

**Creating Credibility – Performing Plausibility:
Interdisciplinary Challenges in Practices of
Assessment of *sur place* Cases of Conversion to
Christianity within the EU+ Countries with
Particular Attention to the Netherlands**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conversion to Christianity as an asylum claim within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the asylum legislation of the nation-states within the European Union+ creates an intersection where governmental and non-governmental agencies interact in individual cases. These agencies are informed by different academic disciplines (law, theology, religious studies, psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, political studies) so they are familiar with different terminologies.

This article, based on interdisciplinary methodology, seeks to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon in which “conversion” (a theological concept, phenomenon, practice) becomes a key legal component of case analysis and assessment. “Asylum applications based on conversion often operate outside the secular state’s ‘comfort zone’ of objective facts. They are nevertheless to be negotiated inside its institutions. Very different spheres of life, institutions, discourses and actors are brought together into the truth-finding field of asylum seekers’ conversion.”¹ This acknowledges that the assessment practices of conversion as an asylum claim place all actors involved (inclusive religious ones) outside their “comfort zone”; the “modern” state with its labels and categories

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¹ Markus Elias Ramsauer and Ayşe Çağlar, “Making the Convert Speak: The Production of Truth and the ‘Apparatus of Conversion’ in Austria”, in *Asylum and Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Lena Rose and Ebru Öztürk (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 66.

proves incompetent to decide matters of asylum legislation and thus also matters of conversion.

The article makes two major claims. Firstly, the legal-bureaucratic system in which the asylum seeker as an individual must provide evidence for their case in an “authentic” fashion operates in a way which leads to the nihilation of that what its most after: the narrative of the asylum seeker. Secondly, the article problematizes the centralization of conversion within the assessment procedure. It does so not only by calling attention to the notions’ theological complexity but also by postulating that the preoccupation with conversion hinders the understanding of the more complex and larger narrative of the asylum seeker based on which the question of fear for persecution should be addressed and sorted out.

In assessing asylum claims in which conversion to Christianity features as a major component, the different agencies involved need legal guidance. Section II below offers a broad context in which such credibility assessments can be discussed, and then draws attention to the practice of creating guidelines for “governments, legal practitioners, decision-makers and the judiciary, as well as UNHCR staff carrying out refugee status determination in the field.”² Guidelines disclose the complex interaction of the various actors shaping the case and also display serious interdisciplinary challenges which if left unaddressed may lead to misinformation in the courtroom.

Section III identifies problems with the 2025 guidelines on this topic by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, Ministry of Asylum and Migration in the Netherlands (hereafter IND). The text displays a set of problems of this “out of the comfort zone” practice and creates the opportunity to penetrate more into the depths of interdisciplinary intricacy.

Next to engagement with scholarship on the asylum procedure, the argument developed in this paper is further informed by the author’s participation in an interdisciplinary work group around this topic for

² The UN Refugee Agency, “Guidelines on International Protection: Religion-Based Refugee Claims under Article 1A (2) of the 1951 and/or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” HCR/GIP/04/06 (April 28, 2004): 1.

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the last eight years, reviewing more than thirty cases. This took place within an interdisciplinary workgroup of lawyers, NGO representatives and theologians to whom the topic of conversion was of primary interest.³ This shaped the author's way of asking questions on "conversion". The group in their regular meetings discusses the actual developments regarding the topic in terms of legislation and asylum policy, zooming in on concrete questions around asylum cases.

Section IV develops four claims that identify problems with the practice of looking at conversion as a main component when assessing asylum seekers' claims. The first claim is about how the process of assessment discloses that a narrative about an asylum seeker is multi-authored and multi-lingual text. The second claim is that this written text, like an oral account given at a legal hearing, is guided by mistrust. The interpretative process then leads to working with fragments of conversion narratives and by doing so it also decontextualizes the language of the narrative.

This leads to the third claim: both creating the narrative and assessing the narrative seem to lack the necessary interpretative tools which can do justice to the actual religious identity of the asylum seeker. The last claim is that authenticity as an interpretative tool cannot work when the methods of interrogation (how the story is created) lead to significant loss of the person's emotional and cognitive ability to talk about their belief.

These claims point to the problematic nature of working with "conversion" as the primary or important lens to investigating whether an asylum seeker should fear persecution based on their faith.

³ Dorottya Nagy and Gé Speelman, "Conversion Controlled: Missiological Reflections on Assessing Conversions to Christianity Among Asylum Seekers in the European Union," *Theology* 120, no. 5 (2017): 355–363.

II. THE CONTEXT OF ASSESSING THE CREDIBILITY OF CONVERSION-BASED CLAIMS

After over four years of debates, drafting and negotiations, the Pact on Migration and Asylum was adopted in the European Parliament on 10 April 2024. Its adoption with 322 MEPs voting in favour of it (mostly centre, centre-left and centre-right parties) and 266 MEPs voting against it (mostly further left and further right parties) illustrate that it is still controversial. The Pact incorporates a comprehensive approach to EU external borders, asylum and return systems, the Schengen area of free movement and the practice of assessment.

The EU+ with its *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, which entered into force on 11 June 2024, aims at developing “a common system to manage migration in a dignified and sustainable way”.⁴ One day later, on 12 June 2024, the Commission published the “Common Implementation Plan” to help “mapping out milestones to successfully start applying the new legislation by mid-2026. It will be used as a basis for the preparation of Member States’ National Implementation Plans which are due by December 2024.”⁵ The “State of play” report envisions “Fair, efficient and convergent asylum procedures: Member States are adjusting to the new legal framework, also with EU support. Further work is needed to reduce backlogs and delays in the asylum procedures, including by increasing capacity and providing adequate training.”⁶

⁴ “Achievements of the von der Leyen Commission: Managing Migration Responsibly,” *European Commission*, July 9, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/story-von-der-leyen-commission/managing-migration-responsibly_en.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Commission Reports on the Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum at Halfway Mark,” *European Commission*, June 10, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_1446.

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The reactions by academics and NGOs to the Pact itself and the process it set in motion has been critical⁷ because it does not convincingly show any substantial improvement in addressing the worldwide entanglement of the processes through which the diverse forms of migration are produced and maintained, and because it predicts a further bureaucratization of migration management. For the purposes of this article the Pact is important because implementation has consequences also on how guidelines for handling religion-based refugee claims have been developed since June 2024.

A. The Pact in a Concise Historical Framework

The Pact is a continuation of implementations of the 1951 Geneva Convention, article 35, and to the Status of Refugees and Article II of its New York 1967

⁷ See, e.g., “More than 160 Civil Society Organisations Call on MEPs to Vote Down Harmful EU Migration Pact,” *Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)*, February, 13, 2024, <https://picum.org/blog/81-civil-society-organisations-call-on-meps-to-vote-down-harmful-eu-migration-pact/>; “EU Pact on Migration and Asylum,” *PICUM*, January 17, 2025, <https://picum.org/blog/eu-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/>. For scholarly reactions prior to adoption, see Sergio Carrera & Andrew Geddes eds., *The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in Light of the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees: International*

Experiences on Containment and Mobility and Their Impacts on Trust and Rights (European University Institute, 2021); Theodora Gazi, “The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Supporting or Constraining Rights of Vulnerable Groups?” *European Papers* 6, no. 1 (2021): 167–75. For post-adoption analysis, see Philippe De Bruycker, “The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: What It Is Not and What It Could Have Been,” in *Reforming the Common European Asylum System* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2022); Carmine Conte & Başak Yavcan, “Reflection Paper on the New EU Pact on

Migration and Asylum,” Migration Policy Group (2024): 27; Juoni Häkli, Gintarė Kudžmaitė & Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, “Devaluing Personhood: The Framing of Migrants in the EU’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 49, no. 4 (2024): e12676, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12676>; Maciej Stępką, “The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Another Step in the EU Migration-Security Continuum or Preservation of the Status Quo?” *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze* 28, no. 1 (2023): 23–37.

Protocol. With the establishment and enlargement of the EU the legal framework through which the refugee laws were to be implemented has been part of ongoing and usually heated political discourses.

The implementation of the 1951 Convention has been a challenge for Europe since it entered into force in 1954 because by then it was already clear that the very context of the Convention was changing. The Convention was written right after WWII with the purpose of resolving the huge population displacements within Europe but it failed to anticipate the shape of human mobility worldwide. Thus, politicians have started to frame the changes through crisis theories.⁸ In her book *The New Politics of Immigration and the End of Settler Societies*, Catherine Dauvergne states that “the asylum crisis comes from the realization that Western states cannot effectively limit the number of asylum claims they will receive each year”⁹ which realization then perpetuates not only the terminology of the crisis but also adopting crisis management theories for phenomena within human mobility which may not qualify as crisis.

The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 too stands in this long line of policy interventions and regulations through which the EU government and the governments of the individual member-states seek to negotiate the power of managing migration with a rhetorically shared aim of and commitment to respecting human rights and human dignity. Iconic

⁸ For example, in 1956 UNCHR still writes about the “refugee problem” and the term “crisis” is only mentioned in relation to funds: “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Supplement No.11 (A/3828/Rev.1),” *UNHCR*, January 1, 1959, <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees-56>, and about crisis in Hungary in 1957 in the “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Supplement No.11 (A/3585/Rev.1),” *UNHCR*, January 1, 1958, <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/report-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees-13>, but the formula “refugee crisis” has been in used since the 1950s. Lauren Stokes, “The Permanent Refugee Crisis in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949–”, *Central European History* 52, no. 1 (2019):19–44.

⁹ Catherine Dauvergne, *The New Politics of Immigration and the End of Settler Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 39.

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documents of this negotiating process are the Tampere Conclusions (1999)¹⁰ with its keywords of freedom, security and justice, “The Hague Programme: Strengthening Freedom, Security and Justice” and “The Stockholm Programme: An Open and Secure Europe Serving and Protecting Citizens in 2010,”¹¹ and the “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum” (2020).¹²

The vision of a common migration policy within the EU, however, has been challenged by various political processes which disturb and even unsettle the reality of the Union itself, e.g. member states choosing to leave the Union (Brexit, the different migration discourses among the voting citizens). Nevertheless, the history leading to the Migration Pact remains relevant for discussing the conjunction conversion and asylum cases because it mirrors the ideologies (and languages) of legal practices.

B. The Challenges of Interpreting the Convention and Its Protocol

The interpretation of the United Nation Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, in force since 22 April 1954) and its New York 1967 Protocol’s definition of a refugee and how it outlines the legal rights refugees are entitled to (and these are implemented) has led to a bureaucratic

¹⁰ European Parliament, “Tampere European Council 15 and 16 October 1999 Presidency Conclusion,” n.d., https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/tam_en.htm.

¹¹ European Council, “The Stockholm Programme — An open and secure Europe serving and protecting citizens” (OJ C 115, May 4, 2010), 1 [https://eur-](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52010XG0504(01))

[lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52010XG0504\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52010XG0504(01)),

¹² European Commission, Secretariat-General, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum” (COM/2020/609, final, Brussels, September 23, 2020), https://commission.europa.eu/publications/migration-and-asylum-package-new-pact-migration-and-asylum-documents-adopted-23-september-2020_en.

system both in the EU+ and its member states in which each individual case needs to be assessed and judged. It is up to individual states to decide who qualifies as a refugee, and the notion of “persecution” in the text of the Convention is also left open for interpretation and investigation. The notion of religion too raises problems of interpretation. Together these hermeneutical obstacles were met in the process of credibility checks, which by definition imply a mistrust of the applicant’s statements and lead to thinking in categories of “genuine” and “non/genuine” claims. There is no great gap between this dichotomy and perceiving asylum seekers as potential criminals or “illegal”.

The credibility of the asylum seeker’s statements (preferably documented as much as possible) is the most important factor in the decision whether or not to grant them protection. The most important component of the statements is the narrative of the applicant, so guidelines for interpretation seem necessary.

C. Assessing Religion-Based Refugee Claims: Interpretative Guidelines

While guidelines for interpreting religion-based refugee claims started with the 1951 Convention and its 1967 protocol, the practice of developing “interpretative legal guidance”¹³ seems to have been intensified after 9/11 2001. My presupposition is that the interpretation of the 9/11 events within a clash of civilizations and thus for numerous politicians a clash of religions (between Islam and Christianity) allowed those lawyers to shape the interpretation of religion-based refugee claims through the same dichotomy (at least for a while). This went parallel with the observation of certain faith-based advocacy that the number of religion-based refugee claims not only increased but also diversified. For example, due to long periods of waiting “conversions to Christianity” or

¹³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on

International Protection” (HCR/1P/4/ENG/REV. 4, Geneva, February, 2019), 123.

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cases of “apostasy” could then modify the claim of the applicant. Thus, Christian advocacy seems to have a role in how guidelines were developed leading to a separate branch in religion-based refugee claims, that of conversion-based claims.¹⁴

For example the UNHCR’s Guidelines from 2004 are the result of a set of consultations with, among others, the Church World Service in Baltimore, Maryland, United States, in October 2002.¹⁵ The Church World Service, a faith-based organization claiming to unite seventeen different denominations in the United States, seems to play a pivotal advisory role in migration and refugee matters in relationship to the UNHCR.¹⁶ This is but one example that advocacy and lobbying of the faith-based organizations, churches translate (at least in an implicit way) into the texts of guidelines.

¹⁴ This phenomenon led to the emergence of scholarship researching the conjunction conversion and asylum claims. See for example Dorottya Nagy and Gé Speelman, “Conversion Controlled: Missiological Reflections on Assessing Conversions to Christianity Among Asylum Seekers in the European Union,” *Theology* 120, no. 5 (2017): 355–363; Szabolcs Kéri and Christina Sleiman, “Religious Conversion to Christianity in Muslim refugees in Europe,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2017): 283–294; Lena Rose, “Asylum and conversion to Christianity: An introduction”, in Lena Rose and Ebru Öztürk, eds, *Asylum and Conversion to Christianity in Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 1–17; Anna Murphy Høgenhaug, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Asta Sofie Stage Jarlner, “Nordic Asylum Practice in Relation to Religious Conversion: Insights from Denmark, Norway and Sweden,” *UNHCR Legal and Protection Policy Research Series* (2023); Ilona Blumgrund Née Silvola, “Credibility assessment of religious conversion in the asylum process: A theological analysis,” *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 77, no. 2 (2023): 125–152; Anne K. Schlüter, “Credibility assessment in asylum claims based on religious Conversion in Germany: A Qualitative Sociological Analysis,” *Asylum and Conversion to Christianity in Europe: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (2024): 39–60.

¹⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on

International Protection” (HCR/1P/4/ENG/REV. 4, Geneva, February, 2019), 123.

¹⁶ “CWS: A Brief History,” *Church World Service*, n.d., <https://cwsglobal.org/about/history/>.

Examples within Europe, both at the level of EU governance as well as at member level, demonstrate that the development of “interpretive legal guidance” has direct connections to faith-based advocacy, often Christian advocacy, and through the phenomenon of “Christian” political parties.

In developing guidelines, the UNHCR advice from 1989 that credibility assessment should “be a matter of personal judgment”¹⁷ seems to be accepted. Nevertheless, various actors (ministers, church representatives) seek to feed with expertise and advice the “personal judgment” of the law’s representative. The modern preoccupation with professionalizing “personal judgment” can weigh in the light of IND officers talking about their work: “Every day, I realize how much impact my decisions have on the lives of applicants. That’s why it’s important that every decision is made very carefully.”¹⁸ “one or two times per year, there are situations, when it is difficult to bear without tears, honestly.”¹⁹

The “matter of personal judgment” is embedded in this bureaucratic system, in a machinery which aims at creating and testing the subjectivity of the applicant as a convert by transforming the case into a text file. The credibility of the asylum seeker’s statements, bound together in one coherent narrative, remains the most important factor in the decision whether or not to grant protection.²⁰

Working with guidelines might create the image of professionalization and it may certainly contribute to more interdisciplinary engagement with the decision on which claim passes the credibility check while another does not. It is remarkable that in the various

¹⁷ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “RLD2 - Determination of Refugee Status,” January 1, 1989, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/manuals/unhcr/1989/20463>.

¹⁸ <https://ind.nl/nl/over-ons/verhalen-over-ons-werk/carla>, translation DN.

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eQ1hRKFvVk>, translation DN.

²⁰ Guidelines for interviewing too are provided. E.g. European Union Agency for Asylum, “Practical Guide on Interviewing Applicants with Religion-based Asylum Claims,” *EUAA Practical Guides and Tools* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022).

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efforts leading to professionalization, a fixation on “conversion” seems to be constant even when most recent guidelines have started to avoid the term itself. It is even more remarkable that faith-based advocacy seems not to question a conversion-focused assessment of a religion-based claim.

III. AN EXAMPLE FROM THE NETHERLANDS

The practice of writing guidelines or work instructions (*werkinstructies* as they are called in the Netherlands) mirrors the intensified process of interaction between representatives of faith-based organizations (NGOs, Christian churches, members and/or leaders of Christian political parties) and the government. In the Netherlands, the Aliens Act (*Vreemdelingenwet 2000*)²¹ is subject to constant modifications, and its major modifications relate to the question of asylum and refuge provided the context of discussion.²²

A. A Brief Note on the Developments

While little is known to the wider public about the history of lobbying and advocacy in relation to conversion-based claims, Stichting GAVE,²³ one of the most active faith-based organizations advocating for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, have preserved major milestones of the processes which lead to the establishment of writing work instructions for the IND staff in the Netherlands. Having a good and direct knowledge of the files, Stichting GAVE observed that in the period between 2003 and 2007 investigating the credibility of conversion cases was mainly based on

²¹ *Vreemdelingenwet 2000* (“Aliens Act the Netherlands”), BWBR0011823 (1999).

²² Kezia Haar and Gienke Douma, “Bekering als asielmotief,” *Tijdschrift voor Religie, Recht en Beleid* 1 (2016): 19-26; J. M. D. Schans and L. E. H. P. van Lierop, “De geloofwaardigheidsbeoordeling van asielaanvragen met een LHBTI-of bekeringsmotief” (2019); K. E. Geertsema, “Uitspraken uitgelicht. De Afdeling en de nieuwe rechterlijke toetsing asiel.: Vijf uitspraken van de Afdeling,” *Asiel&Migrantenrecht* 5 (2016): 230-235.

²³ Stichting Gave, 1992, <https://www.gave.nl/>.

examining cognitive knowledge of the Bible, Christian traditions and doctrines.²⁴

Assessment on cognitive knowledge had been recognized as a problem worldwide and Europewide because the UNCHR Guideline from 2004 already warns “extensive examination or testing of the tenets of knowledge of the claimant’s religion must not always be necessary or useful.”²⁵ Nevertheless, the question about the “factual knowledge” of the religion remained a matter of debate in these discussions.²⁶

The faith-based advocacy resulted in the formulation of a so-called permanent code of conduct “vaste gedragslijn” in 2012 based on which conversion-based claims could be assessed. The code of conduct was partially made public in 2013,²⁷ followed by another partially open-access document on assessing religion-based claims in 2016.²⁸ The line then continues with the first fully public Work Instruction, WI 2018/10 in 2018. Since then, the changes within the work instructions can be more or less traced upon a close reading of their texts with the exception of the

²⁴ Marnix Visscher, “Bekering tot Christus: Aandachtspunten voor de asielbeoordeling van Christenen met een achtergrond in een andere godsdienst of levensovertuiging,” *gave* 3, no. 3 (Stichting Gave, 16 October 2016), found at <https://juridisch.gave.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Bekering-tot-Christus-versie-3.3.pdf>. Visscher refers to Selma van Halder, “De toetsing van de geloofwaardigheid van het bekeringsverhaal bij asielzoekers in Nederland,” *Asiel & Migratierecht* 9 (2010): 475–482, one of the first pieces of research on this topic.

²⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on

International Protection” (HCR/1P/4/ENG/REV. 4, Geneva, February, 2019), 10.

²⁶ Anna Murphy Høgenhaug, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, and Asta Sofie Stage Jarlner, “Nordic Asylum Practice in relation to Religious Conversion: Insights from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden,” *UNHCR Legal and Protection Policy Research Series* (University of Copenhagen, 2023).

²⁷ “Uitspraken 201109839/1/V2,” *Raad van State*, May 24, 2013, <https://www.raadvanstate.nl/uitspraken/@90311/201109839-1-v2/>

²⁸ IB 2016/ Handvatten Horen en Beslissen in Bekeringszaken (“Guidelines for Hearing and Deciding in Conversion Cases”)(2016). This document is archived at <https://juridisch.gave.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/informatiebericht-ind-inzake-asielbeoordeling-bekering.pdf>.

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newest one, which has 31 headings hiding instruction for “internal use” only.²⁹

B. The Entanglement of Agencies Behind the Guidelines

As is often the case with changes in interpretive legal frameworks, the practice of writing guidelines or “work instructions” started with a case. One of the advocates, after a court ruling which did not grant asylum in a conversion-based claim, appealed to Rev. Dr Arjan Plaisier, by then the Secretary General of one of the largest Christian institutions, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and asked him to speak to a group of Iranian asylum seekers who claimed that they converted to Christianity. Upon interaction with them, Dr Plaisier concluded that that “most of them were ‘genuinely’ converted” The story continued with an appeal on the first ruling and the judge, after reviewing the case, also based on documents provided by the expert, granted asylum in that particular case.

The process clearly demonstrated the need for training of the IND staff in assessing religion-based claims. Consequently, the IND, most probably under pressure from even more faith-based and political advocacy, organized a so-called master’s class for its staff. Remarkably the master’s class was given by Arjan Plaisier and Gert Jan Seegers, a politician who had just entered the House of Representatives after the general elections in 2012 and who acted as the leader of ChristenUnie, a Christian party with numerous evangelical voters.³⁰

Plaisier argues in his masterclass that checking the credibility of the conversion brings one “on the thin ice of theology” because from a theological point of view it is only God who ultimately holds the truth about

²⁹ It contains nine sub-headings titled “internal information” under 2.1 Process and Motivation and five sub-headings under 2.2. Knowledge; nine “internal information” sub-headings under the heading 2.3. Expression and activities; one under heading 3. Weighting (*Weging*); two under 4 Attribution (*Toedichting*); two under 5. Opvolgende aanvragen; and three under 5.1. Contents related assessment.

³⁰ The faith-based NGO, Stichting GAVE.

feelings and thoughts. He proposes instead questions to be included in guidelines about practising the Christian faith because according to him those questions might provide more material about the genuineness of belief.³¹

It seems that Dr Plaisier was well received both in IND circles and in political advocacy because he was lecturing on conversion matters again in 2014, this time in a meeting of the EU faction of the Social Party (SP). One of the reports of that meeting underlines the full harmony between the theologians, recognized as expert explanation of conversion, and IND staff. An IND staff member confirmed that the Plaisier's four principles are fully implemented.

The four principles are: "the relevance of the Christian faith in one's life, – basic knowledge about the faith and baptism based on the creed and – the practice: does one really live according to it, and finally: does one go to church and to which religious community does he/she belong? Remarkably the IND staff member makes the statement that "Nearly 99% of converts in the Dutch asylum process are Muslims who have converted to Christianity".³² Dr Plaisier's contribution went so far that the so-called Plaisier Commission was established, an ecumenical committee within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, which at the request of lawyers conducts interviews with asylum seekers whose conversion narrative was not assessed as credible by the IND and, based on their interview with the asylum seekers, write an expert report on the case. The very first work instruction acknowledges both the Plaisier Commission as well as Stichting GAVE as experts in conversation/related matters.

³¹ Arjan Plaisier, "IND Bekeringen getoetst," found at <https://juridisch.gave.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/plaisier-bekeringen-getoetst-ind.pdf>

³² "Protestantse Kerk Nederland Tegen Strafbearstelling Illegaliteit," *SP*, March 20, 2014, <https://sp.nl/nieuws/protestantse-kerk-nederland-tegen-strafbearstelling-illegaliteit>.

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C. Building up “Scientific” Terminology

Conversations with lawyers, representatives of faith-based organizations confirm that the IND regularly listens to their advice, including theological advice, but the work instructions fail to integrate parts of the advice in those texts. After all, the work instructions are already products of interdisciplinary meetings taking place not only outside of the comfort zone of the secular or modern state but also outside the comfort zone of theologians who may not have the ability to make their theological language meaningful outside the ecclesial setting. Thus, the initial conversation on conversion between theologians, Christian party leaders and IND staff, and to some extent lawyers, is developed by other experts.³³ As such they are text which showcase a set of conflicts between different language field. Yet, they aim at professionalization through scientific insights and terminology.

One of the best examples from the Netherlands is how the conversion theory of a psychology of religion scholar made it into a valid categorization of the conversions in the work instructions. In her theory, Joke van Saane³⁴ describes two major types of conversions: passive conversions and active conversions. The passive one implies a sudden change caused by e.g. a dream, a vision, experiencing a miracle. A passive conversion implies a long(er) process of searching, orientation and discernment which leads one to decide to adhere to a particular religion. Saane points to a third category as well, which is a mixture of the two.

These categories are complemented by a table of further categories which clearly map the motivations to convert as developed by Lofland and Skonovd who

³³ The committee still exists and claims to review about thirty cases yearly. This is one of the few statistics available about conversion-related cases because the IND does not keep any statistics about it.

³⁴ First circulated in the form of documents presented to IND and faith-based advocacy, later published as Joke van Saane, “Bent u echt bekeerd? Het toetsen van de betrouwbaarheid van bekeringen van asielzoekers,” *NTKR, Tijdschrift voor Recht en Religie* 2 (2016): 55–67.

seemed to create a scientific method for the assessment of conversions. In the foggy territory of judging the credibility of conversion narratives, almost all parties involved in conversion and asylum matters seemed to be satisfied because they seemed to get hold of scientific terminology and tools to discuss and judge conversion. This process may be qualified as a sort of language game in the line with Wittgenstein³⁵ only to the extent that the law necessitated the creation of a game in which the rules of how to use language had to be clear for all except the asylum seeker. Put differently, the contextuality of the language games created around the claim of the asylum seeker was contextual to all involved, except for the asylum seeker.

The idea of looking at court hearings through Wittgenstein's language game theory is not new. Linda Tvrđiková wrote about performing language game in the courtroom.³⁶ The new argument I postulate in this article is that different actors who make and work on the case to be assessed on its credibility not only come from different language backgrounds (culture) but they play different language games even during the process of assessment. Among the various language games however there is one missing: the one in which the asylum seeker would participate to set the rule together with those who interrogate them.

The first work instruction WI 2018/10 published in 2018 proposed working with these categories; Stichting Gave used them for their own guidelines; and the Plaisier Commission too appropriated the vocabulary. Conversion has been acknowledged as a clearly assessable transition from religion A to religion B. Apparently, the minor sentence included in the third type of conversion ("There can also be an intermediate form, either an active conversion with passive elements or the other way around"³⁷) did not lead to

³⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

³⁶ Linda Tvrđiková, "Interpretation of law as language game: the game of giving and asking for reasons in the courtroom," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique* 38, no. 2 (2025): 549-565.

³⁷ WI 2018/10, 3.

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the conclusion that if there is any “scientific” truth to theorizing on conversion through such categories, then it is exactly the third type of conversion, the mixed one, in which most of the cases fall.

Put differently, Saane’s theory created the claim of a scientific and therefore (for the state, and perhaps also for the other parties) legitimate way of assessing conversions. In practice, though, IND staff members and lawyers but above all the asylum seekers were left in the foggiest of creating credibility for conversion narratives.

From a theological point of view and perhaps from interdisciplinary perspectives as well, the worst scenario was realized: the church, initially and in its rhetoric critical on any attempt to assess the credibility of conversions, became or presented herself as an expert in matters of assessing conversions. In the Plaisier Commission, two theological experts meet the asylum seeker (a person unknown to them) for about ninety minutes in order to listen to their story. At the time of the hearing the theological experts have read the relevant documents of the case.

As argued elsewhere,³⁸ this type of theory formation on conversion not only operated on outdated theories which do not match the complexity of life encountered in the hearing room, but it also maintained and strengthened theory formation on the notion of “religion” as a static, fixed and essentializing identity marker both for individuals and for communities.

D. The Newest Work Instruction (WI 2025/9)

The newest Work Instruction valid from 4 December 2025 is entitled “Religious Conviction” and is linked to WI 2024/6 on credibility assessment (asylum). This instruction, the shortest in the history of its kind,³⁹ replaces the notions of “conversion” and “apostasy” in its title with “religious conviction” but hastens to state that the instructions are for IND officers who have to

³⁸ Nagy and Speelman, “Conversion Controlled” (2017).

³⁹ It is nine pages long compared to the WI 2022/3 counting 20 pages, or the WI 2018/10 13 pages.

deal with “conversion or apostasy as an asylum motive and has to make a credibility assessment” (WI 2025/6, *Leeswijzer*). There is chronology in how the titles of the work instructions shift from denoting persons to phenomena:

WI 2018/10 Converts

WI 2019/18 Converts

WI 2022/3 Converts and apostates

while WI 2024/9 Religious conviction and WI 2025/6 do not provide any working definition of “conversion” but still distinguish two types of “conversions” (active and passive) with the possibility of a third option, “an active conversion with passive elements or the other way around”. WI 2022/3 gave work definitions for the notions “theistic religion”, “non-theistic religions”, “atheism” and “agnosticism”.

The only section which did not change at all in its wordings is the one on the so-called Conversion coordinators, who are supposed to be consulted in cases with a motive of conversion “including apostasy or conversion to atheism”.⁴⁰

For the first time the instruction contains a disclaimer at the end of the document with this remarkable sentence: “There may be good reasons to provide customized solutions in an individual case and deviate from instructions”, which suggests that not all cases receive a customized solution.

The shortness of the instructions can be explained by the fact that there are 31 headings with “internal information” not accessible outside the IND system. These headings become even more meaningful when looking at the new concepts the document introduces and by which it blurs even more the already problematic terminology. Some examples of this terminology are the interchangeable use of concepts without any explanation: converts, apostates, faith-conviction, religious conviction, belief, religion (*godsdiens* and *religie*), faith.

The document highlights a couple of keywords but gives no explanation: apostasy (2x), conversion (2x), conviction, biography, atheists and apostates (2x), starting situation (2x), past (2x), present, future (2x),

⁴⁰ WI 2025/6 Section 6.

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the Netherlands, country of origin, change, new elements and findings. New and unexplained concepts are “personal life sphere” and “faith identity”. In general, the documents give the impression that it they are work in progress, but something had to be published and the validity of the old instructions, for some reason, could not be extended. It is also remarkable that for the first time support gained by “third parties” is not made explicit; nor is the Plasier Commission mentioned.

The constants of the document are the unchanged theoretical approach to conceptualizing conversion and constructions of identities as adopted from Saane; the three elements which should be taken into account when assessing a case: process and motives, knowledge and expressions and activities; and the search for an “authentic story” provided by the asylum seeker.⁴¹

The modest conclusion of a first review of this instruction may point out that in terms of developing interpretive legal guidance the process seems to be back to square one. In the remaining part of this article I address the major focus of the credibility assessment: the narrative and the issue of authenticity. The paper invites further research on how the two incredibility assessments are linked with the term “authentic story”.

IV. CHALLENGING THE CRITERIA OF ONE COHERENT AND CREDIBLE STORY

Seeking coherence in asylum seekers’ statements is one of the main interpretive tools for checking credibility in the understanding of guidelines. The cases labelled as religious conversions belong to that area of the credibility assessment of claims which hardly can be supported by “official” documents. In these cases narratives which support the claim must be created. As seen in the example above, the latest version of the IND work instructions goes so far that it takes the biography (assuming that biographies can be

⁴¹ WI 2025/6 uses the term “authentic” once compared to WI 2022/3 which uses it seven times. Again, one does not know how often the term appears in the texts for internal use only.

told in one single way) as the largest context which should provide coherence for supporting a conversion claim. There is clear teleological unfolding of one's conversion (whatever that may be) in the chronological sequence of past, present and future or before the "starting situation" and after it. These concepts used in the work instructions already expose the theoretical limitations of the assessment not only from the perspective of conversion studies but also from intercultural studies (e.g. notions of time) and display some rules of the "language game of the asylum assessment".⁴²

A. The Story Is Multi-Authored, Multi-Lingual and Textualized

The story which will be assessed for credibility can never be the story of the asylum seeker alone. It is a story constructed within the asylum setting with different intentions from the very beginning: the IND officer working on it and with it with the intention to distinguish the genuine from the fake ones; the asylum seeker with the intention to tell the story in such a way that it matches the expectations of credibility (performing plausibility).

The creation of credibility through narratives results in narratives made by different agents next to and together with the asylum seeker. Asylum seekers prior to their hearing will whenever necessary try to gain as much information as possible about the hearing from other sources than the information provided by the IND staff. If possible, they will contact fellow asylum seekers who have already experienced hearings. Their lawyer too will share some information with them when preparing for the interview. Once in the hearing room, they will encounter at least one IND staff worker and in most cases a talk.

The interpreter is a powerful person in producing the narrative. Some of the Guidelines mention the

⁴² Thomas Scheffer, "Kritik der Urteilstkraft-wie die Asylprüfung Unentscheidbares in Entscheidbares überführt," *Migration Steuern und Verwalten: Deutschland vom Späten 19 Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Jochen Oltmer (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2003): 427.

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need for supporting talks with a list of vocabulary of specific religious terms due to the special context in which they have to perform the translation work. Even when equipped with technical vocabulary, talks in these hearings have to navigate at least between two different language repertoires: the one used by the IND staff and the other (based on assumed expectations) applied by the asylum seeker. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations happen regularly.

While the IND officer is instructed to ask open questions, in these cases, the possibility that questions can be understood as open is minimalized because of the power asymmetries involved and the issue at stake. The IND officer has the power not only to lead the hearing but at the end to judge the credibility of the narrative. The asylum seeker filters each question through the counter-question: which answer, which formulation would best serve their case? In the hearing it is always the IND staff member who decides to take the “conversation” into areas which best serve their interest in assessing the credibility of the conversion narrative. Questions, such as “Do you have anything else to add?” may result in material which can be used for or against the applicant. Or questions such as “Do you understand the talk?” are meaningless because understanding the talk does not guarantee a meaningful conversation between the IND officer and the asylum seeker. These are but a few dimensions which point to the problem of creating narratives as primary material for the credibility check.

The issues of the IND officer’s lack of knowledge of the contents they ask about further complicate the creation of narratives. There were cases in which the IND officer asked the applicant to mention his/her favourite Bible passage. In this case, the asylum seeker quoted a text from Romans, which is written in a genre of a letter and does not contain stories as the Gospels do. The IND officer kept asking about the story in which that particular quote appeared. For the officer the fact that the asylum seeker could not tell the story to which the text belonged was a signal of lack of genuineness. The asylum seeker either did not have the terminological tools to explain that the verse

in case is not written in the genre of a story or they simply did not understand the question and kept explaining the text's relevance for their life.

Since 2017, it has been made possible for all applicants in any application centre to record interviews. Asylum applicants must give notice of the wish to record the interview in advance. In practice, however, interviews are rarely recorded, most probably because the IND officer does not mention this option to the asylum seekers.⁴³

Building further on Thomas Scheffer's concept of "language game of asylum assessment", it seems that there is not just one but various language games of asylum assessment, or at least the rules of the game are not shared or known by all speakers. The different agents creating the conversion narrative seem to play different language games and nothing guarantees that these language games coincide and if they do so under which condition.

B. The Story Is "Entextualized" and Decontextualized

The creation of the narrative however does not end in the hearing room. It is one of the major scenes of what Ramsauer and Caglar call the "apparatus of conversion".⁴⁴ In the hearing room and through the hearing by creating the narrative (you are your story), "the person is constituted as a *subject* with the convert identity in interaction with the apparatus".⁴⁵

Nevertheless, while a particular subjectivity, that of the convert, is created, a particular objectivity needs to be created as well. This is the objectivity of the narrative itself. The narrative typed, transcribed, becomes "the object" which needs to preserve the professional distance between the insiders' of the apparatus and their outsiders. The created subject of the convert "entextualized" (Bauman and Briggs, 1990:73), to the extent that only the observations of

⁴³ Laurence Verkooijen et al., *Netherlands Country Report: Update on 2024* (European Council of Refugees and Exiles, 2025), 52. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/AIDA-NL_2024Update.pdf

⁴⁴ Ramsauer and Caglar, "Making the Convert Speak", 64.

⁴⁵ Ramsauer and Caglar, "Making the Convert Speak", 65.

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the IND officer on the non-verbal communication of the applicant reported (silence, crying, hesitating). Entextualization means that both the applicant and the tense interrogating setting of the hearing are inscribed into a text that can be read outside the context in which it was made. The possibilities provided for the applicant for correction are minimal because the story's main line cannot be changed any longer. Telling the story in a different way falls in the category of incoherence. Asking why the applicant did not mention at an earlier stage something which could support their case disturbs coherence and activates the hermeneutics of suspicion even more.

“The distance afforded by such entextualization is seen to suppress the potential dangers (to objectivity) of physical nearness and emotional involvement from the side of the IND; moreover, it allows for different IND officers to separately enter into an application process and ‘evaluate’ the application from different angles.”⁴⁶ The co-created narrative becomes not only entextualized and but also canonized to the extent that the applicant may not be able to own it. Even the interpretative authority is taken away from them because the narrative only returns to them in further interrogation settings. There is no other narrative; all additions relate to the fabricated narrative of multiple agencies in power asymmetries.

Based on close reading of hearings of asylum seekers, Anthea Vogl contributes two main arguments to the discussion on the centrality of the narratives in identifying the genuine refugee. She observes that “the narratorial voice required of refugees is that of the realist novel’s omniscient narrator, who can confidently account for herself and others” and that “the narrative of a ‘genuine’ refugee is marked by the literary conventions of the Bildungsroman. Just as in the reconciliatory genre of the Bildungsroman, refugees must present their evidence in the form of a linear narrative that moves towards self-possession

⁴⁶ Maja Hertoghs, “Affects of Objectivity: Decision-Making Practices in the Dutch Asylum Procedure”, *Social & Legal Studies* 34:2 (2025), 206-223.208.

and sovereignty, and that resolves in incorporation into the nation-state and citizenship.”⁴⁷

This request to construct a narrative which points to an autonomous subject is the link to the another problematic notion of the credibility check: the issue of authenticity. Applying the modifier “genuine” to the refugee or asylum seeker already creates a venue for dehumanization and discrimination.⁴⁸

C. Interculturality Lacks Interpretative Tools

The acknowledgment that conversion is an experience which aims at a holistic transformation of a person’s and community’s life, culture and self-understanding does not mean that such a transformation in spite of one’s commitment to a new set of values or “truths” becomes publicly visible, reportable and plausible, especially outside the “language game” in which its meaning has been created.

In the section on the context of creating guidelines for assessing religion-based refugee claims, I made the link between Christian advocacy and the terminology of the guidelines. I would dare to speculate that the presence of the notion of “conversion” as part of the vocabulary of the work instructions reveals something of the so-called “evangelical” lobby, activism and advocacy in the processes which led to the formulation of such texts. Such a speculation however is useful only to the extent that it illustrates an aspect of interculturality; in this case how evangelical tradition understood as a particular “language game” and as culture shapes credibility assessments.

D. W. Bebbington’s widely accepted definition of the “evangelicals” points to conversionism (the conviction that the life must be changed), activism, the expression that faith must be put into action, especially through “spreading the gospel”, biblicism

⁴⁷ Debra Hayes, “Modern Migration and the Creation of the Refugee,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Work* (2013): 215–220; Anthea Vogl, “The Genres and Politics of Refugee Testimony,” *Law & Literature* 30, no. 1 (2018): 81–104.

⁴⁸ Anne-Kathrin Will, “On ‘Genuine’ and ‘Illegitimate’ Refugees: New Boundaries Drawn by Discriminatory Legislation and Practice in the Field of Humanitarian Reception in Germany”, *Social Inclusion* 6.3 (2018): 172–189.

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(centrality of the Bible for one's faith), and cruciocentrism (the stress on the significance of Jesus Christ's death on the cross). The IND work instructions mirror this structure in their sections on "elements" which should be considered during the assessment. The work instructions from 2018 to the latest one in 2025 list these elements as the conversion itself, the process and motivation, knowledge and expression and activism.

According to Bebbington "Evangelicals have believed that only through conversion does a person become a Christian".⁴⁹ The Work Instructions from the Netherlands resonate with this conviction by allowing the notion of conversion to become so prominent in the assessment of the asylum cases that the narratives are constructed around them and the authenticity of conversion narratives needs to be assessed. The focus on the identity of a person gains meaning only through the question of "what is your conversion story?" Instead of questions such as "What exactly do you believe and how does that belief make you fear for your life within the political system of your country of origin?" questions like "How can we be convinced that you became a real Christian? That you are transformed?"

An authentic conversion story then needs to envision future activism as well. Activism means that after one's own conversion, one feels compelled to work on the conversion of others – which again, from a particular evangelical point of view, might be a desire and an expectation but theologically may not hold for wider, diverse Christian traditions.

Based on the data presented one might have enough material to demonstrate that the Plaisier Commission too operates on such an evangelical understanding of conversion and that Saane's theorization of conversion too relies on evangelical accounts of conversion.

⁴⁹ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 10.

It might be argued that such an evangelical theorization of conversion⁵⁰ may be useful because most of the converts in the asylum procedures belong to evangelical types of Christianity. Since most of the “converts” encountered such evangelical types of Christianity it might be legitimate to interrogate them based on the evangelical understandings of conversion.

There are arguments against this speculation. Firstly, asylum seekers usually embody the most diverse and complex manifestations of Christianity (partly due to biographical components). Secondly, it is inherent in the genre of conversion narratives from an evangelical point of view to eliminate that kind of authenticity which distinguishes one conversion narrative from another. While the personal needs to be accentuated, the personal is also eliminated because conversion narratives require a set of formulae without which within certain Christian communities a conversion cannot be seen as “authentic” (e.g. Jesus saved me; God loves me; I do not fear any longer; I feel joy, peace, I accepted Jesus in my heart; I do not fear; God provides).

This, put in the light of the work instructions’ expectation of authentic narratives, means that unique narratives bring tensions in the assessment process. “It’s common for aliens to give standard answers regarding a conversion. This in spite of the fact that the IND is actually looking for an authentic story and the personal meaning of the conversion for the alien involved.”⁵¹ The IND is also in search of a transformation from religion A to religion B, from one closed and clearly outlinable identity into another. It even used the evangelical terminology of an “old” and a “new” religion/faith.

Interculturality in assessment processes yields for other interpretative tools than the ones functioning in the hermeneutics of cognitive mistrust. The material

⁵⁰ Evangelicals continue to work with the notion of authenticity and transformation: Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion & Authentic Transformation* (InterVarsity Press, 2001); Miranda Klaver, J. Roeland, P. Versteeg, H. Stoffels, and R. van Mulligen, “God Changes People: Modes of Authentication in Evangelical Conversion Narratives,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 2 (2017): 237–251.

⁵¹ WI 2018/10, 5.

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discusses above reveals the need for attending to the complexity of interfering language fields which in order to allow communication need to revisit how the narrative of the asylum seeker is being created and interpreted.

D. Authenticity of Conversion Cannot Be Checked

Much of the literature touching upon the issue of authenticity in conversion studies uses Charles Taylor's notion of authenticity as a reference.⁵² Authenticity in its adjectival form becomes a normative and judgmental category through which an authentic/ genuine conversion must be reflected through a narrative in which the individual's unique life experience, especially the so-called inner life, can be articulated in such a way that the IND officer can follow its logic and find it coherent and reasonably convincing.⁵³ In this understanding of life, the "authentic" refers to the inner life found in and through individual experiences.⁵⁴

In its move towards judging the credibility of a conversion narrative through the "authenticity" lens,⁵⁵ the IND (and for that matter assessment practices of conversion narratives in asylum processes elsewhere in the EU) resonate with conversion legislation worldwide. Thus in 2002, the Indian state of Tamil Nadu passed a law that operates on the centrality of the "authentic religious selves" to postcolonial Indian statecraft.

Seemingly posed in a different context, Rupa Wis's question seems to be valid in the context of conversion-asylum nexus as well: "under what distinctive circumstances are particular selves called upon to

⁵² Klaver et al, "God Changes People".

⁵³ See also Matthew Zagor, "The struggle of autonomy and authenticity: framing the savage refugee," *Social Identities* 21, no. 4 (2015): 373–394.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 455. See also Andrzej Kapusta, "The role of authenticity in transformative experience," *Culture & Psychology* (2024): 1354067X251340199.

⁵⁵ WI 2018/10. 3.3; 3.4, 5; WI 2025/9 2.

actively demonstrate their autonomy and authenticity by divulging putatively secreted contents?”⁵⁶

Building on Richard Handler’s critical assessment of authenticity as “a cultural construct of the modern Western world”, as “a cultural construct closely tied to Western notions of the individual” fuelling the envisioning of social constructs through individualism, the question about the lack of the intercultural component in the bureaucracy of the assessment becomes urgent.⁵⁷ Handler comes to the observation that “the bonds uniting authenticity and individualism remain tight in both commonsense and anthropological ideas about culture”. This in the context of this topic implies that the assessment of religion-based refugee claims needs to be critically questioned on the “cultures” they operate with. Going beyond Handler, the issue is more complex than detecting the “modern Western culture” because we have seen how a “modern Western culture” and an “evangelical western Western culture” are entangled to the extent of the texts of guidelines. The peculiarity of the situation is that an internalization of a “modern culture” unites evangelical ideologies with ideologies of IND officers who may not have any explicit faith-based culture.

In the condition of modernity at large which turns specific cultures transnational, looking at the “cultural” component involved in the assessment process needs to go beyond any form of methodological nationalism and look anew at how identities are changing constructs of interactions with different cultures. Where cultures may be restricted to small communities and social groups, the preoccupation of modern and postmodern theories of selfhood with the notion of authenticity⁵⁸ may help go further than square one only by critical revisiting of the cultures from which the central notions of the asylum

⁵⁶ R. Viswanath, “The Emergence of Authenticity Talk and the Giving of Accounts: Conversion as Movement of the Soul in South India, ca. 1900,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55, no. 1 (2013): 120–141.

⁵⁷ Richard Handler, “Authenticity,” *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 1 (1986): 2.

⁵⁸ Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

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assessment originate. Conversion then might feature prominently in one particular Christian tradition as identifier but it may not have any significance in another.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This article has demonstrated that if there is a place for theologians working in an interdisciplinary fashion in processes related to religion-based refugee claims then it is in the areas of contextual and intercultural theologies through which the hermeneutic of cognitive mistrust can be counter-balanced with a hermeneutics exposing the complexities involved in the narratives and their interpretations.

The narrative approach to assessing religion-based refugee claims result in the creation of narratives which may only partially be owned by the asylum seeker.

Based on the elaborations on the role of the narrative and authenticity in the assessment, I argue that conversion, as a notion featuring such a centrality in the asylum policy, should be further critically analyzed. It seems that a very limited scholarship on conversion studies and only a particular segment (to be identified, I suspect, as a specific type of evangelical) of conversion practices within Christianity gained the status of standards in writing guidelines for conversion-based claims. Similarly, the notion of authenticity, due to the intercultural complexity involved in it, may not what helps keep the focus on understanding fear as a reason to flee.

The modest findings of this article already suggest that a focus on identity and/subjectivity as a fluid concept and not as essentializing persons and a reoriented and sharpened focus on the fears for persecution based on a faith-based identity should not chose “conversion” as the key notion for investigation.

In the same line, while cases can hardly be made without narratives, narratives should not be entextualized and decontextualized but used to reveal the complexity behind each religion-based refugee claim.

The present article confirms that training in relation to asylum claims remains important but the how and whom questions should aim at disclosing more complexity than capturing religious identity formation into models of transformation from A into B. A single illustration from the Netherlands linked to international guidelines exposes the challenges of essentialism as perhaps inheritance of modernity turned postmodern: the aspiration to reduce complexity to labels and categories.

The insights of this modest research question whether the theoretical frameworks chosen to pave “a dignified and sustainable way”⁵⁹ of managing migration themselves are dignifying and sustainable in the worldwide entanglement of sociopolitical and religious processes. The objective is to strengthen EU borders, but the pathways towards sustainable and dignified migration management seem to continue to build walls instead of ways for facilitating human mobility in all its forms.

The question which guided this article was “Considering the complexity involved in assessing asylum claims in which conversion to Christianity features as a major component, which themes and questions need further interdisciplinary attention to improve the practice of developing interpretive legal guidance for the different agencies involved in cases on religion-based refugee claims?” A short answer is that the central notions used for the credibility assessment such as “conversion” and “authenticity” may need to be reconceptualized at least in order to be of any use in credibility assessment. This article might have started to gather sufficient material to invite research which argues for their dismissal.

Questions which need further attention include “How can the multiplicity of the language fields inherent in the assessment be brought into compatibility to such an extent that the asylum seeker may indeed be in position to tell their story about

⁵⁹ “Achievements of the von der Leyen Commission: Managing migration responsibly,” *European Commission*, July 9, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/story-von-der-leyen-commission/managing-migration-responsibly_en.

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fearing religious persecution?” or “How can a critical review of essentializing tendency of religious identity lead to new terminology and theories of assessing fears for persecution based on faith-based identity?” or “What are the reasons of focusing on conversion in asylum cases based on religious claims?”

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