



# How to cook turkey for Christmas?<sup>1</sup>

## The assessment of conversion based asylum claims in European countries

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<sup>1</sup> A question asked in the UK to assess the sincerity of conversion.

# 1. Introduction

At the Dutch *Gave Foundation* we have been campaigning for about three years for the improvement of asylum procedures and decisions concerning Christians from Muslim countries. In October 2013 a query from the Finnish Evangelical Alliance was brought to our attention. They were looking for training materials for immigration officials re how to assess asylum seekers who are claiming to be Christians in fear of persecution. Although we do not have proper ‘training materials’ as such, we do have documentation that can be helpful, although it will need translation and adaptation to national policy. Furthermore, we thought it wise to bring the issue to a European level as we were convinced that this would be an issue in all countries. Hence the idea to raise and discuss the subject at the European Liberty Forum.

In our discussions, we will bear in mind the UNHCR [Guidelines on International Protection - Religion-based Refugee Claims](#) (28 April 2004, section 14):  
*“Relevant areas of enquiry include the individual profile and personal experiences of the claimant, his or her religious belief, identity and/or way of life, how important this is for the claimant, what effect the restrictions have on the individual, the nature of his or her role and activities within the religion, whether these activities have been or could be brought to the attention of the persecutor and whether they could result in treatment rising to the level of persecution.”*

As preparation for the Forum, we launched an online survey ([www.gave.nl/erlf2014](http://www.gave.nl/erlf2014)) so as to gather information about the policies and experiences in the various countries. So far we received twelve responses from nine countries. The results of the survey are published on [www.gave.nl/erlf2014](http://www.gave.nl/erlf2014).

In spite of the limited response, the survey provides a helpful overview of what is going on in various countries and the results are summarized in this paper. Where possible, the input from the survey is complemented by private communication and relevant publications<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For Germany we refer to a recent brochure from the *Evangelische Kirche* and *Evangelischer Freikirchen* with advice for Churches. For the UK we refer to a report by the *Evangelical Alliance* presented to the UK Home Office in 2007. Both are available via a link on [www.gave.nl/erlf2014](http://www.gave.nl/erlf2014).

## 2. Involvement of respondees

Respondees from Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden report that they communicate with the national Immigration Authority. They are also involved or asked to be involved in the training of immigration officials.

In addition, respondees from Italy and the UK are involved in political campaign. In the UK, the Evangelical Alliance investigated the issues in the years 2004-2007, resulting in a report that was presented to the UK Home Office. However, there was no follow up and the recommendations were not implemented.

Apart from the Netherlands, nobody reports that he/she makes assessments of asylum decisions concerning converts (which does not mean that it does not happen in the various countries, of course.) Only the Netherlands report that they report invalid arguments used in asylum decisions to the Immigration Authority.

In Italy and the Netherlands, people help by interviewing converts and reporting about the sincerity of conversion. In the Netherlands, a team of pastors with intercultural experience has been organised to take these interviews.

All but one respondee assist converts in various ways in their asylum procedure. Part of the assistance concerns advice to the Churches (Germany, UK, the Netherlands) concerning:

- ❖ how should a church handle baptismal requests from asylum seekers?
- ❖ how to write a statement of evidence concerning the sincerity of one's faith?

Assistance can also include writing to Members of Parliament who may bring issues to the attention of the responsible Minister (UK, the Netherlands) and advice to MP's how to handle requests (UK).

## 3. Results of the Survey

### 3.1. Focus on knowledge

Often, it is assumed that conversion requires a thorough knowledge of biblical facts. Also, it is quite often expected that one can reproduce the exact date of a first visit to church, the exact address of a church he attends and the exact date of one's conversion.

In **Belgium** the emphasis is on knowledge of the Roman Catholic tradition, even though most converts join an evangelical Church. The road to conversion, personal faith and the relationship with Christ, are not addressed. Why somebody decided to follow Jesus seems unimportant, in contrast to the question why one did not join the Roman Catholic Church, something one must apparently be able to explain. In the **UK**, the emphasis is also much on factual knowledge, including the Church calendar traditions like advent and lent. Most astonishing is the question "how do you prepare a turkey for Christmas?"<sup>3</sup> **Finland** also asks doctrinal questions, e.g. "explain the Trinity" and expects converts to be familiar with the typical Finnish version of Christianity "because the examiners know only the traditions, not the content of the Christian faith".

**Denmark** and especially **Germany** show more appreciation of the personal meaning of the Christian faith for one's life, but here also the emphasis seems to be on the knowledge of facts.

In **the Netherlands**, the emphasis also used to be on factual knowledge, even in spite of 2003 case law ruling that a testimony of one's personal faith-life is more important than factual knowledge. In 2012 an asylum lawyer successfully contested the 'expertise' of immigration officials. As a result, the interviews have been improved. **Sweden** also reports improvements: "Before they asked a lot about Christian faith, but now more about the process to become a Christian."

### 3.2. The study of religions and of Christian traditions

**Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden**, and the **UK** report that the Immigration Authority assume that one needs to study the various religions and/or the various Christian traditions before one can make a sincere, well informed decision for the Christian faith and a particular church or denomination.

This idea also presumes that the Christian faith is primarily a matter of intellectual knowledge rather than a personal relationship with Christ. Thus it assumes that conversion is basically a choice between ideas and world views.

### 3.3. How much time is needed for conversion?

In **Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden** and the **UK**, it is assumed that conversion takes quite a lot of time. In the Netherlands a typical objection against a conversion within, say, three months is, that "a conversion is always preceded by a long internal process." Sweden especially reports that Bible study (Alpha course, e.g.) is an essential preparation for a conversion.

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<sup>3</sup> Example mentioned in the 2007 report of the Evangelical Alliance

### **3.4. Personal testimony**

**Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland** also look into one's personal testimony. People can be asked about their favourite Bible passage, about the way they encountered the Christian faith, what appeals to them, what difference it makes compared to their former religion, how their faith influences their life, and how they practise their faith. No one reports that immigration officials are interested to hear what worship means to the convert and only a few report that they want to know what Christ means to the convert.

### **3.5. Differences between Islam and the Christian faith**

In **Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden**, converts may be expected to explain what difference the Christian faith makes to them compared with Islam. In the Netherlands, we notice a new development in that important differences like love and forgiveness are not accepted as credible motives for conversion because love and forgiveness are also mentioned in the Quran.

## 4. Discussion

The assessment of the sincerity of conversion requires a good understanding of what conversion is. As to the conversion of Muslims to Christ, David Greenlee has written a helpful review paper<sup>4</sup> in preparation for the centenary mission conference Edinburgh 2010. Greenlee presents a thorough literature review and draws the following conclusion:

“How is God at work in drawing Muslims to faith in Jesus Christ through these diverse circumstances? Each person is unique; God’s grace is creative. Those Muslims who now follow Jesus came to and live out their faith in many different ways. Prediction and prescription are to be avoided. However, three summary factors are independently referred to by several researchers (...). Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus Christ usually have:

- ❖ Encountered the truth of God’s Word;
- ❖ Received a touch of God’s love through his people; and
- ❖ Seen a sign of God’s power.”

In the following we will discuss the assumptions made by immigration authorities. Which ones can be sustained and which ones cannot be sustained? The challenge here is, of course: how do we get the message across to immigration officials, most of whom will not be Christians and may have little or no understanding of the Christian faith?

### 4.1. Faith, knowledge, ideas and world view

The survey clearly reveals that it is often assumed that conversion to the Christian faith is primarily about factual knowledge. Especially, one must know various biblical facts and facts about Christian traditions. This assumption also underlies the idea that a study of religions and of Christian traditions must precede a sincere conversion. It suggests that one makes up his own mind and then decides that one particular faith, i.e. Christianity, is the best and that one particular tradition within that faith would suite one best.

As to a conversion to Christ, this does not hold. First of all, it contradicts the basic biblical notion of sin and the consequent darkness of one’s mind. Nobody will turn to Christ on the basis of one’s own reasoning, because the Gospel of Christ is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greek. In fact, if someone would claim to be converted to the Christian faith by a mere choice of his own mind, that would be a good reason for doubting his sincerity on biblical grounds. If one thing must be clear, a conversion to a certain faith must reflect the theology of that faith. Secondly, the relevant literature is not in favour of this view either. Greenlee concludes, e.g., not that a convert has proved (by his reason) the truth of God’s Word but that he has *encountered* the truth of God’s Word. Bernard Lonergan<sup>5</sup> calls it a ‘religious conversion’ that consists in “being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-

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<sup>4</sup> David Greenlee, “New Faith, Renewed Identity: How Some Muslims are Becoming Followers of Jesus”, paper presented at the “[Hamburg Consultation](http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/main-study-themes/christian-mission-among-other-faiths/hamburg-consultation.html)”, August 2009; [www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/main-study-themes/christian-mission-among-other-faiths/hamburg-consultation.html](http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/main-study-themes/christian-mission-among-other-faiths/hamburg-consultation.html)

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Lonergan, “*The Dimensions of Conversion*”, in: Walter E. Conn (ed.), “*Conversion*”, New York: Alba House, 1978, pp. 15,20

worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservation.” Lonergan identifies three ‘stages’ in a conversion process, of which this religious conversion is the first. The second stage he calls a moral conversion, and the third stage is an intellectual conversion: “from a causal viewpoint, one would say that first there is God’s gift of his love. Next, the eye of this love reveals values in their splendour, while the strength of this love brings about their realization, and this is moral conversion. Finally, among the values discerned by the eye of love is the value of believing the truths taught by the religious tradition, and in such tradition and belief are the seeds of intellectual conversion.”

A conversion then starts at being touched by God’s love and ends in the renewal of the mind and the acquisition of a new world view. This is a genuine process of spiritual growth that lasts during the rest of our earthly life. Hence, at the start of the Christian life one may not expect a thorough knowledge and understanding of biblical truths and doctrines. Neither can one expect a thorough understanding of Christian traditions. In general, one will have encountered the truth and love of God within the context of a particular Christian fellowship and it is most natural that one wants to be part of that fellowship.

## **4.2. The process and moment of conversion**

In some countries the assumption is that a conversion process takes a lot of time. Paul would not pass the test! Neither would Lydia or the Philippian jailor. However, quoting some Bible texts may not convince immigration officials and judges. In the Netherlands, Prof. dr. Willem Ouweneel was an expert witness in court to settle the matter.

Some countries also reported that applicants are expected to give the exact date of their conversion. Now this is rather weird, when they at the same time believe that a conversion process is gradual, taking a lot of time. In individual cases a conversion can take a lot of time indeed, but then it is safe to assume that there is no clear cut moment about which someone can say “this is the moment of my conversion”. What would be the exact date for Peter, or for John? What would be the exact date for Apollos who initially had a defective understanding of the Christian faith?

On a theological level there is a lot to say about this subject. Dr. Joke van Saane, lecturer at the Free University in Amsterdam, writes expertise reports for lawyers. She distinguishes between active and passive conversions. A passive conversion ‘happens’ to somebody, an active conversion is, so to speak, initiated by the person himself who starts seeking for truth or for meaning in his life. According to Van Saane, some 30 percent of conversions are passive conversions, but the percentage is higher among refugees. Active conversions are more common among western people who have a greater individual freedom and are, with respect to their way of life and thinking, less bound by social constraints.

I think this analysis is important, because it reveals that immigration officials can be pre-occupied by the common experience of active conversions in the western world and have a blind spot with respect to passive conversions.

Furthermore, however, the real issue should be: “has somebody converted to Christ?” rather than “when was somebody converted to Christ?” Important is not the moment of conversion but the ‘fact’ of conversion. From a theological point of view, it is helpful to distinguish between regeneration and conversion. Regeneration is the

hidden work of the Holy Spirit in somebody's heart and conversion is somebody's response to God's grace. As such, conversion is a life long commitment that aims at the growth of spiritual fruit. In accordance with Lonergan's analysis (see former section) this growth entails first of all one's walk with God, then the criteria for one's decision making and finally one's world view. Conversion is indeed a 'process' that takes a lot of time, but it does not follow that conversion is by necessity *preceded* by a long process as Dutch immigration officials often assume. Conversion is *in itself* a process. In the course of this process there will be a period in which one arrives at the conclusion that he cannot and will not live without Christ any longer. When someone has arrived at that conclusion he will be able to speak about it and to give an account of the hope that he has.

In this process, one may be expected to be committed to Bible study and/or courses like the Alpha course, both pre-conversion and post-conversion. Especially at passive conversions, Bible study and courses will typically follow the conversion experience. In cases of passive conversion, I think it would be right to demand a definite 'post conversion' commitment to the growth in the Christian faith. In other words: a conversion experience is significant but not sufficient. Dr Arjan Plaisier, national secretary of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands was invited to give an address at a seminar for immigration officials. In conclusion he said: "The real question should be: does someone practice his faith? Does he go to Church? Does he or she read the Bible? Does someone evangelize, whether inside or outside the reception centre? Can other believers testify about the applicant? Someone who behaves like a Christian does take certain risks. Does someone behave like a Christian?"

### **4.3. Differences between Islam and the Christian faith**

Immigration officials are right to ask about the difference that the applicant discerns between the Christian faith and his former religion and what difference it makes to his life. In their assessment, however, they must be able to appreciate these differences as well. It is not acceptable that differences are being played down or even denied so as to decide that the differences mentioned by the applicant are not a credible motive for conversion, as happens in the Netherlands. Thus, it must be spelled out clearly to immigration officials that especially the love and forgiveness of Christ are completely different from love and forgiveness in the Quran. Also, in my experience, MBB's often mention the position of women as a motive for conversion. The story of the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus in the temple (John 8) is often related as a favourite Bible passage. Thus it also needs to be spelled out what position women have in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testament, as compared to Islam. Furthermore, it will be important to appreciate that Islamic practice in one's home country is more important to one's perception than some official teaching that people often do not receive. Applicants can face objections like: "But the Quran says ... and that is actually the same as what you appreciate in the Christian faith." However, Muslims have in general little knowledge of the contents of the Quran, even more so when they do not speak Arabic. Immigration officials will need to understand this.

#### 4.4. Back sliding after asylum

An issue to be addressed is the possibility of 'back sliding' after one has been granted asylum protection. In our opinion there are two reasons why we have to address this issue. First, it attracts the attention of Immigration Authorities, at least in the Netherlands. Secondly, it questions the credibility of the Church in cases when asylum protection has been granted partly on account of someone's baptism or on account of testimonies from the Church. In the Netherlands, baptismal certificates and testimonies from churches are sometimes not accepted as evidence on the grounds that "it is rather easy for everyone to join a church and to be baptized, even if someone is not sincerely converted." In general we protest against this prejudice. However, we must admit that some churches do baptize easily without satisfying themselves that someone really wants to follow Christ in his life and has a basic understanding of what following Christ actually means. This does not pass the attention of the Immigration Authority and for the sake of the Church's credibility, it is important that the Church is evidently careful in this.

As a matter of fact, it does happen that people whose asylum claim has been rejected start showing interest in the Christian faith, go to Church, attend Bible study faithfully, are baptized and are granted asylum protection eventually. This can be most sincere, but sometimes you may wonder as to whether someone converted for the sake of Christ, or for the sake of a residence permit. The Dutch Immigration Authority is aware of this and it can make them suspicious with respect to 'after rejection' conversions. In Denmark, I understand, 'after rejection' conversions are now *a priori* held not credible even without a proper hearing or interview.

We must be honest here: in the Netherlands, people whose asylum claim has been rejected receive very basic shelter in so-called Family Centres when they are with minors, because minors may not be 'pushed out' into the streets. The people in these Family Centres experience that it is hardly possible to re-open their asylum case successfully. About the only people who appear to be successful with a new asylum claim are those who claim conversion to the Christian faith. It does not come as a surprise, then, that people from these Family Centres would show interest in the Christian faith even if they are not interested in a life with Christ.

Having said this, it is important to appreciate that genuine converts can also lose touch with their church after their asylum claim has been accepted. First of all, people will move to a normal home and that might be far away from the church they attended and where they feel at home and which they regard as their new family. In their new home town or village they may not find a welcoming church where they feel at home. Secondly, people get overwhelmed by the demands of western society they now have to integrate in. If there is no church nearby that helps them in this respect they will find it hard to keep in touch with church. Thirdly, quite often a refugee arrives in our countries on his own, leaving a family behind. After getting leave to stay here, their family may come over and be united. If one has become a Christian in the mean time, it can be hard to tell your husband or wife. Especially among Somalis this is also a reason for not continuing attending church.

Finally, there are also examples of people who 'converted' for the sake of a residence permit and received asylum protection nonetheless, but became genuine Christians afterwards, sometimes also because they experienced their leave to stay as a miracle from the God of the Bible.

#### **4.5. Baptism of asylum seekers**

In view of the risk of conversion for the sake of a residence permit, Churches should be very careful with requests for baptism from asylum seekers. Without interfering in the Churches' policy, we advise churches to add a statement to baptismal certificates clarifying the process by which one is accepted for baptism in general and a statement about the faith life of the applicant in particular. As to the latter, there is a need to emphasize this. It is meaningless just to say that the applicant attends the services faithfully and that he helps a lot in the setting out of chairs and the provision of coffee and tea. What is really needed is statements concerning the impact of the Christian faith on the applicant's life and his growth in faith, as far as man can discern.

## 5. Miscellaneous

In this chapter some issues will be briefly presented that are not on the agenda for discussion at the European Religious Liberty Forum but are still of interest in relation to the topic of asylum applications of converts.

### 5.1. Full right of practicing one's faith

Some countries still refuse asylum protection on the grounds that one can keep silent about his faith, or, as the Dutch government used to put it, 'keep a low profile' in the expression of one's faith. However, in 2012 the European Court of Justice ruled that no one can be asked to abstain from practicing essential elements of his faith in order to avoid persecution.<sup>6</sup> This means that a country must grant asylum if, e.g., attending worship or evangelism is essential to someone but too dangerous to observe in his home country.

### 5.2. After flight conversion

Switzerland does not accept after flight conversions as a ground for asylum protection. The European Court for Human Rights also does not seem to support after flight conversion as ground for asylum protection.<sup>7</sup> However, as far as we are concerned, the European Court of Justice did not exclude 'after flight converts' from the principle that no one can be asked to abstain from practicing essential elements of his faith in order to avoid persecution (see former section). In the Netherlands, the rule is applied equally to people who were or became Christians in their home country and to people who converted during their flight (e.g. if someone had lived in Greece for a while) or after arrival in the Netherlands.

### 5.3. How safe are countries of origin for converts?

In 2010 a *Platform Christian Asylum seekers Iran* was formed in the Netherlands. They put a lot of effort in the screening of news messages concerning the persecution of Christians in Iran. They monitored the original Farsi news sources even before news items might appear in the west. By their efforts they were able to identify the original sources of news items and the reliability of these sources. Using this information they campaigned for improvement of the Country Report Iran of the Dutch Foreign Office. This was materialized in 2012. As a result the minister of immigration identified Iranian converts as a high risk group that is in need of protection for the mere reason of being a Christian convert.

At Gave we realize that Christians from other countries than Iran face the same kind of problems in their asylum application. However, we do not have the resources to copy the efforts made by the *Platform Christian Asylum seekers Iran*. Also, such efforts should best be made at an international level and the results be made available internationally. In the summer of 2013 discussed these issues with Jubilee Campaign. As a result we started a project together aiming at the provision of solid

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<sup>6</sup> Click [here](#) for the English text of the court decision. If preferred you can change the language in the top left corner of the document.

<sup>7</sup> In Denmark, appeals on behalf of converts are lodged with the OHCHR in Geneva

evidence concerning the persecution of Christians in various countries. Jubilee Campaign has a broad international network that can help us finding the evidence we need. For instance: CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement) has a lot to offer with respect to Pakistan. Together with Jubilee Campaign, we will set up an online platform where this information will be made available to asylum lawyers and where asylum lawyers will be able to exchange information and experience. This will start in the Netherlands, but we plan to take it to an international level when funds are available.

#### **5.4. Attributed conversion**

In the Netherlands, some courts recently ruled that an ‘attributed conversion’ can also be a legitimate ground for asylum protection. An attributed conversion means that someone has not really become a Christian, yet the government of his home country or his social environment may believe that he has become a Christian because he has made himself known as such, e.g. by putting a lot of Christian material on his facebook pages. In the Netherlands one lawyer has even advised a convert from Iran to present himself at the Iranian embassy telling them that he has become a Christian and asking for a statement that, in accordance with Iranian law, he lost his Iranian citizenship because of his conversion. However, in these issues one must consider the risk it might incur for family back home. One has to face the question as to whether it would be right to put others at risk in order to safeguard your own protection and as to whether churches and lawyers should co-operate with this.

## 6. Further Reading

### **English**

**Evangelical Alliance (UK)**, “*Altogether for Asylum Justice – Asylum Seekers’ conversion to Christianity*”, report presented to the UK Home Office, 2007 (includes “Asylum Applications and Christian Belief – A briefing for ministers to give evidence in support of asylum applications” by the Methodist Church)  
[www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/alltogether-for-asylum-justice.cfm](http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/alltogether-for-asylum-justice.cfm)

### **German**

**Evangelische Kirche and Evangelischer Freikirchen** (Germany), “*Zum Umgang mit Taufbegehren von Asylsuchenden*”, Eine Handreichung für Kirchengemeinden, herausgegeben vom Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche (EKD) und der Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen (VEF), November 2013  
[www.ekd.de/download/taufbegehren\\_von\\_asylsuchenden\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/taufbegehren_von_asylsuchenden_2013.pdf)

### **Dutch**

**Gave Foundation** (The Netherlands), “*Bekering van islam tot Christus - Aandachtspunten voor de asielbeoordeling van Christenen met een moslimachtergrond*” current version: 1.3, February 2014  
[www.gave.nl/gave/download/juridisch-extern/bekering-van-islam-naar-christus-versie-1.3.doc](http://www.gave.nl/gave/download/juridisch-extern/bekering-van-islam-naar-christus-versie-1.3.doc)  
An English outline is available at [www.gave.nl/erlf2014](http://www.gave.nl/erlf2014)