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Deportability of Christian Converts and the Controversy Over Faith in Finland

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The issue of conversion from Islam to Christianity has emerged in the aftermath of Europe's 2015 surge in asylum-seeker numbers. In Finland, the increase in the number of deportation orders issued set in motion affective practices of resistance in the religious field across denomination boundaries. Critical frame analysis to public letters and other documents by religious leaders is combined with thematic analysis of interviews with converts' supporters in the religious field. This dual perspective reveals how affects and emotions are central in institutional-level processes whereby faith-based communities participate in asylum politics. The article argues that emotions such as fear are not only felt for those who are under deportation or deported but also for the religious communities themselves. The individuals' and the community's trust in the state gets called into question, along with the genuineness of their right to freedom of religion. The article demonstrates that affective practices become a means of resisting both deportations and the perceived violation of the right to define one's faith.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the news media reported a new 'phenomenon' in Finland. After negative asylum decisions, people (mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan) reapplied on the grounds of conversion to Christianity. There were also increasing numbers of appeals to administrative courts on decisions related to post-departure conversions. While the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) does not have official statistics for conversion-based claims, it estimated that 70% of the 7,500 appeals filed with administrative courts in 2017 and also of new applications to Migri (a proportion equating to 2,000 in 2016) were based on claims of religious conversion (Migri 2018; Niemi 2017). This led to faith-related controversy that set the Finnish Immigration Service against Christian converts, converts' supporters in the various congregations, and the Finnish Ecumenical Council—which brings together various Christian churches to strengthen their voice in the public sphere.[1]

International human rights law and the fundamental laws of Finland articulate the right to choose one's religion. In Finland, the majority of the population, nearly four million people out of a total population of over five million belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which status is defined in the constitutional church law. Traditionally, the relations between the state and the Lutheran Church have been close. A small minority of people belongs to other Christian churches that as organizations remain independent from the state and church law, such as Pentecostal and Free Churches. In terms of asylum-seeker issues, Christian churches commonly cooperate through the Finnish Ecumenical Council.

Legally, religion is understood as religious belief, identity, and a way of life, and 'one should not be compelled to hide, change or renounce this in order to avoid persecution' (UNHCR 2004; see McDonald 2016: 137–138). Accordingly, the Finnish Migration Service and the courts are required to examine asylum applicants' 'conditions of conversion and its genuineness' (Supreme Administrative Court of Finland 2009). However, what counts as a genuine belief, identity, or way of life can be debated—and it is. All religions are complex and multifaceted, shaped by cultural and social contexts (McDonald 2016: 134–144). Even within the confines of a single society, there are various denominations and congregations, alongside substantial variation in individuals' religious practices; furthermore, converts typically maintain some practices that could be defined as 'religious' from their life prior to conversion (McDonald 2016: 144). Since forced displacement creates a break with various aspects of the past, refugees and asylum-seekers may well start adopting spiritual ideas and practices when navigating new influences (Kraft 2017). Likewise, issues of interpretation and interpreters' religious background complicate investigation of religious issues in connection with asylum hearings (Rose & Given-Wilson 2021). Clearly, specifying objective criteria for genuineness and investigating credibility is difficult, if not impossible. This issue is exceptionally challenging for bureaucratic systems based on a tradition of rationality (Weber 1946), and it can cast into sharp relief tensions between asylum-related bureaucracy largely situated within a culture of disbelief and religious institutions that hold belief at their core.

1 The Ecumenical Council in Finland was founded in 1917 and currently has 11 member churches and five observer member churches (including the Pentecostal parishes) comprising all of Finland's major Christian churches. Despite lacking any legal status in political processes, the council has taken a public stance on the issues of asylum-seekers and engaged in collaboration with the Immigration Service, thus functioning as an important mediator between individual congregations and the state.

As previous research on conversion and deportation has shown, beneath the administrative and legal examinations lie suspicions of non-genuineness: might post-departure (*sur place*) conversion be a 'migration strategy' (Akcapar 2006) or an 'asylum tactic' (Hoellerer & Gill 2021)? While this is sometimes the case (Akcapar 2006), following one's beliefs and presenting a certain identity or way of life to others can, irrespective of its genuineness, put people in danger if they later get deported. For the Finnish bureaucracy, however, performative (or public practice of) religion counts only if it can be proven genuine. Hence, public debate emerged around questions of who possesses the capacity and the authority to determine what constitutes true conversion, the criteria for genuine conversion, and who is a true convert. In that debate, religious communities called out and rebuffed state institutions' decisions and evaluations. For example, Evangelical Lutheran priests read out negative decisions during Lenten church services in 2017 (Askola 2017). These public performances positioned Christian congregations *vis-à-vis* state authorities, shifting the discussion to a more confrontational dynamic on this particular topic of conversions and deportations.

The issue of conversion and deportation emerged in the aftermath of Europe's 2015 surge in asylum-seeker numbers, when Finland embraced stricter asylum policies (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018; the introduction to this issue). The issue of asylum claims and post-departure conversions entered public debate also elsewhere in Europe, yet research on the topic remains scarce. That said, it has recently increased, largely in strongly Protestant regions: the Nordic countries, Germany, and the UK. Post-departure conversions have gained attention, particularly at the intersections of religious studies, law, and migration studies. Our multidisciplinary approach that combines media studies and sociology is situated in deportation studies, a subfield within migration research, and we draw on literature from religious studies, law, media studies, anthropology, and sociology. Researchers have started considering asylum, deportation, and conversion with regard to media coverage (Hartikainen 2019; Pennarola 2019), narratives and motives for converting (Stene 2020), religion as alleviating the asylum system's noncomprehensiveness (Nielsen 2019; Whyte 2019), legal aspects of determining the right to protection (Aarsheim 2019; Karras 2017; McDonald 2016; Møller 2019; Pernak 2018), social dimensions of asylum and court hearings (Rose & Given-Wilson 2021; on judges' discussion of conversions during hearings, see especially Hoellerer & Gill 2021), and theological questions of conversion and baptism (Krannich 2020). However, deportation studies often focus on deportees and their experiences, whereas our contribution to the field widens the perspective to see how deportations also affect the deporting society and its communities (see the introduction to this issue).[2]

While in the abovementioned existing literature scholars have identified the processes and motives of conversion and the legal, theological, and public-debate aspects of the conflict between the relevant state and religious institutions, and the role of Christian churches in asylum policy making at the European Union level (Mudrov 2013), little is known of how negative asylum decisions and deportations or threats thereof shape religious communities more broadly. Furthermore, aspects of affects and emotions are often removed from the analysis of institutions level controversies and negotiations, that is, those between churches and the state. Our

2 We thank Professor Henning Theißen for the overview of German research presented at the CCME online event 'Conversion in the Asylum Procedure—New Developments and Old Challenges' (January 18–20, 2022).

aim is to examine the role of faith-based communities in asylum politics, namely, how they respond to deportations and the deportability of post-departure converts at the public and institutional level, and why. Here, we examine these gaps in the literature, asking key questions in the Finnish context: What is the role of affects and emotions in negotiations on deportability at the public and institutional scale? How does deportability affect faith-based communities and what kinds of emotions motivate their actions? How do they respond through institutional channels to these affects, and in doing so, shape asylum policy?

We examine these questions from a multidisciplinary perspective by combining media studies and sociology and by bringing together two different types of research materials: public letters and institutional-level documents by religious actors and thematic interview material with religious actors. Through these materials, we analyze public and nonpublic practices by Finnish churches that questioned state institutions' practices and how particular conversions were assessed, in conjunction with some converts' deportability. We trace tensions between 'hard facts' and 'belief' within bureaucracy in 2016–2021 via the theoretical framework of affective practices (Wetherell 2012). This framework highlights the role of affect and emotions in actions. In other words, the focus is on what people do and what are the outcomes of their actions. As Wetherell, McConville and McCreanor (2020: 16–17) have recommended, we focus here on affective practices as units of analysis by considering emotions, affect, meaning-making, and interactions between people, rather than sticking to single, basic emotions as analysis units. They found that 'the making of meaning is central to what is felt, how it is articulated, and how social forces assemble, register, and have effects' (28). Hence, affective practices are motivated not only by emotions but also by processes of making sense of them, so they create various emotional consequences for those involved. Instead of seeing affect merely as preconscious bodily reactions that lack cognitive and cultural elements, we understand affect and emotions as intertwined: emotions are expressions of affect produced and circulated in discourses and practices (Wetherell 2012: 39). Accordingly, we analyze how emotions and affect, as responses to negative asylum decisions, triggered a process of meaning-making: making sense of the emotions and responding through action became urgent. In addition, we examine how these emotions were shared across congregations and inter-denominationally via the institutional platform of the Ecumenical Council, alongside what kinds of actions and outcomes followed.

First, we apply critical frame analysis to public letters and other documents from the council to understand how Finland's religious leaders framed the issue: what they considered to be problems and how they wanted to solve them. Their framing of the issue reflects what we regard theoretically as a meaning-making process (Wetherell et al. 2020: 28). Problem framings are articulations aimed at making sense of a situation that is both rationally unacceptable and emotionally distressing at the individual and collective levels in the religious field. These framings—and the meaning-making process—should not be seen as an outcome of a purely rational practice. Rather, as our further analysis demonstrates, public framings are an outcome of affective practices.

We expand frame analysis by going deeper into the processes preceding these public problem framings that materialized in open letters. Through thematic analysis of interviews with converts' supporters, we examine how and why faith-based communities resisted state institutions, coupled with what consequences have followed. In this discussion, we analyze motivations and consequences through

identifying affective practices the interviewees had engaged in. The analysis demonstrates that these practices influence life for those involved and profoundly shape their sense of citizenship and belonging.

DATA AND METHODS

The article refers to two interlinked sets of empirical data. First, we applied frame analysis to publicly mediated views expressed by the religious field: five public documents by the Ecumenical Council (the council's web site, 2022), mainstream-media interviews with religious actors, and their published letters-to-the-editor (13 media items from *Helsingin Sanomat* and Yle). This can be seen as the tip of the ice berg—rational problem framings that reach the broader public and institutional level of the society. Second, we analyzed thematic interviews we conducted with eight people who had created social ties with asylum-seeker converts and been part of their asylum processes. These interviews reflect the affects and emotions behind the public resistance, that is, the iceberg. Some interviewees had been directly involved in the council's work. We also used materials provided to us by the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, such as a list of religious actors' visits to state institutions to discuss asylum and deportation issues. We interviewed people holding various positions (pastors and immigration-focused volunteers) with two distinct denominations (the Lutheran Church and Pentecostal Church) in several parts of the country (we refrain from identifying the municipalities and the interviewees, for anonymity's sake). We also interviewed a lawyer who, because congregations know well that she is a Christian, had received requests to represent several asylum-seeker converts as a legal assistant in asylum cases. Of the interviewees, whose ages ranged from 40 to 70, three identified as female and five as male. We conducted the interviews in spring and autumn 2020, two in person but others, because of the pandemic, online. The interviews were one to two hours in duration, and we recorded them, with the interviewees' consent, for later subjecting our transcripts to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). In this process, we first thematized emotions (either directly or indirectly expressed) and the types of interactions and practices they engaged in with asylum-seekers and with asylum-relevant authorities. Later in our analysis, we categorized these as 'affective practices.'

OUTCOMES OF AFFECTIVE PRACTICES: PROBLEM-FRAMING IN FINNISH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL DOCUMENTS

We turn to the published documents first—the Ecumenical Council's open letters, recommendations to parishes, and statements requested by state institutions that address the issue of deportations and conversions to Christianity. Our work focused on the frames that these specific agents promote to gain public support for their interests, positions, and concerns (Scheufele & Scheufele 2010: 111): we analyzed what these texts frame as a problem; what kinds of responsibilities they identify; and how, according to the authors, the problem should be solved, and by whom (Bacchi 2009). While these documents are addressed to specific actors, such as parishes or state officials, the public at large is another audience. The materials are available on the council's website and were disseminated to Christian and mainstream media. While Christian media routinely report on publications of the Ecumenical Council, direct open-letter quotes began appearing in Finland's nationwide broadsheet

Helsingin Sanomat (Welling 2019) and reporting by public service broadcaster Yle (Mäki 2019) as the conversion issue gained momentum. Through these documents, the council thus actively entered the public space as a 'frame sponsor' (Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 6–7) to promote its understanding of the issue.

Ever since Finland's sanctuary policy developed in the mid-2000s, the Ecumenical Council has served as the forum for the Christian religious field coming together on migration-related issues (Ahonen 2020; Horsti 2013; Pyykkönen 2009). The council is connected to Europe-wide Christian networks, and issues related to asylum-seekers and refugees are discussed at that level. Experiences are shared and problem framings discussed jointly via the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), which is consulted by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EASO).

The Ecumenical Council first raised the issue of asylum and conversions in October 2016 in a statement that the Ministry of Justice requested for the preparation of the National Action Plan on Fundamental and Human Rights, 2017–2019. The statement reminds that, 'according to Finnish basic law, the freedom of religion or belief includes the right to confess and practice religion, the right to express belief, and the right to belong or not to belong to a religious community' (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2016: 1). The council outlines four recommendations for action to realize freedom of religion or belief, and the third of them, on page 3, refers to the right to convert under the heading 'Refugees and asylum-seekers':

> Immigration authorities react with suspicion to conversions, which forces converts to take a test on religion that has given unreliable results. The process of belief-testing, according to which it is decided whether a person is truly Christian or not, is discriminatory and against freedom of religion, and the present form of exam does not serve the original purpose, the investigation of grounds for asylum.

The fact that state authorities hold the power to test and judge a person's belief and its sincerity is defined as a problem here. As such, this is a problem of fundamental rights—that is, rights concerning every individual and society. Hence, while the problem manifests itself in the context of a minority (converts among asylum-seekers), it nevertheless involves everyone's fundamental rights, those of the majority included (see also Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017a).

In 2017, the council advised parishes of different denominations on how to proceed with asylum-seekers who were seeking protection on grounds of conversion. It published its 'Recommendation for Churches on a Statement of Asylum-Seekers Who Have Converted to Christianity' on January 25, 2017. The council based this recommendation on its negotiations with the Immigration Service, in which the two parties agreed that churches or parishes would write a statement about 'their members who were seeking asylum and had converted to Christianity' for the Immigration Service (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017b). For a person who has been baptized, the statement should comprise details of the baptism and religious training. In addition, the signatory must supply 'an assessment of the religious belief of the baptized' and 'a view on the baptized person's participation in the Christian community and its activities' (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017b). Thus, the submitter evaluates three aspects of the applicant's religiousness from the perspective of the community: religion as belief, identity, and way of life. Alongside these aspects, recognized by the UNHCR (2004), the Ecumenical Council added religious training and knowledge as aspects of religiosity to be examined.

In its introduction to the guidelines, the first problem the Ecumenical Council identifies is that 'church members have in their asylum interviews been cast in questionable light because of their belief in Christianity' (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017b). While the document uses the passive aspect and does not explicitly state that immigration officials find church members' beliefs suspect, this meaning is clear from the context. Nevertheless, the most significant aspect of this problem framing is that the document uses the term 'members of a church' as the main signifier of the persons in question, and thus, not making a difference between a citizen and a noncitizen.

The second problem framing that the council presents is not one it promotes: 'It was difficult for the Immigration Service to know who had genuinely converted to Christianity and who used their conversion only as a reason to obtain asylum' (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017b). In this framing, the problem's origin is asylum-seekers and their suspected inauthenticity. The documents make it clear that this framing is promoted solely by Migri and that it is not sponsored by churches that grant membership in their community (usually via baptism). This distinction is underlined linguistically too: the council is 'concerned' about the first problem but not the second.

The third problem, in contrast, is common to both entities: 'Both parties were concerned over conversions in which the baptized person did not know, for example, the meaning of baptism' (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017b). In this framing, the implicit origin of the problem is not necessarily the asylum-seeker so much as the church or congregation that has baptized someone erroneously or hastily, without providing training and gaining certainty of the person's knowledge of Christianity. For solving this problem, the council suggests that the written supporting statement should not only evaluate the person's belief and participation in the community but also make the exact hours and time of religious teaching explicit.

The requirement to render the teaching hours and mutual commitment to baptism visible allows state authorities to evaluate the level of religious authority more objectively. In this connection, the Ecumenical Council does not object to the grounds for investigating the person's belief, the requirement of genuine conversion. In fact, it participates in ascertaining whether that requirement is met and assists the state authority in this. By rendering faith in something measurable, the declaration produces a category of people (converts) who can be governed. Part of the aim for the statement, then, is to transfer the power of evaluating the sincerity of belief from state authorities to religious authorities (at least to some extent). Nevertheless, as the third problem framing reveals, the religious field is not unified: some churches baptize to bring in new members through looser criteria than others.

The core of the controversy between religious and state actors became more clearly articulated in an open letter that the council sent out on August 22, 2019 (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2019). The gravity of the letter is underlined by its first signatory, Archbishop Tapio Luoma (serving since 2018), followed by 16 other top-level church leaders. The first problem addressed is a concern that asylum-seekers are forcibly removed to unsafe regions and 'possibly even to death.' The council, therefore, demands that the non-refoulement policy be obeyed. The second problem identified is a 'deep concern' over how some 'active members of our Churches have received an official decision that their Christianity is not genuine or that they supposedly could return to countries where their lives might be threatened.' An important linguistic device visible here too is the reference to the persons of concern as members of the same community as the signatories.

The third problem cited in the open letter is that the religious field as an authority on religious matters is undermined:

> The voice of our experts who are experienced and specialists in religious matters, however, is not sufficiently considered in asylum interviews or in administrative institutions. Administrators who do not have expertise based on education evaluate genuineness of religious belief. (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2019)

Whereas the guidelines document of 2017 seemed more sympathetic with authorities' difficulties, the open letter written two years later is more confrontational, demanding, and straightforward. As for solutions, the Ecumenical Council made this demand: 'Our expert statements on evaluation of Christian belief must be heard' (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2019).

This demand is not addressed to any specific actor. Neither is the open letter as such. In its vagueness of address, the open letter leaves room for a consensus-seeking approach, yet its more demanding tone renders the letter exceptionally direct and confrontational. Comparison to earlier documents points to a possible shift in the religious field toward a more controversial position *vis-à-vis* state institutions. The dominant problem framing, however, remains the same: the main issue being that state actors undermine the authority and expertise of religious actors in matters of belief. Paradoxically, this can be considered to be in conflict with the fundamental right of religious freedom. The council's first formulation in 2016 within the context of asylum and conversion suggested the whole activity of 'belief-testing' by state-actors to be a violation of basic law. All the same, later framings accepted this premise and sought consensus by first suggesting and then demanding that the religious field maintain (at least partly) the authority to judge the genuineness of a person's belief.

Next, we investigate what exactly happened in these crucial years: what kinds of events, emotions, and affects triggered these problem framings, and specifically, the more confrontational approach of 2019 at higher institutional levels in public.

AFFECTIVE PRACTICES BEHIND THE FINNISH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL PUBLIC ACTS

After identifying the problem framings promoted by the religious field through the Ecumenical Council, we apply thematic analysis to our interviews with eight people who have been active in asylum cases for Christian converts. We identified affective practices (Wetherell 2012) in resistance to decisions and processes of state institutions, the Finnish Immigration Service, and the administrative courts.

According to our interviewees, the Christian 'love thy neighbor' ethic guided their practice, but other theological issues too emerged in our conversations with them. In addition to *diakonia*—the love and care for any person—one Pentecostal pastor quoted Matthew 28:19 in citing mission (in Finnish, *Lähetyskäsky*) as the second motivation behind actively seeking out asylum-seekers: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'. In particular, Pentecostals actively spread the Gospel as part of their religious practice, and in the interviews they referred to Muslim asylum-seekers' arrival as the 'missionary field' entering Finland. Pentecostals had structures and practices in place for encounters with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Some of the congregations bussed hundreds of people from reception centers to their

church facilities for social activities. Larger cities' parishes provided simultaneous-interpretation services for ceremonies and ran Bible-study groups in Arabic and Farsi. Some interviewees had been missionaries and considered encounters with asylum-seekers in Finland a continuation of their expert contributions to 'intercultural missionary work,' as one former Pentecostal missionary pastor explained to us.

In the aftermath of the "refugee reception crisis," asylum-seekers of Muslim background joined Evangelical Lutheran Church congregations and Pentecostal and other evangelically oriented missions in growing numbers. This led eventually to rising numbers of asylum appeals based on conversion to Christianity. Interviewees supplied approximate numbers for baptized asylum-seekers of a Muslim background after 2015. For example, a roughly 2,500-member Pentecostal congregation in one larger city had baptized about 100 people since 2015, of whom 75 were still members of the congregation at the time of our interviews, and a smaller city's Pentecostal congregation (with 300 members) had baptized 70 converts since 2015. These numbers illustrate how significant the issue of conversions had become within many congregations.

Negative asylum decisions and orders to leave the country at first shocked many of our interviewees and their congregations. They recognized that some of the new Christians would face threats were they to be deported to certain Muslim countries. For example, public apostasy is against Islamic law and punishable by death in Afghanistan (Azami 2014). With persecution of Christians being a fundamental narrative in the Bible, the concrete threat of deportation to potential death in this context evoked those deeply rooted Christian motifs. This undertone, we argue, is specific to the fear that our interviewees described themselves and their fellow congregation members experiencing and working through such means as prayer.

Feeling sad and desperate for the deportees, pastors, and volunteers working with the congregations began concretely assisting with their asylum processes. In the first phase, they gave advice on bureaucratic issues and sought legal assistance for either initiating an appeal to an administrative court or filing a new asylum application. This concrete help can be approached theoretically as an affective practice: it was motivated by affects and emotions, such as feelings of sadness and fear coupled with an embodied effect of shock, which triggered the process of rational and emotional meaning-making.

Interviewees talked about feeling 'a double pain': they suffered emotionally as they witnessed the condition of deportability close to them and, simultaneously, struggled with administrative processes and relationships with authorities. They encountered a bureaucratic border and its violence, which leaves rejected asylum-seekers in a situation of vulnerability, entailing the threat of deportation to a dangerous place (Näre 2020).

A pastor with one Pentecostal congregation described the affective practice triggered by the double pain as a 'fight':

> These people are so loved and close to us, and, yes, we feel pain when they are deported. At the same time, we fight with the Finnish authorities, the police, Migri, and administrative courts. That is, how can we trust them? It is so surreal that we have this pain that we feel for our sisters and brothers [asylum-seekers under threat of deportation], and then on the other side we have this fight with authorities.

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The reference to engagement in asylum processes and with authorities as a fight pertains particularly to cases in which asylum applications were based on conversion to Christianity and in which congregations had experienced downplaying of their religious expertise or even direct criticism of how they helped asylum-seekers and taught them religious angles. One pastor stated that Migri had accused them of 'unethical coaching'—that is, preparing asylum-seekers for the asylum interview. This experience resonates with Hoellerer and Gill's (2021) analysis of how judges at asylum hearings in Germany and Austria positioned evangelical missions (such as Pentecostal churches), which included accusations of 'assembly-line baptism.'

Finland's Immigration Service expects asylum-seekers to detail their conversion by using Christian terminology and, as Pentecostal pastors stressed, the terminology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Pastors perceived many of the expectations to be nearly impossible for someone having only recently converted to Christianity. Research in other contexts attests that the trauma and mental-health problems of asylum-seekers can exacerbate the challenges of coherently representing their narratives of conversion (Rose & Given-Wilson 2021).

While the instances of negative decisions and authorities' suspicion of religious communities at the local congregation level could be interpreted as single cases, it soon became obvious that similar stories had unfolded across the country. Stories were shared via Christian media and the grapevine, but the Ecumenical Council became the platform where experiences and emotions related to conversions were shared across differing Christian denominations. It was in this context that the council took on the role of a mediator between congregations and state authorities by providing instructions to all parties on the overall issue. As our frame analysis of documents demonstrated, the council acted as a joint voice of the religious field toward Migri and the administrative courts. In addition, it developed a mantle of authority in the religious field, though opinions were not unanimous on matters related to baptizing.

The decision to write a supporting statement for an asylum application that affirms genuine belief represents another affective practice that pastors and congregation members engaged in. This involved considerations on the reputation of the congregation in the religious field. Pastors we interviewed wanted to avoid reputation damage arising from associations with 'assembly line baptism' (Hoellerer & Gill 2021). This is how one pastor from a Pentecostal church explained the congregation's views on baptism:

> We are not blind: [...] we don't bring people into our community if they are not genuinely converted. We have quite a lot of people [without a residence permit] who just stop by, but they don't necessarily attend activities at the church, and, of course, for these people we don't write any statements or baptize them. Those people whom we baptize, we engage with them, and they become dear and close to us.

Interviewees explained how baptism binds Christians together as 'brothers and sisters': it creates a kind of non-biological kinship similar to the connection often formed on the basis of ethnicity, locality, marginal status, or sexuality in Euro-American societies (Carsten 2000; Weston 1997). We argue that such a practice of kinning evokes a specific emotional and intimate connection. In addition, through baptism, people become part of not only the community of a congregation but 'the family of God,' in the words of one interviewee. This sense of kinship, therefore, creates a specific

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dimension to the context of deportability and deportations. Fighting against sending 'a brother or a sister' to 'death' brings the fight closer to one's own intimate sphere of life. If the authorities can question the belief of one's sister, perhaps they can question one's own belief too.

Other affective practices that followed included Finnish citizens accompanying asylum-seekers to Migri interviews and to administrative-court hearings and, when possible, delivering oral testimony on behalf of their fellow parishioners. Confrontation by the authorities triggers numerous emotional and affective consequences (Rose & Given-Wilson 2021), and in the religious context, it evokes the mythical narratives of persecuted Christians in the early years of the church.

A negative decision on an asylum application in these instances casts aspersions not just on the applicant's truthfulness but also on the supporter, particularly since the latter has carefully verified the convert's religious authenticity. One volunteer responsible for immigration issues within a Pentecostal congregation described the ensuing decision to testify in support of that person's case:

> I only write testimonials for people whom I know personally and who I know are real Christians, and when they receive negative decisions that state this person is not a Christian, I wonder what right Migri or the courts have to state this on the basis of an interview of 1–2 hours, compared to my testimony. I who see these people all the time, meet them several times a week, talk with them, study the Bible with them, and pray with them.

These common feelings of frustration led to the Ecumenical Council seeking collaboration with Migri by, first, engaging in the aforementioned 'negotiations' and, second, providing training to Migri personnel on topics related to religion. In one result of these discussions, the Ecumenical Council provided guidelines to congregations on how to write supporting statements that verify the 'genuineness' of an individual conversion (Finnish Ecumenical Council 2017b). However, as our analysis of the documents demonstrated, the results of the provision of support letters did not satisfy the religious field. One of our interviewees explained:

> We have received recommendation on how to write support letters for asylum cases and how and on what grounds converts are baptized. There has also been training provided on religious topics to Migri. But these have not mattered at all. In this context, when applications came back negative and [authorities] seemed to ignore testimony of congregations, the controversy becomes very personal and emotional.

The decisions' arbitrary-seeming nature and the fact that most decisions were negative after support letters and witnessing by faith-based communities led to there being even greater frustrations after the Ecumenical Council had offered the immigration bureaucracy its expertise.

In this constellation of events and emotions, immigration authorities' suspicion of conversions is not limited to doubting asylum-seekers' right to change religion. It also impinges on the identity of congregation members who are Finnish citizens. This is how one pastor explained matters:

> We as Christians are not accepted; we cannot exist. This is the conclusion we draw. It really hurts us deeply, not only because converted people are not believed and their rights are being denied, but it also deeply hurts us [Finnish citizens] as Christians.

Likewise, a pastor from another Pentecostal congregation described these circumstances as 'a hard hit to the face' that provoked anger:

> This is a hard hit to your face. Not only to this person but also to the whole community [congregation]. It makes you think, 'if this isn't real, what is real, then? If this was not a real conversion to Christianity, what, then, is real?' This feels very unfair. It causes anger and frustration.

Frustration was felt toward the Immigration Service and the administrative courts. Their perceived neglecting of the oral testimony and supporting documents provided for courts by religious congregations led interviewees to reevaluate the functioning of the court system. Trust in the Finnish justice system was eroded, which is similar to what happened more generally among pro-asylum activists in Finland during the refugee reception crisis (Pirkkalainen et al. 2022). A pastor from an Evangelical Lutheran parish perceived ignoring religious expertise as discrimination based on religion after experiencing his expert statement being ignored several times in courts and states:

> I am wondering whether it works the same way if a doctor gives an expert statement in a case related to health issues, or an economist on an economic case. Would the court always ignore an expert statement? It cannot be like this in every case. I think this is religion-based discrimination; they do not consider a religious expert to be an expert.

Reevaluation of the justice system, on the basis of feelings of being ignored and discriminated against as Christians, had led interviewees to experience a profound contradiction between civic and religious belonging. Losing trust in state institutions while still respecting the fundamental law is a serious outcome of the series of affective practices that we identified. A pastor from a Pentecostal congregation described his loss of trust in these words:

> My sense of trust has changed. At least towards administrative courts. I have no trust in them. I have lost my trust in the whole asylum system. I have always thought that we are a Western country, that we have a fair and an equal state, and that people are being heard here. But no, none of the testimonials of pastors are being heard.

A lawyer who had defended several Christian converts in various administrative courts, described having witnessed congregation members' lack of trust in the court system and finding it to be a serious issue. From her point of view, one reason for the 'randomness' of decisions about the genuineness of belief is that there are neither EU-level nor Supreme Court juridical precedents in this regard. She reflected thus on the seriousness of both the 'randomness' and the loss of trust:

> Decisions on conversions are not like those on 'the usual cases and topics,' because evaluating belief is so demanding. I have noticed that this has led people not to trust the authorities and the courts, and I think this is a very serious issue. Usually in Finland, authorities and the court system are trusted.

DISCUSSION

The Ecumenical Council became a platform for sharing experiences and emotions across congregations and developing more structurally oriented responses at an institutional scale. Religious actors created a common position and resisted state institutions—namely, the Immigration Service, which decides on asylum applications, and the administrative courts that investigate appeals of those decisions. The trust-based relation between the Lutheran church and the Finnish state is reflected in our analysis, as revealed in the consensus-seeking public statements by the Ecumenical Council. Based on a frame analysis of public statements and media reports, we argue that Christian congregations did not question the state authorities' right to evaluate belief in asylum processes per se (except in one document on fundamental rights in 2016). Instead, the religious field demanded the authorities hear their views and utilize their expertise in asylum decisions. From the religious actors' standpoint, as was seen in the public documents as well as in the interviews, the first solution presented for the perceived failure to determine the genuineness of belief was collaboration with state institutions. Therefore, the core controversy circled around the means of defining genuineness and who has the expertise and authority to do so in the first place. This struggle between religious actors and state institutions in 2016–2017, which the Ecumenical Council termed 'negotiations,' yielded a set of guidelines and practices to emphasize religious actors' authority in assessing belief. The authorities did not publicly endorse these structures; they withheld from others the power to determine and define asylum. As the analysis of the interviews showed, the flow of distressing negative decisions and downplaying and complete ignoring of the religious testimonies and expertise provided by the Christian congregations continued, leading to an affective and emotional response from the religious field and resulting in 2019 to a tougher and more confrontational note in public statements.

As the analysis of interviews revealed, the emotion of fear that motivated congregations' action was not only felt for those under the threat of deportation but also for the communities and citizens themselves. They perceived a threat to their rights and identity as Christians. Furthermore, these affective practices led to experiences of a loss of trust in state institutions and eroded aspects of their civic identity. A profound contradiction between their civic and religious belonging emerged, leading to deepening emotions of fear and disappointment.

Based on our analysis, it was clear that the Ecumenical Council's documents are produced through affective practices among members of congregations who have witnessed the asylum processes of Christian converts firsthand. Even though the tone of the Ecumenical Council's documents, which we have conceptualized as outcomes of affective practices, grew more confrontational and demanding over the two-year span examined, they are largely devoid of emotions. This most likely has to do with assuming the bureaucracy to be based on nonemotional rationalization.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the role of faith-based communities in asylum politics, namely, in how they respond to deportations and the deportability of post-departure converts in public and institutional level, and why. This article offers a revealing look at a specific controversy over faith in Finland that developed in the aftermath of the "refugee reception crisis" in the public sphere first in 2016–2017 and then flared up later, with

a more confrontational tone, in 2019. Negative decisions on asylum applications based on *sur place* conversion to Christianity and the deportation orders set in motion affective practices of resistance in the religious field across denomination boundaries. Post-departure conversions have been previously researched in migration scholarship, in particular, at the intersections of religious studies and law analyzing, for example, motives of conversion and the theological, legal, and public-debate aspects of tensions between religious institutions and state actors. However, little attention has been paid specifically on deportations and deportability in the contexts of conversions and religious communities. Our study contributes to deportation studies by taking a new perspective on how deportations also affect the deporting society and its communities. We demonstrate how personal engagement in the asylum process further deepened the affective and emotional response among the Finnish citizens defending fellow congregation members. The article vividly attests that denial of an asylum-seeker's Christian belief has hurt these Finnish citizens not only as people witnessing the slow violence of deportability (Horsti & Pirkkalainen 2021) nearby but also at a highly intimate and existential level—because their own right to religion and belief too was questioned. Thus, the article demonstrates how deportation threats of Christian asylum-seekers shape religious communities and their relation to the state actors more broadly. The article reveals that affects and emotions play an important role in institutional-level negotiations and controversies between Christian churches and state actors, which are often invisible in analyses of asylum policies.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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