

European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting

Harriet Sherwood in London and Philip Oltermann in Vienna Sunday 5 June 2016 15.01 BST,



Mohammad Eghtedarian is a refugee from Iran who converted to Christianity. He is now a curate at Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

A growing number of Muslim refugees in Europe are converting to [Christianity](#), according to churches, which have conducted mass baptisms in some places.

Reliable data on conversions is not available but anecdotal evidence suggests a pattern of rising church attendance by Muslims who have fled conflict, repression and economic hardship in countries across the Middle East and central Asia. Complex factors behind the trend include heartfelt faith in a new religion, gratitude to Christian groups offering support during perilous and frightening journeys, and an expectation that conversion may aid asylum applications.

At Trinity church in the Berlin suburb of Steglitz, the congregation has grown from 150 two years ago to almost 700, swollen by Muslim converts, according to Pastor Gottfried Martens. Earlier this year, churches in Berlin and [Hamburg](#) reportedly held mass conversions for asylum seekers at municipal swimming pools.

The Austrian Catholic church logged 300 applications for adult

European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting [Harriet Sherwood](#) in London and [Philip Oltermann](#) in Vienna Sunday 5 June 2016 15.01 BST, baptism in the first three months of 2016, with the Austrian pastoral institute estimating 70% of those converting are refugees.

At Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral in the UK, a weekly [Persian service](#) attracts between 100 and 140 people. Nearly all are migrants from Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere in central Asia. One in four confirmations conducted by the bishop of Bradford, Toby Howarth, over the past year were of converts from [Islam](#). Most were Iranian and most of those were asylum seekers.

A woman praying in the church at the now destroyed 'Jungle' refugee camp in Calais, France. Photograph: [Stephanie Lecocq/EPA](#)

Mohammad Eghtedarian, a curate at [Liverpool Cathedral](#) and a refugee from Iran who converted to Christianity and was later ordained, said the church was helping people to develop their **faith and to apply for refugee status. "These two are intertwined. Most people apply for asylum on the basis of their religion,"** he said.

Maybe, I thought, Islam was a religion that began with violence
Johannes, an Iranian refugee

His own journey, from the Iranian city of Shiraz to the UK, took him through half a dozen European countries, by truck, train and on foot. Destitute and terrified, he was offered practical and emotional support from Christians along the way.

Before being granted asylum, Eghtedarian spent four months in **Tinsley House detention centre, near Gatwick airport. "Every day was challenging and beautiful. Challenging because I didn't know if they would deport me; beautiful because I was in the Lord's hands. I promised the Lord: if you release me, I will serve you."**

Now he devotes himself to helping other refugees. "People are desperate. They spend a lot of money and waste a lot of money. They are vulnerable, abused and sometimes [they have been] raped." The experience of being a refugee was degrading

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and dehumanising, he said.

Johannes, another Iranian, left Tehran for Vienna. Born into a Muslim family, the 32-year-old – who was previously called Sadegh – **began questioning the roots of Islam at university.** “I found that the history of Islam was completely different from what we were taught at school. Maybe, I thought, it was a religion that began with violence?”

Converts or not, letting them in is the Christian thing to do

“A religion that began with violence cannot lead people to freedom and love. Jesus Christ said ‘those who use the sword will die by the sword’. This really changed my mind.”

Johannes began the process of converting to Christianity in [Iran](#). He was ambushed with a group of others leaving a bible class but managed to escape and went into hiding. When the Austrian visa he had already applied for came through, he left the country.

Now waiting for the outcome of his asylum application, he has not told his parents of his conversion: only his sister knows his **“secret”**.

Where in the world is the worst place to be a Christian?

Authorities say there are about 90,000 [Christians in Iran](#), though some human rights organisations put their number as high as 500,000. While Iranian law does not order the death penalty for converting from Islam to another faith, courts have handed down death sentences based on interpretation of Sharia law and legal opinions issued by religious leaders.

Last year, the Austrian bishops’ conference published new guidelines for priests, warning that some refugees may seek baptism in the hope of improving their chances of obtaining asylum.

“Admitting persons for baptism who are during the official procedure classified as ‘not credible’ leads to a loss in the

European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting Harriet Sherwood in London and Philip Oltermann in Vienna Sunday 5 June 2016 15.01 BST, church's credibility across the whole of Austria," the new guidelines say.

Since 2014, applicants interested in converting to Christianity with the Austrian church have to go through a one-year "preparation period" during which they are informally assessed. "There has to be a noticeable interest in the faith that extends beyond merely the wish to obtain a piece of paper," said Friederike Dostal, who coordinates preparation courses in Vienna's archdiocese.

"We are not interested in proforma Christians. You have to be able to register some kind of process of change in people." In 5-10% of cases, she said, applicants broke off their course before they were baptised.

In Liverpool, Eghtedarian acknowledged that the factors leading Muslims to convert were often complex and multilayered.

"People are desperate for a better life and sometimes they will lie for it – that's understandable."

The church had a difficult road to navigate, he said. **"We have a mission to give them the message of Christ – a message of peace, salvation and freedom. The only person who knows what's in people's hearts is God. It is not for me to judge."**

At Liverpool Cathedral, there is an established process. People are registered when they first come to church in case evidence of attendance is needed for an asylum application. That may be followed by five sessions of baptism preparation and 12 sessions of confirmation preparation. **"This way we get to know them and see how they're involved in the life of the church,"** said Eghtedarian.

If necessary the church will provide a "letter of attendance" for the immigration authorities and support them through the appeals process.

Asked if some people pretended to convert to Christianity in order to help their asylum applications, Eghtedarian said: **"Yes, of course. Plenty of people. I do understand there are a lot of mixed motives. There are many people abusing the system –**

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I'm not ashamed of saying that. But is it the person's fault or the system's fault? And who are they deceiving? The Home Office, me as a pastor, or God?"

Abuse took many forms, he added. "Don't people abuse the tax system or the NHS? Look at MPs. And look at people who go to church to get their children into good church schools. Is there any difference, morally? You want to find the best school for your child, we want to find the best life for ourselves.

"We still try our best to serve people. Jesus Christ knew Judas was going to betray him but he still washed his feet. Thank God it is not my job to judge them."

The Church of England does not collate figures on conversion.

"This can be a delicate issue and we want to be sensitive to the backgrounds that people are from," said Howarth.

"There are many reasons [for conversion] but among them is undoubtedly the mass movement of people and the increasing interconnectedness of the world," he said. **Conversions were** happening across different faiths, he added, citing the example of black prisoners converting to Islam. **"The world– and people's identities – are being shaken up.**

"When we do confirmations, we work hard to make sure the person is serious. We all have mixed motives. But if someone says 'I believe this', who are we to make windows into people's souls? The only thing I can do is see if people are still there a year later – and often they are."