviewed expressed deep

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<sup>23</sup> Khalaji, M. (2013). *The rise of Persian Salafism*. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-persian-salafism>.

<sup>24</sup> Spellman, K. (2004). *Religion and Nation. Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain*. New York: Berghahn Books.

disillusionment with the strict interpretation of Islam practiced in their home countries, making it difficult for them to identify with it. One particular informant, named Ashti, shared her journey from Islam to atheism while living in Iran, to discovering a new faith through attending a home church and reading the Bible in Greece. *“The government wants to brainwash everyone. Islam allows a man to come to me and ask me why I do not cover my head. I believe that it is not his business because I chose to cover or not”*. She was very intentional in connecting her daughter (who remained in Iran) with a house church in order to expose her to these new beliefs. Another informant from Iran, now in Athens, found the message of the Bible appealing due to its emphasis on tolerance towards others. She perceived her identity as rooted not in Islam but in the rich Persian history, where values like tolerance are central. Many of the Iranian refugees that I’ve talked to tend to perceive Christianity as a religion that encapsulates elements of modernity that they admire so much and are in congruence with the Western culture, like equality, women empowerment, freedom, generosity, and justice.

**Chapter 9** examines recent migration history from Iran while also taking into consideration both the factors that led to the choice to leave the country, as well as the impact that transnational social networks had in the development of the decision. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and perhaps as a result of the country's considerable socio-political changes, fresh waves of emigration began, which steadily increased the number of Iranians residing abroad (Hajiyousefi & Behmard, 2006)<sup>25</sup>. Iranians who lived in the West, whether they returned to Iran or remained in the host countries, continued to influence Iranian opinions of the West. This positive image of modernity and prosperity may have influenced how people in other nations see the quality of living in the developed world as well as in their own country. This seems to be one of the inherent consequences of living in a globalizing world (Sabbar & Dalvand, 2018)<sup>26</sup>. The unfavorable perception of the situation in one's home country, on the one hand, and the idealized utopian vision of life in *kharej*<sup>27</sup> (the West), on the other, might be a tremendous motivation for migration for certain individuals.

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<sup>25</sup> Hajiyousefi, A. M., & Behmard, S. (2006). The causes of Iran's Elite migration after the End of the Imposed War. *Political Science Bulletin*, 4, 27-67.

<sup>26</sup> Sabbar, S., & Dalvand, S. (2018). Semiotic Approach to Globalization: Living in a World of Global Things. *Journal of Cyberspace Studies*, 2(1), 75-88. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jcss.2017.232442.1004>

<sup>27</sup> *kharej* literally means "outside" or "abroad" in Farsi. In the Iranian social and cultural context, however, this exact translation does not adequately convey the connotations associated with it. In this sense, *kharej* refers to a region where living conditions are much better. The term often alludes to the West, and moving there is associated with "better education, advancement, and prosperity" (Khosravi, 2017, p. 87).

The process of globalization and the proliferation of global media have provided Iranians with new options and opportunities to redefine their lifestyle and the meaning of religion. Changing one's religion has become an act of exercising freedom of choice, and Christianity, with its emphasis on personal faith and set of beliefs, has emerged as an attractive choice. Its association with Western culture offers a chance to dissociate from Arab influences and affiliate with the West (Afshari, 2018)<sup>28</sup> rediscovering *persianess*. Although there is a lack of reliable statistics on the number of converts, individual accounts, and anecdotal evidence suggest that Christianity is indeed growing among Iranians in Iran, Europe, and North America. The increase in refugee populations in Europe has witnessed significant numbers of Farsi-speaking individuals, mainly Iranians, seeking baptism in churches across countries such as the UK, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland (Afshari, 2018).

The concept of religious conversion is a controversial especially when placed in linguistic spaces such as Farsi and Dari or cultures like the ones described in these two countries, which are marked by the Islamic faith (where many describe their conversion as “*not selling my religion*”). In these settings, change of one’s religion is prohibited, and religion is seen an ascribed communal heritage, which is in great contrast to an increasingly individualized relationship with faith in Western Europe (Afshari, 2018). Therefore, these six chapters provide an understanding of what it means for a Muslim Background migrant to convert to Evangelical Christianity in Europe versus converting in their home country. The thesis aims to underpin the larger process of conversion that might begin in the home country but continues throughout the migratory journey.

Part of the socio-political context in Central Asia could be described as being marked by the rise of religious extremism, populism, and political instability. Contrary to a common belief that the rise of extremist religious stances like the Iranian regime or Taliban regime would push people away from religion but on the contrary, they seem to search for new religious expressions, and Evangelical Christianity is one of them. However, it is rather difficult for someone coming from Iran and Afghanistan to leave their faith, which served them for centuries as a tool of sense-making for the individual and community. In this context, leaving the faith that shaped and reshaped their identities and value system is a significant transformation process. Therefore, when the meaning-making system has been tainted, the individual transition into a phase of the search,

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<sup>28</sup> Afshari, S. (2018). An examination of the growth of Christianity and the Contribution of Farsi Christian Media in Contemporary Iran.



where they would like to replace it with something similar, a system close to the previous one, even if the conversion might be seen as something irreversible or permanent. It provides a bridging tool to help the individual through the transition toward a permanent solution. For some individuals, this could include a phase where they identify as *atheists*.

In **Chapter 10** the narratives from two countries - Iran and Afghanistan- converge in a distinctive setting that lies outside both the destination country and the refugees' home country. The description of the refugees' challenging journey from country of origin to Greece, along with the depiction of the Greek setting, sets the stage for the emergence of a migrant-led spiritual community called Agape Church. In this chapter the focus shifts to exploring how the new converts navigate their new identities and the ways in which they establish a community like Agape Church, looking at the strategies employed as they shape their sense of self and build connections within their newfound faith community. Thus, attempting to provide an answer to the third and second research questions.

To understand **the genesis of the Agape church** we need to start by looking at the larger Greek context - the challenges associated with their journey to Greece and the reception condition - and the identity transformation process.

The chapter starts by discussing the process of **identity transformation**, followed by a presentation of the emergence of the Agape Church. It is of significance to state that through the ethnographic study, it has become evident that the reasons behind Muslim conversions to Christianity in Europe cannot be simplified as mere tactics to enhance asylum cases. Rather, they represent a genuine exercise of freedom of choice and religion. The testimonies of converts reveal that embracing Christianity signifies a sense of liberation and a departure from their previous religious beliefs. It holds profound symbolic meaning, as it fills the void left by their past faith and leads to a radical transformation of their personal lives. This adoption of a new system of meaning-making also serves as a tool for integration and negotiation within their new society. They view conversion as a means to disaffiliate from their previous religious identity and establish their space and belonging in European or North American societies.

Migration strategy encompasses social, legal, spiritual, and identity-related dimensions. As migrants transition to new locations, their perception of self and identity undergoes significant changes, allowing for the adaptation to a new religious worldview. For many migrants and

refugees, identity is less about possession and more about their actions, even rejecting aspects of their national and cultural heritage.

From a spiritual perspective, refugees with religious backgrounds seek a sacred space where they can find clarity and establish a connection with the divine, especially during challenging times. Many refugee converts consider the church as a sacred haven, where they find solace, acceptance, and support beyond its utilization for asylum cases.

Integration is a crucial aspect for refugees and migrants, with religion resurfacing as a topic of public debate and integration discourse. Faith plays a vital role in constructing one's religious identity, and conversion becomes a tool to reconstruct this identity within the frameworks of the host society. In some cases, particularly among women, visible changes in public behavior, dress code, and displays of religious symbols such as crosses are observed. Through these changes, individuals negotiate a new space and belonging within the host society, conveying a message of disaffiliation from their previous identity and community. This highlights the utilization of conversion as a means to embrace elements of modernity and a desire to integrate.

Muslim-background converts to Christianity may have different interpretations of conversion, such as becoming a Christian, accepting Jesus Christ in their life, or giving their heart to Christ. These different understandings can lead to various types of religious change, influenced by the convert's agency, search purpose, and exercise of freedom and knowledge. Some converts may adopt a cultural form of Christianity, an evangelical expression of Christianity, or incorporate it into their existing belief system. This brings into discussion the theme of “continuity” proposed by Speelman (2006)<sup>29</sup>.

It is important to differentiate the conversion of Muslim-background individuals to Christianity from the Christian concept of a unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience, such as the conversion of the apostle Paul. Dreams and visions, which are common among Muslims, including Shia Muslims, may play a role in the decision-making process for conversion but may not necessarily indicate a conversion experience. Instead, conversion among Muslims is often driven by finding solutions to life issues, seeking another spiritual source, finding a sense of belonging or care, or pursuing a better future in this world.

For many Muslim-background converts, conversion is a decision and a process that involves weighing the costs and benefits of switching religions. It is a choice influenced by the

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<sup>29</sup> Speelman, G. (2006). Continuity and discontinuity in conversion stories. *Exchange*, 35(3), 304-335.

calculations of what they may lose, gain, keep, or let go. The extent to which individuals change their religious belief system can be challenging to determine. The understanding of conversion among converts varies, with those exposed to Farsi Christian materials online having a similar understanding to most Farsi converts outside Europe. Those with less access to such resources may view their baptism primarily as a sign of protection and redemption (Afshari, 2018).

The influx of close to one million asylum seekers in Greece between January 2015 and March 2016 has placed a significant burden on the country, which was already grappling with its own economic crisis and social unrest (Tinti, 2021; Palmer, 2019)<sup>30</sup>. To accommodate the growing number of refugees, various facilities in Athens, including former Olympic sites, have been repurposed as refugee camps. It is within this context that many Iranian and Afghan refugees have found solace in their newfound faith, often attributing their conversion to miraculous events (Tinti, 2021). One such account is that of Amir and his family, who embarked on a treacherous journey from Turkey to Greece on a bitterly cold night. Together with his young children and pregnant wife had a near-death experience that culminated with a sense of finding the “real God”. The testimonies of many Muslim refugees indicated that their decision to convert was often preceded by supernatural encounters, such as dreams or experiences that brought them closer to the presence of God (Tinti, 2021). These profound moments often occurred during the most challenging and desperate situations, serving as catalysts for their spiritual transformation. However, it is not just these extraordinary experiences that draw refugees towards Christianity. The love and compassion demonstrated by Christians and their genuine care for the well-being of refugees play a significant role in their decision to consider changing their religious affiliation (Tinti, 2021). The personal attention and sense of belonging they receive from both God and the Christian workers in the camps provide a stark contrast to their previous experiences within Islam. This deep sense of being valued as individuals led many to question their faith and seek a different path. While the miracles and supernatural encounters may serve as initial catalysts, it is the embodiment of love and acceptance within the Christian community that solidifies their decision to embrace a new faith.

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<sup>30</sup> Tinti, P. (2021). EU-Turkey Deal: Five Years On. Migration Policy Institute.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eu-turkey-deal-five-years-on>

Palmer, C. (2019). *God's Work Among Refugees in Greece* – Gordon College Center for Faith and Inquiry, Wenham, MA.

These accounts underscore the profound impact of personal experiences and human connections in shaping one's religious identity, particularly in times of immense hardship and uncertainty.

The migration journey is a harrowing ordeal, marked by traumatic experiences and immense stress for those embarking on it. These individuals often carry a history of pre-existing trauma from their home countries or previous transit spaces, which is further compounded by the distressing events they encounter during their journey. The changing migration policies have further intensified the perils and financial burdens associated with the journey. From the risk of drowning to being coerced into prostitution to secure funds for progress, the dangers are manifold. However, the survivors included in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience, managing to cope with the traumas they faced both in their country of origin (such as Iran, Pakistan, or Afghanistan) and throughout the journey itself. Based on their testimonies, it becomes apparent that those who were willing to accept the potential risks and possessed sufficient financial means, physical strength, and support networks, ultimately succeeded in reaching Greece and other parts of Europe. For many Afghans, the act of entering Europe proved to be a deeply traumatic event, as they hoped to remain undetected at the border.

The numerous studies on diaspora churches that are operating in Europe are mainly focusing on the impact of the faith communities on new cultures and the manners in which the church community is contributing to the newcomer's integration process into the new society. However, the influx of refugees in Europe has given rise to the emergence of multiple churches (many of the being migrant led) and refugee centers, particularly belonging to the Evangelical and Charismatic minority rather than the Orthodox landscape. In Athens, the main site of my research, an array of newly established Evangelical churches has emerged in response to the recent migration waves, amongst them are at least seven churches that primarily use Farsi and Dari as their spoken language (Carlson, 2020). The majority of these seven churches are migrant-led, operating under Iranian leadership with logistical support provided by various faith-based organizations (FBOs). Besides the Farsi-speaking churches, other churches have been formed because of the massive refugee influx, such as Eritrean and Ghanaian (Carlson, 2020)<sup>31</sup>. The Evangelical Greek Churches were responding to this sudden interest in Evangelical Christianity in many ways. One of them was by opening churches in areas that seemed lost, like the neighborhoods occupied by the

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<sup>31</sup> Carlson, D. (2020). *Christianity and conversion among migrants*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

anarchists. Other pastors were reporting the necessity to accommodate large waves of newcomers that joined their congregations.

The very concept of an Afghan church is very strange to most people familiar with Afghanistan and its history. There might be only a few Afghan churches in the entire world. But one of them is in Athens. Migrant-led churches are providing a space for newcomers where they do not need to cross-linguistic, class, or racial boundaries to be part of the community (McGavran, 1990)<sup>32</sup>. They usually operate on the margins of Greek society, as they do not seek to become integrated into the Greek Christian church movement nor other Western-led ecclesiastic structures. This is true for Athens, where the role of the church is not to facilitate integration in Greek society, but rather to offer a cultural and religious space mirroring a familiar past. Migrant-led churches are using Bible translation, songs, and other media materials in different vernacular languages, preserving the migrants' identity as well as helping to attract more people into the community. For the majority of the migrants that are attending, it might be for the first time that they have a spiritual experience while using their mother tongue. The Agape Church was established in 2013 by a group of Afghan refugee converts connected to a faith-based organization in Athens. They started gathering regularly for Sunday services, attracting more members as the number of Afghan refugees increased. A Korean missionary, who had previously been arrested by the Taliban in Afghanistan, took the initiative to raise funds for a dedicated property where the community could meet and grow. Over time, the church received support from additional missionaries and aid workers, as well as staff members from different faith-based organizations. The initial leadership team consisted of Korean and American missionaries, who mentored Afghan refugee converts to become leaders within the congregation. The appointment of the leader was based on a combination of criteria such as a sense personal calling, the team's openness towards the candidate, and the candidate's family dynamics. Many refugees learned about this church through refugee centers operated by Hellenic ministries and the Helping Hands center. This church (many are seeing it as an Afghan Church, while others are describing it Farsi a speaking church) is a unique place where about seventy people are meeting regularly for church services as well as for English classes, meals, and counseling. Its inception phase was between 2013 and 2014, with a weekly

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<sup>32</sup> McGavran, D. A. (1990). *Understanding Church Growth*. 3rd ed. rev. and edited by C. Peter Wagner. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

service followed by lunch on the upper floor dining area. At that point, the people were coming in such large numbers that the church leadership decided to offer a midweek service on Tuesdays.

In terms of forms and rituals, Agape Church holds a Sunday service similar to neo-protestant Evangelical Church tradition. It includes a welcoming message, worship songs led by a team, a sermon by one of the pastors, a Sunday school for children, and a prayer time where attendees can share their prayers and concerns. The service ends with individual prayers and announcements from the pastors and congregation. In a typical Sunday service, believers and seekers are aiming to find solace and a respite from the challenges of their lives as Afghan refugees in Greece. They come together, dressed in their best attire, to sing, pray, and recite emotional poems that resonate deeply with the experiences of many. Amir, one of the Afghan Pastor leads the congregation in heartfelt prayers, asking for asylum, provision, healing, and guidance. The worship team sings songs of victory and strength, while the pastor's daughter, leads the groups songs. The congregation seems fully engaged, immersed in the joy of a world free from their hardships. This experience of finding meaning and support in their faith community is a newfound and exhilarating one for Amir and his congregation. One element of surprise was to see that the Afghans and Iranian refugee converts managed to overcome long-standing historical tensions and form a cohesive faith community while in Athens, which highlights the transformative power of faith in fostering unity and transcending divisions. As Amir said, *“the ones that before were perceived as unfriendly, are now perceived as brothers, belonging to a newly formed family”*.

Examples such as Farshid and Bahnam (both have a refugee background), who started a church for refugees in an anarchist-controlled part of the city, highlight the impact of migrant church leaders who listen to the stories of refugees and allow them to play a role in effecting change in their own lives.

For many refugees, attending church is not solely motivated by religious or spiritual reasons, but also by feelings of loneliness, boredom, depression, and a lack of meaningful activity. Organizations focused on refugee outreach in Athens offer essential services such as meals, hygiene, healthcare, language classes, and legal advice. Refugees like Vahid and Susan, who were deported from Iran due to a being falsely accused of an accident found solace in a Farsi-speaking church facilitated by Suhrad, another converted Christian who worked as a translator. Their experiences in Greece, where volunteers practiced the love and teachings of Christianity, stood in stark contrast to their perceptions of their fellow Muslims in Iran. Vahid's religious quest and his

baptism in a Greek Evangelical Church, along with the support of church leaders like Amir, demonstrated the interconnectedness of Evangelical churches in Athens that transcend ethnic boundaries. Amir, himself a former refugee, now a pastor of Agape Church, which primarily serves Afghans and Iranians is an example of this. His journey, along with the experiences of others like Khalil, an Iranian Evangelist, and Lamar, an Iranian preacher, exemplifies the commitment of the converts and other Christian workers in Athens to reach out to their respective communities and offer hope and salvation. Additionally, stories like Fatima's shed light on the challenges faced by young women in traditional societies, where their desires are often disregarded, and societal judgment looms large.

In summary, the presence of Christian communities and refugee centers in Europe provides refugees with a new faith and support system. The transformative power of compassion and practical assistance, combined with direct engagement with the Bible, leads to conversions and a significant change in the lives of refugees.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the analysis of field data and literature, it becomes evident that the process of religious conversion is primarily initiated and driven by the convert. The findings reveal that the process of conversion is deeply ingrained in the larger migration journey, seeing how several informants actively sought other faith options, looking out Farsi-speaking churches once they arrived in Greece, indicating their awareness of different religious congregations in Greece and their desire to explore them. This search for alternatives in many cases started while the migrants were still in Iran, where Iranian seekers looked for options in a space that suppressed pluralism, discouraged religious exploration, and even penalized it.

In Athens there a set of Christian communities (Evangelical mostly) that offer robust social networks to refugees and Christian converts, providing them with supportive friends during their transit. These communities help refugees cope with the challenges of forced displacement, such as isolation and homesickness. The new religion equips transient refugees with the necessary resources to navigate their day-to-day struggles while dealing with trauma and uncertainty (Gomes & Tan, 2015)<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Gomes, C., & Tan, J.Y. (2015). Christianity as a Culture of Mobility: A Case Study of Asian Transient Migrants in Singapore. *Kritika Kultura*, 25, 215-244.

Faith conversion from one monotheistic religion to another is less about religious doctrine and more about an individual's goals, aspirations, and desire to embrace a modern space where democratic values and the rule of law are respected.

One prominent theme that emerged from the conversion stories of Iranian and Afghan migrants is hope, which is closely tied to the power of aspirations. The motives for conversion can range from seeking answers to prayer to secular goals such as integration, membership affiliations, and a sense of belonging. However, it is not a dichotomy between spiritual and secular motives; even conversions driven mainly by secular goals often exhibit spiritual elements. Elements that foster hope are central to both religious conversion and the decision to migrate. Hope for a better life, both in this world and the hereafter, is a driving force behind these processes. Regardless of the reasons for conversion, religious faith serves as a tool and resource for the migrants.

By examining conversion within the studied population through the lens of social networks, religious communities, as highlighted by Coleman (1988)<sup>34</sup> and other social scientists, are among the most significant sources of social capital in our society. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that converts will continue to tap into the resources provided by religious institutions as they move to their destination countries, extending beyond the transit countries.

Akcapar and Afshari argue that conversion is linked to the integration process and plays a significant role in negotiating space and belonging within European host societies. It serves as an umbrella for protection in a space where protection is mostly perceived as lacking. The social cost of exercising the freedom of choice in conversion differs between Iranians and Afghans in their host country and conversion in Europe. Taking into account the individualistic versus communal stance on religion and the assumptions of rational choice theory, the rational arguments proposed by migrants may seem irrational to others. When considering the gains obtained through their new identity, it becomes more relevant to ask what is lost. However, there is little to be said about the losses, while many aspects are perceived as gains within the context of European host societies. Thus, despite the fact that most Afghan and Iranian refugees in Athens face significant problems to obtain a decent quality of life, they do have it better than in home country, migration and conversion might have not enhanced their socio-economic status significantly, but they can attest to the fact that there is a positive change on some levels. This is particularly more accurate in the case of refugees that have found a place of work while in Greece. Secondly, many Afghan and

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<sup>34</sup> Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, 95-120



Iranian refugees in Athens shifted their short-term survival coping mechanisms such as being stuck in a camp to medium and long-term strategies in the hope that this would enhance their socio-economic status. The connection between migration and religion brings to the forefront the dynamics that occur in the country of origin, trying to adequately address the role of religion as a tool in transit countries or countries of destination. Thus, we are able to see that conversion is one of the means through which they actively seek to create new paths for the medium and long-term life plans. In other words, many of the Afghan and Iranian refugees are reconsidering their options post conversion. If in the pre-conversion phase they were very determined to reach a certain country in Northern or Western Europe, post-conversion they are finding new ways to live a fulfilled life. Some are considering staying in Athens until they feel God tells them otherwise, some are even becoming involved in different faith-based endeavors. Some others are opening different venues of connecting with the larger refugee population, through YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. These new strategies that they pursue to improve their situation and quality of life while based in Athens makes them agents of change and proponents of hope for their immediate family, but also other people form their social networks.

The negotiation process of a new identity largely revolves around the convert's aspirations, goals, and religious institutional landscape. Despite Europe being perceived as a secular space, for refugees arriving on its shores, it is perceived as a Christian space, and Christianity is seen as the religion of their hosts. They interpret the processes and social dynamics of the host country through religious lenses, often stating, *"Europe is much better at everything because of their Christian faith, while Islam had pushed us back"*. Religion and religious institutions serve as suitable gateways into this new world, allowing them to argue their case, negotiate their sense of belonging, reconstruct and reshape their religious identity, and establish their system of meaning.

While churches like Agape Church, along with many other religious institutions catering to migrants in Greece and Europe, provide physical and social care, it is important to acknowledge that the significant number of refugees in Europe has led to a rise in racism, populism, and stigma. Through conversion, individuals might dissociate themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with Muslim refugees and find protection from the risk of being rejected. Therefore, the three main areas where conversion plays a vital role in the lives of converts are: (1) as an external gateway to the host society, facilitating membership negotiations, belonging, and space; (2) as an internal process, involving the reconstruction and reshaping of religious identity and the

search for a new system of meaning; and (3) as a mean of overcoming victimhood and avoiding social rejection.

In conclusion, Muslim conversions to Christianity in Europe go beyond calculated tactics for asylum cases. The process of religious conversion represents a genuine exercise of freedom of choice and religion, the converts being “*perpetrators*” of their own set of actions (Giddens, 1984, p. 9)<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, it symbolizes liberation from previous beliefs, helping in integration, and serving as a tool for constructing religious identities within the host society.

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<sup>35</sup> Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Saturation*. Cambridge: Polity Press