



ccme

churches' commission for migrants in europe

beyond borders

since 1964

Conversion in the Asylum Procedure: New Developments and Old Challenges

18-20 January 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A CCME conference in cooperation with



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церквей

Funded by



Copyright © 2022 Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in notices or reviews, no part of this report may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher.

The full report is available on the [CCME website](#).

Full report and executive summary compiled by Deborah Romano.



ccme

churches' commission for migrants in europe

beyond borders

since 1964



Ecumenical Centre,
174, Rue Joseph II
B-1000 Brussels



+32 (0)2 234 68 00
Fax : +32 (0)2 231 14 13
email : info@ccme.be

About the event

The conversion of asylum seekers to Christianity has received increased attention in recent years, raising pastoral, theological-missiological, legal, as well as ethical questions and dilemmas for churches in a number of European countries. Furthermore, conflicts concerning the exact role and competence between state and church, as well as the ability to assess the credibility of a conversion within the asylum process have arisen.

The event “Conversion in the asylum procedure – new developments and old challenges”, which CCME organised in January 2022, addressed recent developments in jurisprudence, legislation and practices related to the issue of conversion within the asylum process. The event reflected upon the opportunities and challenges for churches, and highlighted examples of best practice. In an interdisciplinary approach, theological, as well as sociological, legal, and socio-political perspectives were examined in an exchange between churches, state authorities, judges, and academics. It was also important to hear personal accounts and experiences from individual converts, and how they were questioned about the credibility of their conversion during the asylum process.

The intention was not to formulate recommendations, but rather to gather a deep understanding on the topic, and discuss some of the biggest concerns, to foster future dialogue and collaboration between the different stakeholders involved.

Opening Keynote

Prof. Dorottya Nagy, Lutheran minister, and professor at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands, opened the event with an overview of the implications of refugee law, and in particular the impact that conversion law has on Christian churches and communities. This presents a dilemma regarding the way they tackle conversion among asylum seekers and prompts the need to revisit their relationships with the state. Prof. Nagy invited Christians churches, theologians, and NGOs to critically address the legitimacy of having conversion as such a central preoccupation in an asylum procedure. The judiciary’s current obsession with this preoccupation, does not take into regard the human Christian identity, along with all the other complexities involved in the case, and she believes this approach should be challenged.

Another key point of Prof. Nagy's presentation concerned the **conversion narrative of the asylum seekers** and the risk that they can become detached from their own story. The personal narrative could be robbed of its authenticity by going through the broad and complex network of inter-relationality which characterizes the asylum procedure.

Following Prof. Nagy's presentation, participants discussed a number of issues such as the involvement of criminal networks in the circulation of prefabricated stories among asylum seekers, conversion as a strategy to get asylum, the role played by churches regarding the detachment of the story from the person, and the issue of mediatization when it comes to the conversion of asylum seekers.

Conversion in the asylum procedure: what is it all about?

Prof. Dr. Henning Theißen, from Leuphana University (Germany), proposed a critical reflection upon the current extensive debate in Germany around the increasing number of conversions to Christianity among asylum seekers. The debate has created opposition between church and state institutions, with questions arising over the credibility of these conversions.

He stressed, for instance, the difference of approach between church and state institutions with regard to some aspects of the right of religious freedom and discussed its origin, specifically in the German context. Prof. Dr. Henning Theißen also pointed out the need for asylum authorities and jurisdictions to preserve a perspective that respects the standards set out in the Geneva Convention, that takes into consideration different anthropological aspects, and is not limited to a peculiar ecclesial situation in Germany.

He finally emphasized the importance of combining theological means and methodologies of empirical social science and cultural studies in order to fully grasp the connection between one's conversion to Christianity and a convert's personal and social situation in their country of origin.

Following Prof. Dr. Theißen's presentation, participants discussed the importance of sharing this valuable knowledge with all the stakeholders concerned, and wondered about the implications for the churches' strategy.

Participants also deeply reflected upon the whole assessment process of the sincerity and credibility of a conversion.

This session of the event concluded with real life stories told by asylum seekers themselves, who had converted to Christianity. This opened discussions surrounding some common components among Iranian asylum seekers' stories, but also the challenges faced in the interview process, and the pre-conditions to be baptized.

Developments in asylum authorities and judiciary

Ms Gesine Marder, Asylum Processes Officer at the **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)** who spoke about religion-based asylum claims. She presented the main activities related to conversion carried out by the Asylum Processes Network, including the thematic meeting on religious persecution and the development of guidance on interviewing applicants with religion-based asylum claims. Ms Marder walked us through the various chapters of the EUAA Practical Guidance document that will be published later this year.

Prof. Harald Dörig, Vice Chair of the **International Association of Refugees and Migration Judges**, provided a detailed presentation of the different elements that judges take into consideration when dealing with asylum claims which invoke conversion as a reason of persecution. Finally, he addressed the issue of the certificates that churches can submit to support the credibility of an applicant's conversion.

Mr. Peter George Xuereb continued with a presentation based on his experience as a judge at the **Court of Justice of the European Union**. By referring to the Y AND Z and FATHI cases, he stressed the importance of openness to the evolution of thinking, which is specific to the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Ms. Ruth Nordström, representing the NGO Scandinavian Human Rights Lawyers, gave an overview of the situation in Sweden, and then commented on the contributions of some of the previous speakers. This launched different discussions around a number of topics such as the concrete application of the EUAA Guidelines, and the role of the UNHCR Guidelines in relation to the EU Guidelines.

Best practice of churches - a panel

This panel offered an opportunity to hear the direct experiences of church representatives about the way they deal with the issue of asylum claims based on conversion to Christianity.

Pastor Dietlind Jochims raised two main points which are particularly relevant in the German context. Firstly, she reflected upon the dynamic between churches and state authorities, and the necessity for dialogue when dealing with asylum seekers converted to Christianity. Secondly, she focused on different aspects of life in congregations within the church based on the experiences and practices of some churches in Germany.

Mr. Ben Ryan, Justice and Home Affairs Advisor from the Church of England, followed up by illustrating the four major principles used by the Church of England to shape guidance for clergy on how to deal with people approaching the Church to seek baptism: i) holding open access to baptism, ii) acknowledging the reality, iii) assuring a fair and non-discriminatory process of seeking baptism as well as iv) consistency across the Church in the enforcement of the guidance.

Mr. Anders Jordet, Senior Advisor at the Church of Norway, and **Bishop Emeritus Berger Jørgensen**, former Bishop in the Church of Norway and currently Bishop in the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, gave an illustration of the attitude of the Norwegian court system and State authorities when dealing with conversion in the asylum procedure. They shone a light on existing issues such as the systemic suspicion towards newcomers in general and especially towards new converts.

Father Teemu Toivonen, from the Orthodox Church in Finland, stressed the importance of assuring proper interpretation and translation in the framework of the asylum procedure, and illustrated the engagement of the Finnish churches, mainly through the Ecumenical Council, in this regard.

Participants discussed the way churches guide these new converts, and the circulation of false stories. They also wondered whether the contribution of clergy was always taken seriously.

The role of foreign/“native” language parishes and churches in conversion

The last panel focused on the practical actions taken by parishes towards migrants and asylum seekers converted to Christianity and their involvement within the Christian community.

Pastor Christian MÖlk, from the Pentecostal church in Härnösand, in Sweden, gave a detailed presentation of the different initiatives of his church at the local, regional, national and international level. He also underlined the main obstacles and issues encountered by the asylum seekers converted to Christianity in Sweden, proving how some of the questions asked by the competent authorities to the asylum applicants are inadequate.

Based on his contact and experience with asylum seekers, **Pastor Peter Vimalasekaran**, from the Tamil Migrant Church in Frankfurt, stressed the importance of sharing life moments with those who are seeking baptism.

Mr. Naser Rezaeih, coordinator of Farsi-speaking groups and activities in Denmark, discussed the complexity of one's conversion and the role played by churches in accompanying the new converts in this process.

The follow-up discussion focused notably on the way pastors deal with issue of the genuineness of a conversion of an asylum seeker, how churches and other organizations can work to improve the manner in which asylum interviews are carried out, and the specificities of some migrant communities including Iranians and Syrians.