

Exploring Fictive Kinship among Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in the Church of Sweden

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Introduction

Between 2014 and 2016, Sweden saw an influx of 44,617 unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) claiming asylum and seeking to build a new life far from their homelands. Many of these were Afghans who had lived and even been born in Iran. Since their arrival, the Church of Sweden has received hundreds of these young people desiring to join the church and become Christians.¹ This phenomenon is notable in an institution that is known for its declining membership and which does not have a reputation for actively recruiting new members.² The question of Christian conversion among refugees has been the subject of recent debate after it emerged that Sweden's migration office has been ruling consistently that URM converts lack the grounds necessary to be granted asylum.³ Those denied asylum have faced deportation to their homelands. Advocates within the Swedish Pentecostal Movement, among others, have been contesting the type of questions used

1. At the time of writing, exact statistics on this phenomenon were not available from the Church of Sweden.

2. Jonas Bromander & Pernilla Jonsson, *Medlemmar i rörelse: En studie av förändringar i Svenska kyrkans medlemskår*, Uppsala 2018.

3. Micael Grenholm, "Why Is Sweden Deporting Christians to Persecution?", <https://pcpj.org/2019/02/17/why-is-sweden-deporting-christians-to-persecution/>, accessed 2019-08-14; Ulrik Josefsson, "Migrationsverket skickar konvertiterna till döden", *Expressen* 2018-11-07, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/migrationsverket-skickar-konvertiterna-till-doden/>, accessed 2019-08-14.

to determine if an individual is really Christian, arguing that they are theologically complex and skewed towards a particular understanding of what it means to be a Christian.⁴

The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion on URM conversion by presenting an alternative perspective to the outside-in approach that typifies much of the analysis on the subject and which reduces conversion to merely a strategy for improving the individual's chance of asylum.⁵ It looks at the phenomenon of conversion on two levels. First, giving voice to the URMs themselves provides us with a bottom-up picture which helps us to understand their reasoning and experiences as individuals whose identity journeys we are interested in. Secondly, by including contributions made by priests and deacons working with these young people, we gain an understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the church structure, its leadership and administration, and any tensions and challenges that exist therein.

For this article, I take Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice as a point of departure for understanding the predominance of practice over theory in the value formation of groups and individuals. For Bourdieu, an individual's position in a social field is determined by his habitus, a "system of structured, structuring dispositions" which "is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions". Habitus consists not simply of hard skills, but also mannerisms, language, ways of dressing, and indirectly associated knowledge which has been internalized. It functions as "accumulated capital" which influences one's position within a social field.⁶ URMs living in Sweden find themselves in an environment in which the dominant habitus is different from their homelands and where, if they are to succeed, they must adapt. Bourdieu calls this mismatch between habitus and social field *hysteresis*, a form of crisis which necessitates the rapid transformation of habitus.⁷

Bridging Bourdieu's habitus and Charles Taylor's social imaginaries, James Smith offers the concept of cultural liturgies, which could be seen as

4. Micael Grenholm, "These Are the Questions Sweden Asks Asylum Seekers to See If They're 'Real' Christians", *The Christian Post* 2019-02-12, <https://www.christianpost.com/voice/sweden-asks-asylum-seekers-real-christians.html>, accessed 2019-08-14.

5. Szabolcs Kéri & Christina Sleiman, "Religious Conversion to Christianity in Muslim Refugees in Europe", *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 39 (2017), 283–294; Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen & Gitte Buch-Hansen, "Listening to the Voices: Refugees as Co-Authors of Practical Theology", *Practical Theology* 11 (2018), 29–41; Admir Skodo, "Migrant Smuggling, Reasons for Fleeing, and Uses of Asylum Capital among Afghan Asylum Seekers in Sweden", *Nidaba* 3 (2018), 1–11.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, CA 1990, 52, 56.

7. Cheryl Hardy, "Hysteresis", in Michael Grenfell (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, Stocksfield 2008, 148.

a teleological approach to practice theory. Cultural liturgies hinge on the idea that we continuously participate in practices which shape us as human beings in the direction of a particular *telos*. Liturgies exist in all spheres of life and shape our social imaginaries towards the embodiment of a particular vision. Social imaginaries are distinct from worldviews in that they are situated in one's understanding, rather than in one's knowledge and are thus "closer to the body".⁸ This echoes the concept of habitus, which operates on a deeper level than the conscious, forming a kind of "muscle memory" which our conscious does not control.⁹ Habitus is, in a sense, programmed into us through continuous training in the home and through education.¹⁰ We all participate, by choice or convention, in practices which (largely covertly) direct our beings towards a particular goal.

Just as habitus is identity in practice, fictive kinship is family enacted. Fictive kinship looks at how non-blood relationships mimic, and often replace, those of biological family members.¹¹ Fictive kin can provide a sense of belonging that is not possible with one's blood relatives, because of social or geographical distance.

As argued elsewhere, identity in the context of migration should not be understood as something fixed and permanent, but rather in terms of ongoing processes.¹² Individuals on migration journeys are themselves forced to redefine and re-evaluate their identities in response to encountering new social fields which differ markedly from those of their homelands. Identity fluidity emerges along with freedom to contest and reject the norms of the societies they have left.¹³ This can result in individuals redefining themselves according to categories that are altogether new, or broadening their definition of existing categories.¹⁴ Reflecting on her work with Syrian refugees in

8. James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Grand Rapids, MI 2009, 65.

9. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge 1991, 17, 21.

10. See Loïc Wacquant, "Habitus as Topic and Tool: Reflections on Becoming a Prizefighter", *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8 (2011), 81–92.

11. Sebnem Koser Akcapar, "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey", *International Migration Review* 40 (2006), 817–853; Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*, 2nd ed., Cambridge 2014.

12. Jonathan Morgan, "Choosing Heresy: How Muslim-Background Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Do Identity and Belonging in the Church of Sweden", Lund University MA thesis, 2018. Cf. Kathryn Kraft, "Religious Exploration and Conversion in Forced Displacement: A Case Study of Syrian Muslim Refugees in Lebanon Receiving Assistance from Evangelical Christians", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32 (2017), 221–235.

13. Kraft, "Religious Exploration"; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York 2004.

14. Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, 2nd ed., London 2000; Kraft, "Religious Exploration"; Roy, *Globalized Islam*; Paul Tabar, Greg Noble & Scott Poynting, *On Being Lebanese in Australia: Identity, Racism, and the Ethnic Field*,

Lebanon, Kathryn Kraft remarks that “the break with their former identity already happened when they were forced to flee their homes, often dodging shellfire. Life as a refugee meant picking up the pieces and building something new”.¹⁵ Taking this view, the young people in this study should be understood not in terms of fixed categories, but as individuals in process, reflecting on their previous experiences from a very particular vantage point.

The Church of Sweden

The Church of Sweden was, until 2000, Sweden’s state church. It has approximately six million members,¹⁶ who belong by virtue of being baptized and confirmed in the church. While the Church of Sweden has been disestablished since 2000, officials are nominated by secular political parties, leading some to argue that it is in fact now more deeply integrated with the state than it was before.¹⁷ While the membership of the Church of Sweden accounts for more than 50 percent of the population, a considerable number opt to leave the church each year; in both 2016 and 2017, more than 90,000 people gave up their membership.¹⁸ In terms of visible membership, it is thought that 80,000 of the members are actively involved, through participation in weekly worship services.¹⁹

What the Church of Sweden is, and how it functions, has been discussed at length by those seeking to make sense of its identity following its disestablishment in 2000, and to grasp its relationship with an increasingly pluralistic Swedish society.²⁰ Although it is commonly believed that the Church of Sweden ceased to be under state control when it became formally disestablished, Thomas Girmalm and Marie Rosenius argue that the state continues to define the shape of the Church of Sweden through binding definition enshrined in law.²¹ Part of this state-definition has involved

Beirut 2010.

15. Kraft, “Religious Exploration”.

16. “Svenska kyrkan i siffror”, <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik>, accessed 2019-08-14.

17. Anders Ekenberg, “The Church in Sweden: Secularisation and Ecumenism as Challenges”, *Polonia Sacra* 20:2 (2016), 23–45.

18. Bromander & Jonsson, *Medlemmar i rörelse*.

19. Ekenberg, “The Church in Sweden”.

20. Ekenberg, “The Church in Sweden”; Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg, “Christianity in a Post-Christian Context: Immigration, Church Identity, and the Role of Religion in Public Debates”, in Ulrich Schmiedel & Graeme Smith (eds.), *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, Cham 2018, 123–143; Phil Zuckerman, “Why Are Danes and Swedes So Irreligious?”, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 22 (2009), 55–69; Sven-Erik Brodd, “Impressions of the Church of Sweden: Liberal and Catholic with Nuances of Lutheranism”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 17 (2017), 133–155.

21. Thomas Girmalm & Marie Rosenius, “From State Church to Faith Community: An Analysis of Worldly and Spiritual Power in the Church of Sweden”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 13 (2013), 48–58.

making the General Assembly (*Kyrkomötet*) the highest decision-making body in the church. Anders Ekenberg has argued that this is tantamount to reducing the status of priests to mere civil servants employed by the parish council, rather than the spiritual leaders they once were.²² In today's Church of Sweden, it is political parties who put forward candidates for political leadership in the church and the church membership that votes for who will represent it.

Some have argued that the Church of Sweden has maintained its privileged position in society through an emphasis on its identity as a folk church (*folkkyrka*).²³ For example, Anders Bäckström and Grace Davie argue that the Church of Sweden has used this concept to redefine itself as something akin to a branch of the welfare state.²⁴ However, Ekenberg argues that this attempt at retaining influence has backfired in the long term since it has meant a steady loss of identity to political actors and, over time, a receding membership.²⁵ While it may not have served the church's post-disestablishment identity formation, folk church ideology provides a conceptual background to the practice of warmly inviting Muslim background refugees into the church community, and creating a space which is religious and yet enables belonging prior to, or without, confession of faith.

While embedded within the political system, the Church of Sweden has also found a voice as a critic of the state, particularly in relation to migration policies;²⁶ this has included joining forces with the Swedish branch of Save the Children to amplify its message.²⁷ The Church of Sweden finds itself consistently at odds with the office for migration, which has proven hostile to those seeking asylum on the grounds of conversion.²⁸ It has been vocal in its support of URM's who face deportation after failed asylum applications, recommending instead that they should be offered amnesty. It is outside the scope of this paper to comment on the correlation between activism against state policy and disestablishment, but such activity demonstrates the ambivalence in the relationship between church and state.

22. Ekenberg, "The Church in Sweden".

23. Anders Bäckström & Grace Davie, *Welfare and Religion in 21st Century Europe: Volume I. Configuring the Connections*, Farnham 2010; Ekenberg, "The Church in Sweden".

24. Bäckström & Davie, *Welfare and Religion*.

25. Ekenberg, "The Church in Sweden".

26. Joakim Lundgren, "Biskop tar strid för ensamkommande", *Dagen* 2017-03-05, <http://www.dagen.se/biskop-tar-strid-for-ensamkommande-1.932222>, accessed 2019-08-14; "Svenska kyrkan välkomnar förslag om ensamkommande barn", <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/nyheter/svenska-kyrkan-valkomnar-forslag-om-ensamkommande-barn>, accessed 2019-08-14.

27. "Svenska kyrkan och Rädda Barnen: Stoppa utvisningarna till Afghanistan," <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/nyheter/svenska-kyrkan-och-radda-barnen-stoppa-utvisningarna-till-afghanistan>, accessed 2019-08-14.

28. Lundgren, "Biskop tar strid".

Method

The data discussed in this article were collected between October 2017 and February 2018 as part of fieldwork carried out at two Church of Sweden congregations in southern Sweden. During these months I immersed myself in the activities of these parishes, attending masses and Bible studies. Each congregation was well attended by URM^s and URM-background²⁹ young adults. For the sake of confidentiality, I have obfuscated the names of these congregations as well as those of priests, deacons, and URM^s who took part in this study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with two priests, one deacon, and six URM-background young adults who participated in the work of these congregations. All interviews were arranged by referral, following a snowball sampling approach,³⁰ in cooperation with staff at the congregations and participants gave consent to their responses being used in the context of academic research. “Verbal iterative” consent was utilized to ensure that participants understood that they could walk away from interviews at any time, without consequence.³¹ Interviews were in Swedish or English and took place on congregation premises or in cafés. At the outset I made it clear that responses were confidential and would have no impact on their asylum processes.

Entry Points into the Church of Sweden

The congregations I visited were highly visible due to their historic buildings, warm in their welcome, and socially engaged. For my participants, there were two general paths by which they came into contact with the Church of Sweden. The first was through exposure to Christians who took interest in them and invited them to church events. This pathway is illustrated by Almas, who encountered two Christians on his journey to Europe. On the boat between Turkey and Greece, he became friends with a convert to Christianity who other passengers had shunned. This man told him stories about Jesus. In Greece, an Orthodox priest welcomed him into his home, where he stayed for several days.³² These experiences cemented an openness in Almas’s mind toward Christians and later, when he was struggling with drug addiction, he sought help from the church.

The second pathway that my participants described was through a journey of curiosity, as they took advantage of their new-found religious

29. Young adults who came to Sweden as URM^s.

30. Anthony Giddens & Philip W. Sutton, *Sociology*, 6th ed., Cambridge 2009, 132.

31. Marcus Herz & Philip Lalander, “An Abstract and Nameless, but Powerful, Bystander – ‘Unaccompanied Children’ Talking about Their Social Workers in Sweden”, *Nordic Social Work Research* 9 (2018), 1–11.

32. Morgan, “Choosing Heresy”.

freedom and used it to explore questions that they had always wanted to ask. Those who came across the church through this pathway found what they described as a unique environment where no question was taboo. This was quite unlike the highly regulated religious environment of Iran. They were able to ask questions that they had never been permitted to in their homeland, and this experience became a springboard into deciding for themselves what to believe.³³ Khaled described life in Iran: “We couldn’t speak openly because we were afraid. I had many questions that I wanted to ask, but my Dad said ‘No! You can’t do that. It’s against their [the imams]’ beliefs. You can’t do that or something bad will happen.”³⁴ His natural inquisitiveness was regarded by family members as something of a threat to the peaceful manner in which they sought to live, a liability that could put them at odds with a powerful religious system. Coming to Sweden meant that Khaled was free to ask questions and he began by using Google to learn more about Shia Islam, the stream into which he was born. Before long he was also learning about evolution and Buddhism. Eventually he began reading about Christianity and asked a friend to take him to church. He spent several months attending St. Mary’s church, where he was encouraged to ask questions and described being deeply impacted by the loving atmosphere that he encountered there.³⁵ Apart from the friendship-pathway and the curiosity-pathway, the priests I interviewed described how some of their URM-background members came to the church after having dreams of a religious nature featuring a figure who they believed to be Jesus.³⁶ However, this pathway was not mentioned by any of my URM participants.

Earlier in this text I mentioned the tendency of those who take an outside-in approach to analysis of this phenomenon to assume that conversions are primarily need-driven, driven by the desire to optimize the opportunity of remaining in Sweden.³⁷ This approach tends to view conversions as fake, and to paint churches as either naïve to the cunning of these newcomers, or as somehow profiting from their vulnerability. Szabolcs Kéri and Christina Sleiman describe it this way: “A strong public criticism of Christian religious transformation in Muslim people is based on the assumption that these are not genuine conversions, but reflect personal needs and interests (e.g., gaining refugee status and financial compensation).”³⁸

33. Morgan, “Choosing Heresy”.

34. Interview with Khaled, 2017-10-31.

35. Interview with Khaled, 2017-10-31.

36. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

37. Kéri & Sleiman, “Religious Conversion”; Lorensen & Buch-Hansen, “Listening to the Voices”; Skodo, “Migrant Smuggling”.

38. Kéri & Sleiman, “Religious Conversion”, 290.

However, after looking at the conversion narratives of 124 Muslim-background converts to Christianity in Europe, they found that the most common conversion pattern was one of intellectual enquiry, and not interest or needs-driven. Prior to conversion, their respondents spent time reading the Bible, asking intellectual questions, and learning about a perspective on God that they had not previously been exposed to. Rather than a sudden change, these conversion paths took place over an extended period of time.³⁹

Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen and Gitte Buch-Hansen suggest that an over-emphasis on what first motivated the desire to convert detracts from the more pragmatic reality that “all of us have mixed motives for our religious engagement. The motives may even change during the day [...] we cannot separate faith from feelings of loneliness, from existential anxiety, from a longing to be welcomed, recognised, and loved”.⁴⁰ While there are those who convert out of a natural desire to improve their migration opportunities, such individuals do not represent the whole. There are those who are drawn to the church out of a genuine interest in spiritual matters, and there are those who are drawn to the church because they offer to meet some other need that they have.⁴¹ Of this latter group, there are those who after having their initial need met, embark on a journey of conversion which they had not anticipated at first contact. It is important to note that the dominant narrative ignores a considerable number of genuine conversions and that by regarding all conversions as fake, we lose the opportunity to increase our understanding of this area of identity formation.

A Sense of Belonging

For children, experiencing a sense of belonging has been shown to be of great importance in their processes of adaptation to a new society; it plays a role in educational success as well as reducing the likelihood of involvement in destructive patterns of behaviour.⁴² In-person and virtual social networks are an important factor in the lives of any young person. The URM in this study all experienced relationships of ambivalence with their families back home. For some, converting meant choosing between outright rejection, and withholding information from their parents. When Amir told his parents of his conversion they “got very angry” and ceased contact with

39. Kéri & Sleiman, “Religious Conversion”.

40. Lorensen & Buch-Hansen, “Listening to the Voices”, 36.

41. Kéri & Sleiman, “Religious Conversion”; Kraft, “Religious Exploration”; Lorensen & Buch-Hansen, “Listening to the Voices”.

42. Björn Ramel et al., “Overrepresentation of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in Inpatient Psychiatric Care”, *SpringerPlus* 4:131 (2015), 1–6; James Reavell & Qulsom Fazil, “The Epidemiology of PTSD and Depression in Refugee Minors Who Have Resettled in Developed Countries”, *Journal of Mental Health* 26 (2017), 74–83.

him.⁴³ This is the reaction that Rahim and Almas feared their families would have, and so at the time of our interviews had not yet informed them about their conversions. However, there are those whose parents accept their new-found Christianity, and continue to express love towards them regardless of their new identity markers. This group includes Sohrab's family, who told him "you can decide for yourself".⁴⁴

Although families reacted differently to their conversions, what my participants all had in common was that they were on their own in Sweden and were compelled to build new support networks here. These churches, with their holistic approach to caring for the needs of URMs, took on the role of family. While there were no blood ties between the members of this group, they looked to other Christian URMs, and to the priests, as family. Sohrab put it this way: "They are like my family because they help me in lots of kinds of situations. Like even [though] we are far away from our families [...] we have a huge family here in Sweden."⁴⁵

These young men formed a band of brothers who supported one another in their challenges and needs in Sweden. In these units of fictive kinship, priests became surrogate parent figures, advising these young men on a range of matters outside of those typically expected of priests. The priests who participated in this study reported being asked questions on everything from God's love to romantic relationships and even fashion as the URM converts sought to determine the boundaries and requirements of their Christian faith. Stefan described this: "They could ask me, 'is it okay to kiss a girl before you're married?' And I said, 'sure.' Or I guess I said, 'it's up to you.' And they said, 'is it okay to tattoo yourself?' 'If you want to,' I said."⁴⁶ Rather than dishing out black-and-white answers to such questions, priests sought to encourage these young men towards deepening their understanding of Scripture and deciding for themselves how to behave. They were clear that it was not their desire to coerce these young people into believing the Christian message, or behaving in a certain way, but instead to create a safe environment to experience peace, love, and acceptance.

As families go, the Church of Sweden is unique in the way that it connects the URMs to the broader society, first through its employed staff members, priests, deacons, and wardens, but also to the wider church community. Whereas children who migrate with their biological families can find them a hindrance to their adaptation to their host society,⁴⁷ the new family that

43. Morgan, "Choosing Heresy", 2.

44. Morgan, "Choosing Heresy", 45.

45. Morgan, "Choosing Heresy", 45.

46. Interview with Stefan, 2018-02-19.

47. Marcus Herz, "Becoming' a Possible Threat: Masculinity, Culture and Questioning

these young people have joined serves to facilitate their acquisition of the capital necessary to succeed.

High Levels of Devotion among URM Members

From a church perspective, one of the remarkable aspects of the conversion processes of these young people is their high level of dedication to the Christian life and to their involvement in the church. Stefan described it this way: “They wanted to become part of the church in the apostolic way, like being disciples, and that’s really more than most.”⁴⁸ Kurt compared this group of URMs with the leadership board at his previous parish. He had struggled to convince the board to attend services and was met with disbelief when he suggested they come to a Bible study once per month: “They told me, ‘we paid you for being in the church on Sundays. Not for us being there.’”⁴⁹ The board expected him to carry out the functions of tradition, even if no-one attended. Regarding this form of Christianity, Kurt told me: “It’s not something lived. It’s culture.”⁵⁰ In contrast, he said, the URM group “is alive. [When] I was working there, I was emotionally [...] tired. Here that is not the case [... I am] happy to meet people [...] happy with the work. We are working with the things which the church should work with.”⁵¹ Working with a highly engaged group of young people and building community around the practices of the church gives Kurt life and energy for the tasks he is involved with.

Bringing the Liturgies of Their Homelands

One possible explanation for the high level of dedication among URM converts is that they are incorporating their new beliefs into old modes of practice. Although in their home countries they may not have liked the way that Islam wrapped itself around their entire way of life, it is the social imaginary to which they have been trained.⁵² It is in many ways the only perspective they have on religion. Much as someone from a highly secularized, Western society might struggle to perceive religion as anything more than something that one participates in for a couple of hours per week, for these young men, it is difficult to conceive of a religion that does not concern itself with every facet of one’s life. Such social imaginaries are not simply a matter of

among Unaccompanied Young Men in Sweden”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 26 (2019), 431–449.

48. Interview with Stefan, 2018-02-19.

49. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

50. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

51. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

52. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 65.

changing one's ideas about the way the world works, but more about an internal disposition (not dissimilar to Bourdieu's habitus) which has more to do with "noncognitive understanding" than "cognitive knowledge or set of beliefs".⁵³

Olivier Roy argues that in the West there is a "delinking of religious and cultural patterns" which has a marked impact on the identity of the displaced *ummah*.⁵⁴ He believes that the result of this secularization process is a more individualistic approach to religion. Instead of adhering to a highly centralized system governed by Islamic authority figures such as Imams and Ayatollahs, Western Muslims are drawn to religious gurus who offer to tailor modern self-help aesthetic to Islamic sensibilities.⁵⁵ Following Roy's argument, one might expect Muslim-background converts to Christianity to exhibit the same kind of individualization of religious practice. New converts should be seeking religion that has more in common with secular society and displays a distaste for an overly theological approach to spirituality. However, for these young men, group practices are central to their lives of faith.

The participants in this study appear to have appropriated liturgies from their homelands for use in their lives as Christians. These included regular group prayer, learning scripture, or viewing their religious formation as group-situated. They carry with them a sense of identity that is oriented first and foremost around being Christians. For my participants, their Christianity was instrumental in shaping their attitudes and their behaviour towards others outside of the church community. They sought to learn and practice the teachings of Jesus and relate them to everyday life. They would also regularly bring along others from the same background, URM's who were themselves curious about the Christian life.

Priests Seek to Establish Credibility

The priests and deacons I interviewed were well aware of the political implications of the work they do, and sought to tread the line between their roles as public figures and spiritual guides carefully. Indeed, the politics of this work has implications both outside and inside the church, with outside scrutiny coming from those who perceive them as naively meddling with asylum politics, and inside challenges coming from elected officials who are suspicious of so much of the church's resources being used on those who

53. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 65.

54. Roy, *Globalized Islam*, 27. Cf. Morgan, "Choosing Heresy".

55. Roy, *Globalized Islam*, 31.

are not tax-paying members. Stefan described a moment when these latter tensions emerged:

At one point the question was raised by the politicians, “why do you do so much for this group that’s not paying” [...] it’s the same question that’s raised on a country level, “why are we taking care of those who are coming now when we have people who have been there their whole life, who have paid the state and shouldn’t we take more care of them?”

While it seems that this discussion was resolved swiftly, by the vicar arguing that the church has to be engaged with this kind of Christian work, it illustrates well the power dynamics that are at play in the everyday life of the church.

It is in answer to the political pressure to be perceived as a “credible actor”⁵⁶ in the public discourse over the rights of URM in Sweden, that both parishes have instituted a baptismal process which requires a greater level of commitment from their URM congregants than many other Church of Sweden congregations. Prospective converts are required to participate in weekly Bible studies, baptismal classes, and to attend Sunday services. Priests were candid in describing the perception that some URM have of the opportunities that are linked to conversion and spoke of the efforts they have taken to discourage those who are merely seeking a shortcut to residency. Kurt, a priest at St. Mary’s, told me that he believed this one year rule is, for the most part, effective in dissuading those seeking migration capital: “If you are calculated, a year will put you off. Because you have to act a whole year [...] the majority of times that is the case that I’ve booked a meeting with them and they won’t show up and I won’t hear anything from them.”⁵⁷ In his experience, a year is long enough to discourage those who are disingenuous. Those who feign interest in Christianity because they think it will help their residence status quickly lose interest when they discover the commitment that the church requires of them. He argues that this requirement positions the church as a credible actor and ensures that those who attend baptismal classes do so out of a genuine desire to grow in the Christian faith.⁵⁸

56. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

57. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

58. Interview with Kurt and Caroline, 2017-10-25.

New Approaches by Priests

Both of the parishes in my study were part of the network *Framtiden bor hos oss* (“The future lives with us”), which seeks to find new approaches to church in light of a growing multiculturalism.⁵⁹ Both parishes had Bible study groups that gathered the URM in their congregations to study Scripture, discuss how to apply it, pray, and offer pastoral support. One of the churches, St. Christopher’s, offered their study after their weekly Taizé mass. The study began with a *fikastund* (coffee time), and the twelve-or-so participants sat on sofas as the priests and deacons led them through a discussion of the text that would feature in the worship service the following Sunday. St. Mary’s had a larger group of URM and a group time that combined coffee drinking, teaching by one of the priests, discussion, creative times for activities such as decorating candles, thematic studies based around the Wreath of Christ (*frälsarkransen*) prayer beads, and baptism classes.

The priests I interviewed shaped their practices around the needs felt by their congregants. All expressed the desire to offer a warm and inviting environment where URM could explore faith for themselves. At both churches, the priests described experimenting with different group activities in order to find what was most beneficial to their members. Stefan, one of the priests I interviewed, told me of a season in which he had partnered with a parish educator (*församlingspedagog*) to take St. Christopher’s URM Bible study group through six months of learning about God through experiences, based on a programme that the congregation had developed for confirmands. Among other things, these included taking walks in the countryside, creating artwork, and writing. At the end of the six months, Stefan asked the URM if they would like to carry on with these experiences, and was told, bluntly, that they would rather study the Bible.⁶⁰ The priests responded to this feedback by returning their URM congregants to a routine of regular Bible study.

Conclusion

The parishes where I carried out my research are remarkable in the diversity of their congregants, with URM making up one-fifth to one-third of the congregations. Their presence and involvement with the church communities had shaped them as individuals, providing them with fictive kinship and a site for developing a sense of coherence between life in their homelands and life in their new host country. It has also led to change within the

59. “Framtiden bor hos oss”, <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/framtidenborhososs>, accessed 2019-08-14; Kristina Helgesson Kjellin, *En bra plats att vara på: En antropologisk studie av mångfaldsarbete och identitetsskapande inom Svenska kyrkan*, Skellefteå 2016.

60. Morgan, “Choosing Heresy”.

congregations they have joined. These congregations are now in the unique position of having a highly engaged post-confirmation-age group. The practice of Bible study has increased in importance as priests have sought to root the Christianity of these young people not in cultural Christianity, but in Scripture. This study suggests that the needs of URM are impacting the role of priests, as they come to terms with the need for providing positive adult role models to young people with no biological family in Sweden. There are also signs that these new converts are influencing the church toward more dogmatic, less secularized practices, with an emphasis on biblical teaching.

This study is just the beginning of building knowledge on this field and it is yet to be seen if and how these young people continue to engage with the Church of Sweden in the long term and if their remarkable level of commitment will be sustained. All but one of the URM-background young people in this study had become Christians since 2014 and are thus relatively new in their identities as Christians. This phenomenon of conversion among Muslim background youth is a positive sign for the church as it has breathed life into an institution that has been in decline. It will be interesting to see if the Church of Sweden continues to adapt its community life and practices to the needs of a new group from an altogether different religious tradition, and how this process will be reconciled with pressure from those within the political establishment of the church who champion tradition over change. ▲

SUMMARY

The Church of Sweden is becoming increasingly multicultural, not least because of the arrival of hundreds of unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) seeking to belong and be baptized into the church since 2014. While there has been speculation about the pull factors which attract them to the church, little is known about the ways in which these young people narrate their own identity processes and decisions to convert. Still less is known about the impact that these young people are having on the church itself. With reference to empirical data gathered at the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018, this article examines the two directional change that is taking place within the Church of Sweden. Firstly, paying attention to the narratives of URM converts, I describe the common pathways taken by URM into membership in the church and the sense of belonging that they find there. I then look at the impact that the presence of these young people is having on the church, paying particular attention to the role of priests and the re-emphasis on the centrality of Scripture.