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Compass, Continuity and Change. Everyday Religion among Women Living in Asylum Centers in Norway

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Abstract: When seeking asylum in Norway, asylum seekers are usually placed in asylum centers, where their everyday life is filled with uncertainty and few meaningful activities. Despite the importance of religion for many residents, little attention is paid both by authorities as well as by scholars to the role of religious beliefs and practices in their everyday life within this context. This article is based on ethnographic research with women living in asylum centers over the course of one year. Through the lens of ‘everyday lived religion’, it explores the role and significance of their religious beliefs and practices in their everyday life in the center, as well as the changes that they experience to these. It argues that religion acts as a compass and provides a sense of continuity in the everyday life in the asylum center. The women also experience certain changes to their religious beliefs and practices due to being in a new socio-cultural environment.

Keywords: everyday religion; asylum seekers; Norway; asylum centers; agency

1. Introduction

In Norway, most asylum seekers are accommodated in asylum centers while they wait for their application to be processed. The length of wait for the asylum application was, on average, 321 days for 2017 (UDI statistics 2018). Most commonly, these centers are located far from the urban/sub-urban population centers, making it particularly challenging for the residents to participate in the local community, therefore leading to them experiencing feelings of isolation and alienation. Asylum seekers have few activities with which to fill their time. Additionally, only a small number have a job, due to the obstacles to receiving a work permit and consequently a job offer¹ (Weiss et al. 2017). The centers are run by different organizations and companies, yet they respond to the Norwegian Directorate of Migration (UDI), which establishes the rules of operation. As for those related to religion specifically, these include directives such as that each resident should have the opportunity to safeguard their language and culture (UDI Regelverk 2017). On establishing how this should be facilitated, UDI suggests that it is up to the operator of the center to provide a “religiously neutral room”² (UDI Regelverk 2017, my translation) for the residents to retire for contemplation³. Aside from this, there is no further explanation on how the cultural and religious needs of each resident should be covered. Additionally, there are few reports that discuss the role that religion plays in asylum centers and its residents

¹ Asylum seekers can receive a work permit if they have a way of proving their identity through an ID or Passport, which few have.

² “The centre should have a room where residents, individually or in small groups, can retreat for contemplation, unless the need is met in the accommodation units. The room should be religiously neutral and could be used by all residents wish to.” (my translation, RS 2008-031, (UDI Regelverk 2017)).

³ It has not been possible to retrieve any report mapping out all asylum centres and whether such religiously neutral rooms has been made available to its residents.

(Andrews et al. 2014). Hence, it seems that not enough attention, and thus effort, is placed on the religious sphere of asylum seekers' lives, neither by the authorities nor by researchers. Within this context, this article explores the role of religious beliefs and practices in the everyday lives of women living in such centers.

Previous Research

There is a long tradition in scholarship on religion and gender that has examined the role of religious faith in the lives of women. One of the main discussions has been that of the agency of religious women (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008; Burke 2012; Jouili 2015). Some of these scholars have claimed that the behavior of religious women devotees such as their "submission to God" (Mack 2003, p. 50 in Nyhagen and Halsaa 2017), "self-abnegation and surrender" (Orsi 1996, p. 50 in Nyhagen and Halsaa 2017), as well as desire for "self-fashioning and ethical conduct", which for some could look as "passivity and docility", may also be understood as agency (Mahmood 2005, p. 212). Bartkowski and Read (2003) have shown that conservative evangelical and Muslim women in the US display exceptional forms of agency in the identity crafting and negotiations they undertake. There have also been recent geographical approaches to gender identity negotiations among young Muslim women (see Dwyer and Shah 2009).

However, scholars have warned of the risk of taking agency for granted and for the need to take into consideration the structural factors that may be involved in restraining and/or facilitating social action. The perspective of 'everyday lived religion' (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2007) is helpful in taking into account the interplay between agency and structure, given that it studies how people practice and understand their religion as well as the context within which they do this (Orsi 2003 in Nyhagen and Halsaa 2017). Moreover, the approach of everyday lived religion has led researchers to taking into account the lives, experiences and practices of groups that had previously been overlooked (Woodhead 2014), such as how Islam is lived in minority contexts (e.g., Jeldtoft 2011, 2013; Jouili 2015; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2017). Other scholars have explored the role that religion plays in the everyday life of women of different faiths and nationalities, including migrants. In many cases, religion is expressed as a way of life, a foundation, deeply embodied as well as guiding their behavior and relationships with others (e.g., Nyhagen and Halsaa 2017; Winchester 2008; Rinaldo 2014; Mahmood 2005).

A large body of research has focused on the important role that religion plays for migrants for coping with the challenges encountered in migratory contexts (see e.g., Willmann Robleda forthcoming; Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Sleijpen et al. 2016; Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010; Khawaja et al. 2008), as well as to recuperate from war trauma (Gozdziak 2002). For Muslim refugee women in various contexts, Islam has been shown to be an important source of sustenance, providing them with continuity and a sense of 'home' in displacement (McMichael 2002), as well as a practical and moral guideline in a new environment (Tiilikainen 2003).

Although there is a growing amount of research on religion and migration, few researchers have examined the role of religion in the everyday life in asylum contexts, despite the number of asylum seekers that Europe has received having increased in the last few years and how common asylum centers have become. Moreover, the scholarly and public discourse in Europe is still largely dominated by 'hypervisible' forms of institutional religion, especially when it comes to minority religions such as Islam. Largely, the attention has been placed on the institutionalization of Islam (and other minority religions) as well as issues of integration, emancipation and radicalization. Less consideration has been given to understanding the devotees through their practices and their ways of meaning-making (Dessing et al. 2014). Hence, I use the concept of 'everyday lived religion' (Ammerman 2007, 2013; McGuire 2008) as a methodological approach that seeks to help me shift the gaze towards the role of religious beliefs and practices in places that are not commonly thought of as religious, such as is the case with asylum centers. Consequently, this article seeks to answer the following question: what is the role and significance of religious beliefs and practices in the everyday life of women living in asylum centers and what are the changes they experience in this new context?

In the following section, I delve into the theoretical considerations on which I draw to answer this question.

2. A Pragmatic Approach to Religion and the Theory of Religious Emotions

According to the Norwegian philosopher of religion Jan-Olav Henriksen, taking a pragmatic approach to religion and religious discourse allows us to see “what religions actually do” (Henriksen 2017, p. 197, author’s italics). He explains that such an approach is not to be confounded with the instrumentalist or functionalist.

Religion and religious resources are not external to people or something they consciously or unconsciously employ to achieve external aims. Religion is a *mode of being in the world* that is internal to people because it has to do with what shapes their identity and their basic points of orientation, and it is linked intimately to how they experience themselves and their world. (Henriksen 2017, p. 197, my emphasis)

By exploring the transformative component of religion, Henriksen (2017) seeks to highlight the inaccuracy of describing religion as merely a worldview. However, his pragmatic approach to religion, despite being practice-oriented, does not disregard the role of belief and doctrine; in fact, he claims them to be constitutive to the orienting and transforming practices.

Henriksen’s pragmatic view of religion identifies it as a source of orientation and transformation. Given that not all behavior is prescribed for humans, the author claims that, as human beings, we are in need of orientation, as we are “not at home in the world” and therefore we can easily disorient ourselves (Henriksen 2016, 2017, p. 181). That is, we need guidance to understand what matters the most in life as well as to comprehend that which we should aim for in life. This understanding then points to a particular course of action. Religion then, being often part of an individual’s larger system of orientation, affords such direction when dealing with particular challenges and significant decisions in life. In addition, it helps people interpret their experiences and make sense of their particular circumstances as well as life in general. Thus, according to Henriksen (2016, 2017), religion can in turn make us feel more at home in the world, as it may provide us with feelings of belonging; through helping us to identify the familiar from the unfamiliar, it helps us make sense of our circumstances and surroundings.

Not only do religions guide their practitioners on their behavior, but they also provide the resources for both personal and social transformation. Henriksen (2017, p. 39) argues that “the transformative element is a component that enhances religious engagement and contributes important motivation for attempts to change the present situation by means of different practices”. Typical practices of personal transformation are those that aim at changing ones’ state through prayer, meditation, etc., as well as that of gaining further knowledge of a particular religious tradition. To further understand the particular ways the transformative element of religion, I turn to Riis and Woodhead’s (2010) theory of religious emotion⁴, from which Henriksen (2017) also draws for his argumentation, in which they highlight the central role that emotions play in religion:

As well as being a significant context for the formation, cultivation, disciplining, and expression of emotion, religion is one of the most important crucibles for emotional change and transformation, even on the part of adults. To join a religion is to experience a new way of feeling about self, others, society and the world. (Riis and Woodhead 2010 in Henriksen 2017, p. 114)

One of the foundations of their approach is to understand emotions within the framework of agency and structure. That is, that emotions are neither purely internal matters nor are they solely

⁴ Which they develop partly by drawing on the long scholarly focus on emotions as social and relational phenomena such as Sara Ahmed’s 2010 work on “affective economies”, Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) on the “politics of emotion” among others.

determined by society, but actors also contest and alter them as well as replicate them without much choice in some instances (Riis and Woodhead 2010).

In particular, according to Riis and Woodhead (2010, p. 77), religious emotions, i.e., emotions situated in a religious context, provide emotional ordering—that is to say, they provide an “emotional template” for guiding which emotions should be expressed or not at precise times and places. Additionally, they offer emotional transcendence-transition; namely, people may engage in rituals and practices to change their current emotional state. Religion can offer individuals the possibility to alter their feelings, possibly in a positive way. It may also help to order one’s emotions and bring them under control. Finally, religion provides inspiration and orientation, namely because they unveil what is meaningful and valuable in life, “the emotional orientation they provide often has a particularly strong bearing on how adherents live out their lives, and what inspires their ultimate loyalty.” (Riis and Woodhead 2010, p. 89).

Through exploring the ‘everyday lived religion’ of the women seeking asylum in Norway and by drawing on Henriksen’s (2017) theory of religion, I show what religion does for them. Furthermore, inspired by Riis and Woodhead’s (2010) theory of religious emotion, I seek to pay attention to the way their religion makes them *feel* and how they undertake particular rituals or practices that may lead them to transform and possibly transcend the difficult emotions related to the challenging circumstances they experience while seeking asylum and living in an asylum center.

Up until the last decade, scholarship has often tended to see conservative religious devotees as passive and compliant in receiving religious doctrine, especially women. Often these women were seen as “oppressed or operating with a false consciousness” (Avishai 2008, p. 411). In the last decade especially, several scholars working on issues of religion and gender have begun exploring agency among women in what were considered oppressive religious frameworks. Some of these works have been mentioned in the literature review, yet the most relevant for this article is the work of Avishai (2008) who draws on the notions of agency as docility developed by Mahmood (2005). Avishai (2008) shows how pious women actually form part of conservative religious traditions for religious purposes and there is actually agency in their so called “compliance”. Furthermore, she argues that “compliance” with norms is a “mode of conduct”; that is, that religiosity or religious conduct is constructed and it is enacted “in the context of social norms and regulatory discourses” (Avishai 2008, p. 413). Thus, she claims that there is agency in “doing religion” for its own sake, no matter the purpose or result of it (Avishai 2008). Such agency becomes visible once we stop understanding agency merely as a form of resistance and disassociate it “from the goals of progressive politics” (Mahmood 2005, p. 5). Given that, in the context of asylum, the agency of asylum-seekers is often overlooked, especially in relation to religion, this approach might be helpful to highlight the agency of asylum seekers in ‘doing religion’.

3. Ethnographic Fieldwork: The Case of Women Living in Asylum Centers

This article draws on a larger ethnographic project where, over the course of one year, I spent time with eight women who were living in two different asylum centers. It is necessary to note here that this group is especially vulnerable, as well as hard to reach, precisely because of its vulnerability. This is in part one of the reasons for the difficulty in gathering a larger sample of participants. Additionally, the material was able to be accessed based on the trust cultivated during fieldwork between the author and the participants. Also, because of the particularly vulnerable circumstances of the participants, the analysis of the ethnographic data has required a particular ethical approach, which I delve into in further detail below.

For the study I chose an inductive and exploratory approach, given the limited amount of research on the topic of this article. In particular, the approach is based on the concept of critical phenomenology (Desjarlais 1997; Willen 2007) as it aims to explore the everyday lives of the participants by taking into account the judicial and socio-political dimensions of what it means to be an asylum seeker in Norway, as well as the impact this has on their “modes of being-in-the-world” (Willen 2007, p. 8). With this approach in mind, ethnographic research was undertaken during one year between autumn

2017 and autumn 2018. I conducted one initial in-depth semi-structured interview per participant, which followed a life story approach (Atkinson 1998), allowing the participant to tell their story as they wished, only being guided by some questions when needed. Additionally, I spent time with the women, 'hanging out' mostly in their living spaces at the asylum center. This allowed me to observe and listen to their daily activities, moods and problems, which then made it possible to contextualize what they shared in their interviews and get a better grasp of their life stories. The interviews and field notes were analyzed thematically with a critical phenomenological approach (Desjarlais and Throop 2011) and by drawing on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis step-by-step method by Smith et al. (2009). Although this method has been developed within the field of psychology, it has also become popular among social scientists conducting qualitative research with small samples, given this approach's in-depth focus (Smith and Osborn 2003). The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author into the language they were held in or interpreted to (English or Norwegian) and then translated to English. In the cases where an interpreter was used, she was asked to read through the transcription and listen to the interview to make sure the transcription was done correctly and the original meaning was kept.

The interview took place either in the women's accommodation or in a room in the building of the asylum center's administration, a choice that was left up to the participant to make sure they were comfortable. Before starting the interview, I made sure they understood my role as a researcher and the purpose of the research for which they were given an information sheet about the study in their language of choice and were asked to sign the informed consent form. In this consent form I explained the purpose of the research and provided the name, email and telephone number of my supervisor as well as the project number I was given by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in case they had any doubts and wanted to double check my identity or anything else. In this form, it was also explained that their personal information would be treated with utmost care, making sure their stories, when used in articles or presentations, were anonymized. The participants were also asked for permission to record the interview, which in all cases was granted. I also explained that the interviews would be transcribed but that the interpreter and I would be the only ones with access to these transcripts, and that, once the project was finished (in summer 2020), these files would be deleted⁵. Whenever an interpreter was used, she was also asked to sign a confidentiality form.

As mentioned above, several ethical issues were taken into consideration given the vulnerable situation of the participants, such as maintaining the women's identity anonymous. This was done by using pseudonyms, most of which I asked the women to choose themselves. Furthermore, in one particular case, I have anonymized one participant's country of origin due to the particularly sensitive situation that she found herself in with the Norwegian authorities at the time of the interview.

I was particularly aware of the power relations between the participants and me, as a researcher. However, maybe because I was younger than most participants and I had introduced myself as a PhD student at university, I often felt they saw me as a young student whom they wanted to help with her studies. Hence I felt that the power imbalance was not as great as if I had been older or introduced myself as a researcher or if I was an assistant professor/full professor. Furthermore, I felt that being a Spanish/Austrian young woman, who had recently moved to Norway and had to learn the language and adapt to the society, made the interaction with the women easier at times; I noticed most of them becoming more relaxed and comfortable talking about the Norwegian society and system as soon as they found out about my nationality. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there were no power imbalances between the participants and me. In fact, sometimes, especially when discussing issues related to religion with some of the Muslim women, I found that some would not elaborate much. At this point I explained them that I was not Muslim so I would appreciate it if they could give me more details about their religious beliefs and practices so I could understand it better. This would usually

⁵ The material (interviews, transcriptions and field notes) is archived following the personal data protection guidelines determined by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

lead the women to give more elaborated answers. However, in one case in particular the woman did not seem to want to elaborate much on the issue of religion, hence I was not able to include her in this article's sample. I did wonder what had led them initially to not go into detail when discussing issues related to religion. At some point I thought it may have been because they assumed the interpreter (usually a woman from the same nationality or region) to be Muslim and they felt uncomfortable talking about their religion in front of her. It may have also been because they assumed that I was not a Muslim and if they talked much about their religion, they would be worried I would think they were trying to convince me about Islam. To this day this is still unclear to me. Additionally, it is necessary to mention that my particular positionality especially as a non-religious person, who has been brought up in Spain, which is predominantly Catholic, not only had an impact on the relationship with the participants as well as what they shared with me but it also informed my engagement with the stories these women told me.

Eight women aged between 23 and 45 from Ethiopia (1), Syria (3), Turkey (1), China (1), Sudan (1) and a country in the Horn of Africa (1) were recruited over the course of six months. Seven of them were Shia Muslim, although from different traditions; one was Greek Orthodox Christian, and one was a practitioner of Falun Gong⁶. They had various levels of education, from just a few years of school to almost PhD level. They also had different family circumstances; some were mothers and had come to Norway with their husband and children, others had come only with the children, some mothers had come alone without husband and child, and some were single or divorced without children and had come alone. The only criteria they had to fulfill was that they had to either already have received the residence permit, or that they had a high probability of receiving one due to the country they came from (e.g., Syria, Turkey). This was because the project sought to follow the women from the time in the asylum center to when they had received a residence permit and moved to a Norwegian municipality. Six of them had already been granted the residence permit when the interviews were conducted.

4. Results and Discussion: The Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre and the Role of Religious Beliefs and Practices

The everyday life in the asylum center was described by all women as challenging, primarily due to the uncertainty of their circumstances. Not knowing what would happen in their near future, and not having concrete information about their asylum application process, was described as one of the most difficult things they experienced. Even those that had already received the residence permit when I first met them expressed feeling uncertain about how long they would have to wait to be able to move out of the asylum center and how their life after that would look. Furthermore, the limited possibilities they had in their daily life in the center to undertake meaningful activities to create a routine that would distract them from their anxieties and problems, exacerbated the feelings of anxiety and often also demotivation and depression.

4.1. Making Sense of the Asylum Experience

It was often the women's religious beliefs that helped them to make sense of such challenging circumstances that they encountered while seeking asylum and living in the asylum center. Particularly among the Muslim participants, they would draw from the religious belief that their lives were in God's hands and, thus, that whatever circumstances they found themselves in was all part of God's plan. As Katrine⁷, a Muslim-Syrian Kurd and a single mother of three explained.

Your faith makes that you hold it out, 'sabr'⁸, as long as you have faith you can hold it out, you can stand it if you have a difficult situation you think that this has come from God.

⁶ Also called Falun Dafa "is an advanced self-cultivation practice of the Buddha School" (Falun Dafa—Introduction n.d.).

⁷ The names are all pseudonyms. Some, such as "Katrine", were chosen by the participants themselves.

⁸ From Arabic refers to "the capacity to endure in the face of hardship without complaint" (Mahmood 2001, p. 221).

God wants that this will happen, so if you have faith, you manage to withstand it if you think that this comes from God that means that God wants you to hold it out.

Similarly, Nayyat, a Muslim-Ethiopian young woman who had arrived alone in Norway leaving her husband and child behind, also referred to the importance of being patient for Muslims.

We have a saying in Islam, if you are patient, God will give you whatever, it will be, you be patient and then you say, 'Thank God that I was patient everything will happen to me.' [In Islam] there is another saying, 'Everything comes with time'. You can't rush it, so you should be patient, this gives you courage and makes you strong.

Thus, in Nayyat's and in Katrine's account, we can observe how their religion *orients* them in how to deal with challenging circumstances such as uncertainty (Henriksen 2017). Their particular religion, Islam, orients them towards being patient, one of the most prized virtues in Islam and a central element of piety, which needs to be cultivated (Jouili 2015). Mahmood (2001) explains that the purpose of exercising "sabr" is not to diminish one's suffering or helping one reach their goals. Rather, to exercise "sabr" is simply for the purpose of "bear(ing) and liv(ing) hardship *correctly*" (Mahmood 2001, p. 221, emphasis original). Yet, as Nayyat mentions, cultivating patience (sabr) would also lead into developing courage and strength to face the challenges ahead.

For Maryam, a Muslim single young woman from the Horn of Africa⁹ who had come alone to Norway, the difficult circumstances that she was experiencing from seeking asylum were also sent from God, with the purpose to bring her closer to him.

We Muslims think that if God loves you, he will give you a hard time, because then you will pray more and be closer to God in these hard times. (. . .) Even when the worst happens, it is all sent from God, there is a reason for everything.

Both Katrine and Maryam interpreted the situation of the long wait for a residence permit and the challenging everyday life in the asylum center as purposefully sent by God, possibly as a way to test their patience (sabr) and their faith. Hence, a challenging experience was seen as an occasion to work on one's relationship with God and foster the fundamental virtues of Islam (Jouili 2015). Consequently, we could argue that at the same time, this would provide them with a purpose and a meaning in their day-to-day while seeking asylum.

It was often through prayer and reading the Qur'an that they were reminded to be patient and, thus, from where they would cultivate "sabr" and, in turn, find strength and motivation to face their day-to-day, as Pinar, a Muslim-Turkish woman who was in Norway with her children and husband, mentioned.

I motivate myself, reading Qur'an, there it tells me 'patience for sure will bring beautiful things' and I believe it. It freshens my faith every day. If I wouldn't read it, I would have to talk to a person constantly. I haven't talked to people for three months. I'm talking five times a day [to God through prayer].

Furthermore, when Pinar mentions that reading the Qur'an and praying "freshens my faith", she seems to be pointing to how it also has the purpose or result (depending on the intention) of (re)consolidating her faith (Jouili 2015). Once again we see how the religious scriptures orient the women towards exercising patience in the face of the uncertainty of their asylum application. As Henriksen (2017) explains, religion is part of these women's larger system of orientation, hence it grants them direction when dealing with significant challenges.

⁹ I have anonymized her country of origin due to her sensitive circumstances.

4.2. Emotional Transcendence: Gaining Control over Negative Emotions

Without much of a routine while living in the asylum center, many mentioned that it was particularly challenging not to start overthinking about their situation, their previous traumatic experiences and fall into depression, as Nousaiba, a single young Muslim-Sudanese woman, who had arrived alone in Norway, described.

I became so exhausted, so tired, I have been so much time in this room [in the asylum center]. I cried; I am alone. During a long time, I did not go to class I had no one to talk to, I was depressed, I am also a human that has feelings . . . and I think too much. I began to think about my family, how they died, what happened. I did not have anything to do so I began to remember things.

Nayat explained that through certain types of prayer, emotions of patience and ease could be evoked, and this would help her deal with the lack of meaningful activity in the asylum center.

In this time when you are sitting here around you don't do anything you have a lot of free time, we do a special type of prayer it helps spiritually and it gives you a lot of tolerance and it makes it easier, when you are a believer it is like that. (. . .) You pray to God that everything goes smooth 'God give me patience; I want to have a good life'. This makes me feel good and strong. It helps me to look forward.

Others also mentioned praying and reading religious scriptures helped them to regulate the depressive and anxious emotions. Such is the case of Maryam, who related the following.

In general, I try to read every day the Sura al baqarah¹⁰, if you read it fast it will take about one hour or one and a half, so it is long. I read it every day when I can and have the energy in a way as a . . . so I don't to feel bad or depressed.

Similarly, Huan, a single young woman and Falun Gong practitioner from China, who had arrived with a relative in Norway, explained that the spiritual practices of the tradition, involving meditation and qigong exercises, would help her to bring her emotions such as anxiety under control. "It [religious practice] can help me calm down, because you know, religion has a strong power for people [. . .] it helps me calm down, and we trust our God can help us".

Thus, praying and other meditative practices seem to allow the women to temporarily 'leave' the real world behind and provide them with a space to articulate emotions, fears and needs. Riis and Woodhead (2010) call this process *emotional transcendence-transition*, which seems to allow the women to surpass the current situation through gaining distance from the current depressive emotions and gain some perspective and control over them.

4.3. Orientation in the Everyday Life

Furthermore, as is common in migration, the women found themselves in completely foreign environments with a different language that they did not master, and in a society with different social norms from those they were used to. In addition, some experienced discrimination due to their ethnicity or (visible) religious identity, especially on the street or public transportation, but also from certain service providers.

Thus, for many, their faith and the sacred texts offered them with a daily guide on how to lead their lives; from their everyday activities, to the interpersonal interactions and ideologies, especially for when routines are disrupted, such as in displacement (Firth 1995; Henriksen 2016). Several participants expressed that their religion oriented them to have good morals and treat others with compassion,

¹⁰ A chapter in the Qur'an.

tolerance and love. Such is the case of Katrine, whose faith guides her on how to treat people in Norway, even when experiencing discrimination from others.

My faith says that I should help people and be good to people, and that way I get the same back. So, I think that my faith has helped me with the way I relate and behave towards people in Norway.

Likewise, for Huan, the practice of Falun Gong teaches her to “be nice and honest”, and “to control bad temper”. This could be particularly helpful especially when dealing with stressful situations such as the asylum process or having to share facilities with people who feel equally stressed and anxious.

Here, we can see the process of what Riis and Woodhead (2010) term *emotional ordering*—that is, the process in which religions guide devotees towards the emotions they should express at particular times and places. As we see in these women’s narratives, their religion provided them with orientation towards the religious emotion they should be driven by when dealing with others, highlighting the values of compassion, honesty and good morals. Here, we can appreciate the relationship between emotions and values.

Additionally, other women mentioned finding orientation for everyday struggles within religious scriptures, especially when dealing with challenging situations. For Rama, a Syrian-Muslim mother of four, it was the Qur’an which provided her with guidance and thus, safety.

My faith means safety for me (. . .) There are things that happen to me in my everyday life that I can refer to in the Qur’an that I can find an answer to in the Qur’an, that is why this means safety for me.

For other women like Yara, a single young Christian woman from Syria, it was knowing that the sacred was always with her, taking care of her, that made her feel safe.

I think that Jesus is with me all the time. On my way to Norway I had to go through a very difficult and dangerous road. One day when I was crossing the mountains I slipped and there was a river and very high mountains so I think if Jesus was not with me, I would have slid in the river. To come from Syria is very difficult you know, people die at sea. So, I think that all the time Jesus was with me. Until now Jesus is with me, so it’s not different when I came here, the same praying, the same belief, but I know every day Jesus is with me

In an everyday life that was completely different from their day-to-day before coming to Norway, as we see above, for many participants, their religion seemed to provide guidance for classifying the familiar from the unfamiliar, affording them with certain security and confidence (Henriksen 2016, 2017). Moreover, their religion was one of the few things that had stayed in many ways the same, although religion also constantly changes, as the person interpreting it changes and the time and context changes. Nevertheless, religion is one of the few things that a refugee can take with her from her country of origin. We can argue that, for the women in this study, knowing that they had their religious scriptures, their rituals and their relationship with the sacred allowed them to maintain a sense of continuity while experiencing the many changes that came with moving to a new country and seeking asylum. Having a sense of continuity between the past and the present is believed to enable a continuous sense of self; this is particularly important when there are significant changes in a person’s life. Such a sense of continuity diminishes the sense of threat that comes with such significant changes (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010).

Moreover, although these women mention how their religious beliefs and practices helped them to deal with the circumstances they encounter while seeking asylum, it is possible to observe in these women’s narratives that they do not engage in religious practices and rituals consciously and merely for that purpose. That religions provide (emotional) orientation and transformation (Henriksen 2017; Riis and Woodhead 2010) is rather a “secondary effect”; as already mentioned above, religion is first and foremost a “mode of being in the world” (Henriksen 2017, p. 197). As we see, the women in this

study “do” religion for its own sake first and foremost (Avishai 2008), despite at times enacting certain rituals at particular times with a particular goal in mind, such as that of calming their anxiety.

When exploring the women’s requests for divine intervention, as well as their belief in God having the ultimate control over their destiny, as seen above in the narratives of Katrine and Nayyat, these may be seen by many as proof for their passivity and lack of agency in the face of the challenges of seeking asylum. However, several scholars have argued that there is in fact agency in merely “doing religion” (Avishai 2008). For some, trusting in the divine is a conscious choice to “detach themselves from ideals of autonomy and rational choice” (Jouili 2015, p. 185). Others have claimed that there is also agency in suffering and endurance (Asad 2003 in Jouili, Arendt 1958 in (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2017)) as it may “create a space for moral action” (Asad 2003 in Jouili 2015, p. 185) as we can observe in the case of Katrine, Nayyat and Maryam, among others, when they exercise “sabr”, the ultimate Islamic virtue.

4.4. Changes in Religious Beliefs and Practices

As mentioned earlier, in many ways the religious beliefs and practices for many of the women stayed the same in Norway as they had been in their country of origin. However, the environment and circumstances in which they practiced and interpreted their religious faith had changed completely, therefore also having an impact on the role of religion in the women’s life.

Maryam reflected on the effect her new surroundings had on her religiosity.

Here in Norway they don’t care which religion you are. It’s not an issue, so it’s really nice, so for me, I feel more connected to God because there are no other people pushing, there is no pressure. I choose it. I feel relief. Now I understand. Because I’m alone, I’m not surrounded by people, so I feel more connected (to God) now. (. . .) I am more connected because I am alone.

On the one hand, Maryam explains that she is more connected to God in Norway because she does not feel pressure to pray or judgement if she is not praying or doing the religious practices that she is supposed to as a ‘proper Muslim’. This is how she often felt in her country of previous residence, something which many would find rather paradoxical. On the other hand, she feels more connected to God because she is alone, and she is facing challenging circumstances which make her want to seek God more often.

For others, it seemed that a major change was having to deal with becoming a religious minority and having to deal with various forms of discrimination. For example, Pinar recounted how when she attended Norwegian class, or went to the public library, she would pray in the bathroom because there was no other place for her to pray. Most of her classmates, despite being Muslims, did not pray, but she still wanted to do it.

I have done it for years and just because another Muslim doesn’t do it, doesn’t mean that I am not going to do it either. Every day I wash the sejad [prayer rug], I wait for it to dry, I iron it and the next day I do it again, and people don’t know about it. When I’m waiting for the disabled toilets people look at me weird, why is she entering this toilet and staying there 15 minutes? [laughs] It shouldn’t be like this. Namaz [prayer] is the hardest thing in this country and also wearing the hijab.

Additionally, Pinar worried that she would have difficulties acquiring a job later on because of the hijab, as she believed that there was also certain discrimination in Norway towards women wearing the veil, especially at work.

Nousaiba, on the contrary, did not think that she would experience any obstacles due to her hijab if she wanted to work as a bus driver, which was her dream since she was a child.

Why should there be a problem [with the hijab]? I will keep my hijab, I will be modern and adapt to the society and to the job, I will wear the uniform that is needed [for driving a bus], it is just the hijab that I want to keep. In this society there are many Muslims, some that use

hijab and others that don't, I will be from those that wear hijab. I can adapt so that in a way I become one of them but at the same time I want to keep myself, my belief and my hijab.

She saw Norway as a country where there were already many Muslims and, thus, where the hijab was accepted. However, she did think that she needed to adapt her clothing style, from the long dress she usually wore to uniform trousers to be able to drive a bus.

In most cases, the women also attended religious services and events less frequently than they had done previously in their home country. Few participants in this study mentioned regularly attending religious meetings or activities. The Muslim participants prayed regularly at home due to personal preferences and habit from their country of origin and only some attended the mosque during major Islamic festivities such as Eid el Fitr and Eid el Adha. Others would not go at all because they thought the mosque was "ugly, smelled bad" and in general was "not a welcoming place" and there were not many mosques in the area to choose from. Huan faced similar obstacles to her participation in the practice of Falun Gong with fellow practitioners, given that there was no organization nearby.

Only Yara regularly went to church, at least once or twice a week. It is logical to think that the reason why Yara was more active than the Muslim or Falun Gong practicing women in this study was because Norway itself is predominantly Christian, therefore making it easier for her to find activities and meetings to attend. Attending church was very important for her; it allowed her to come into contact with other fellow Christians and pray together with them, arguably providing her with feelings of stability and belonging (see also [Ysseldyk et al. 2010](#)). By attending church, she would also meet Norwegians with whom she could practice the language. In addition, this may have provided her with feelings of belonging and helped her extending her social network, which could potentially offer possibilities for friendship as well as employment (see also [Foley and Hoge 2007](#); [Chafetz and Ebaugh 2000](#)).

Out of all the changes, it seemed that a rather significant (and obvious) one was that the daily physical environment, the spaces in which the women now practiced their religious faith, had changed significantly. They would do their daily prayers, meditation and scripture reading in the asylum center rooms where there was limited privacy and space. The latter had a particular effect on Huan's Falun Gong practice as it required space around her to move her arms and her room was so small that she would hit the furniture when she did so. She would sometimes resort to practicing outdoors, but that was often not possible due to the cold, rainy or snowy weather in Norway. For the few that practiced their religious rituals outside of the center, like Yara, who attended church, she mentioned this space was also completely different than the space she went to church back in Syria. The churches she attended in Norway had no decoration, pictures of Jesus and almost no candles, and although she did enjoy singing and praying with others, she felt there was something missing. The whole atmosphere created by the sacred paintings and the candles and even the scent that she was used to find in a church was not what she would encounter. Hence, the experience and emotions that would usually come up when attending church in Syria may not be the same as those when attending church in Norway.

As we have seen, when Pinar prayed outside of her house, she at times had to pray on toilet floors because there was no prayer room. She expressed that this was extremely hard and even embarrassing for her and sometimes she would even be afraid that someone would find her and tell her off for praying there. Hence, her praying ritual that was meant to be peaceful and focused was now at the least distracted and at worst filled with feelings of shame and fear. The spaces in which religion is practiced, as well as the religious objects that are within these spaces, are said to play a considerable role in shaping the emotions and the spiritual connection during these practices ([Riis and Woodhead 2010](#); see also [Brace et al. 2010](#)). These women were practicing in spaces that not only were often lacking the common religious objects but were also spaces that were not ideal for conducting religious rituals (e.g., toilets, small rooms). Hence, these spaces not only may not provoke the right kind of religious emotions but they also may make the connection with the sacred more challenging. Arguably, this could have an impact on the role of religion, in particular the practices and rituals for these women, especially in the long run.

5. Conclusions

This article has used the notion of ‘everyday lived religion’ (Ammerman 2007, 2013; McGuire 2008) as a methodological lens, which has allowed us to shift the gaze towards the role of religious beliefs and practices among women living in asylum centers, places that are not usually associated with religion and where the religious sphere of their residents is often neglected. As a result, this article has shown that religion is not something people do consciously or unconsciously to further extra-religious aims; rather, it is a “mode of being in the world” (Henriksen 2017, p. 197, Avishai 2008). It is primarily a way to understand the world and make sense of it. For women seeking asylum in Norway, their religion is a compass in their everyday life in the asylum center. First and foremost, it helps them make sense of the uncertain and despairing process of seeking asylum by providing them with a purpose and a meaning for their struggles. In particular, religious rituals allow them to transform and transcend difficult emotional states.

Their religion also offers them practical and moral guidance in the new socio-cultural and religious environment, in particular in regard to how to treat others.

Furthermore, it also provides them with a sense of continuity, as their religious beliefs and practices, as well as their relationship with the sacred, is one of the few things that they were able to ‘carry’ with them to Norway. However, their religious beliefs, practices and identity also experience certain changes in the new context. Being in a new physical setting, and the disadvantages of the living circumstances in the asylum center, such as the lack of space and privacy, often limits their religious practices. Being in a new socio-cultural environment, especially for the Muslims and the Falun Gong practitioner, means having limited opportunities to practice their religion in community as well as the effects that becoming part of a religious minority in the host country has on their identity.

Finally, looking through the lens of the ideas of agency in docility by Mahmood (2005) and agency in ‘doing religion’ by Avishai (2008) helps us also highlight the agency the women exercised in contexts of asylum. “To see agency one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing, it suffices to note how members of conservative religions “do”—observe, perform—religion, wherever that might lead” (Avishai 2008, p. 429). Hence, focusing on their religious beliefs and practices has not only made it possible to examine the role they play in their everyday lives in asylum, to make sense of it and deal with it; it has also made it possible to observe the agency of these women in ‘doing religion’ in the asylum center, where agency is so commonly overlooked.

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